



SPELLS  
IN THE  
SUMMER  
TIME

WHERE THE WILD  
THINGS GROW



AURYN HADLEY

# SPELLS IN THE SUMMERTIME

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A MOONLIGHT UNIVERSE NOVEL

WHERE THE WILD THINGS GROW

BOOK 2

AURYN HADLEY

SPOTTED HORSE PRODUCTIONS

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## DEDICATION

*This is for the ones who go against the grain - intentionally or not. Be different. Flaunt what makes you special. Maybe it's a kick-ass cactus, or maybe it's refusing to be the victim. But no matter what, know there is a place you belong.*

*Because if we want some magic, we need to find our own form of being "wild."*

*Amyr Hadley*

## POTENTIALLY SENSITIVE CONTENT

*Where the Wild Things Grow* series contains MM and polyamorous romance.

If you like feel-good romance with multiple love interests, men who aren't afraid to love each other, unexpected sidekicks, and found families, then you will love this bewitching romance.

No plants were harmed too badly in the making of this tale. Yes, skunks smell bad, but they know they do, so they aren't offended. Only a few spices and herbs will be wasted, but lots of flour.

Read at your own risk.

# PROLOGUE

*Three months earlier...*

The pristine white coffin was lowered into the grave. No one in the attending crowd bothered to shed a tear. None of them had known Marjorie Maybrook. The old woman had been a hermit, keeping to herself, yet appearances mattered for things like this. There was no way the founding families could let the people of Summerpoint think someone of our status wouldn't be mourned.

Only one thing was missing from this funeral. The Grimsons had supplied an obscene number of flowers. From the lily-encrusted wreath wrapped around a portrait of the late Ms. Maybrook to the garlands and sprays made of white roses and other pale flowers, the gravesite looked more like a wedding venue than a funeral. No expense had been spared, and the supposed mourners had dressed to match.

And yet none of Margie's family was here.

The crowd was made from the people of Summerpoint. The locals were easy to pick out in their black dresses and ill-fitting suits. Compared to the members of the coven, they looked almost slovenly. The founding families, however, had brought every member to show their support, going so far as to fly their adult children in from out of state.

It was disgusting. This wasn't an attempt to mourn some little old lady who'd been known for her pies. It was a show of strength, intended to make sure the "peasants" in town knew who they were supposed to worship. Oh, not that the founding

families would ever phrase it like that, but it was what they really wanted.

I was sick of the whole thing, so once the ceremony was over, I turned for my car, intending to leave as quickly and quietly as possible. I'd been seen. I'd made my required appearance. Now I could continue on as I'd been before - or so I thought.

“Zane.”

The sound of Kingsley Grimson's voice stopped me in my tracks. “Yes, sir?” I asked, turning back with a practiced, perfectly polite smile on my lips.

“Where's your mother?”

From the scowl on his face, it was clear he was pissed. My smile shifted a bit as I struggled to keep it from turning smug, and then I shrugged.

“I don't really care.”

“I made it clear I wanted every family member here,” the old man snarled, struggling to keep his voice down so the people passing around us wouldn't notice.

I merely tipped my head to show I'd heard. “I like how you assume I think of her as my family. So you know, I don't. She left as soon as she could. I haven't heard from her in years.”

Lucien grumbled under his breath as he joined our little conversation. “So is that why it's taken you so long to get married? I promise that not all women are as unfaithful as your mother.”

“No,” I corrected, “it's taken me this long because you all want me to find a nice little witch to settle down with. I haven't had the chance to leave Summerpoint and meet any. In case you missed it, everyone my age has a dick - which won't help me make an heir.”

“I'm more than willing to introduce you to a few pliant witches,” Kingsley offered. “My own kids have settled into

enough covens that it won't be hard to find a single lady you'll approve of."

"Besides," Lucien added, "if you keep her pregnant, she won't care what you do with your free time. Throw enough money at her, and most women shut the fuck up."

"Which explains your wife's obsession with jewelry," I pointed out. "Sadly, that's not the type of relationship I'm looking for."

Kingsley just stepped in, dropping his voice to a menacing hiss. "Haven't you learned a damned thing, boy? Look at the mess Marjorie just made! The coven lost a bloodline. The only way for us to regain that power is to replace it with one of our own, which is a nightmare to make work."

"Why?" I asked carefully.

It was Lucien who answered. "Because we don't have nature magic. We know nothing about her spells, her abilities, or what is even possible. Without her spellbook, *whoever* gets put in as the next Maybrook might get a promotion, but he'll have to struggle to master his power."

I didn't miss the emphasis Lucien put on those pronouns. *Whoever*? *His*? Clearly they already had a plan. The question was whether they'd tell me, or if I was supposed to smile and nod like an imbecile. I decided to push my luck a little.

"So who's going to get it?" I asked, glancing around to make sure no one else was listening. I also made it obvious enough for the Grimsons to notice.

Kingsley huffed once. "Why, my son, of course. It's time for him to be more than simply the heir. He should be a full part of our coven. It's not his fault I refuse to die so easily."

"And let us hope you keep that up," I said. "But I don't see Lucien as a baker."

Confusion took over Lucien's face. "What?"

"The only magic I've ever heard of Marjorie Maybrook doing was her baking," I explained. "She made cures and treatments in her desserts. Typical hedge witch bullshit."

“Oh, her line can do a lot more than that,” Lucien assured me. “The power of the Maybrook is strong. Margie was weak, but not all of them were. Once we perform the ceremony, I should inherit the full power of that line.”

“How do I help?” I asked, hoping for a little more information about this ceremony.

“The whole coven will be required,” Kingsley assured me. “The first step will be obtaining the property. After that, everything should fall into place nicely, and we’ll pick one of the more powerful full moons for the final ritual.”

I nodded. “Just let me know what I need to do,” I assured him. “I’m always at your service.”

“That’s my boy,” Kingsley praised before turning and simply meandering away.

Lucien followed him obediently, more of a puppet than a son. I had to struggle not to grumble in disgust. That pair was pathetic. The old man was far past his prime, but refused to admit it. The son was desperate for some hint of approval, thinking that mimicking his father made him look impressive to the rest of the world. It didn’t.

But that little bit of information was not what I’d wanted to hear. Losing the Maybrook line should’ve put a crack in the coven. It *should* have weakened their power, yet it sounded like they already had a plan. Shit, if I was honest, it sounded like Margie’s lack of heir was going to work out in their favor.

Fuck that.

A few more people tried to stop me on the way to my car. I ignored the Undergrove boys. The Grimson daughters were a little more persistent. The Spellman woman headed towards me, but I never looked her way, making her feet stall out.

Eventually I made it. Once I was in my car, I headed home, refusing to stop anywhere else while my mind spun. Lucien as the next Maybrook? That couldn’t be possible. Why would he give up the power he had now to become a pathetic little hedge witch? What were the Grimsons hiding this time?

In truth, it didn't matter. Oh, I had every intention of learning all about Marjorie's ancestors now, but at this moment, I had something else on my mind. Somewhere out there, Marjorie had to have an heir. Somewhere, there was a wixen that was related to her. A distant cousin? A long-lost brother? It didn't even matter.

What was important was making sure the Grimsons couldn't get a stranglehold on this coven. I hated those two men too much to make increasing their power easy. Oh, they thought I'd grown up and fallen in line. Instead, I'd simply learned how to play this game better than them.

Rushing into my apartment, I didn't stop until I was in the kitchen. There, I set an entire pot of coffee to brew. Pulling out the largest cup I could find, I dumped an excessive amount of loose tea into it. The electric kettle was turned on for the tea, and then I stormed into my office.

I rummaged for the right piece. The shelves were marked with species names, looking more like some scientist's collection than what it really was. Soon enough, I found what I needed, a desiccated chicken leg. A rooster's, complete with the spur.

That went on the kitchen table. I pulled out my deck of tarot cards, setting them beside it, and then went to collect my tea and coffee. Pouring the fluid over the leaves, I allowed that to steep for a moment as I sorted the grounds from the filter. They went on one plate. When that was done, I poured off the liquid from the tea so I could dump the leaves onto another.

Once I had the tools of my trade ready, I locked the door, dimmed the lights, and then sat down at the table. Breathing slowly, I focused my mind, feeling the power come to me easily - then I laid the chicken leg in the tea leaves, swirling it around.

Divination magic was made for reading the future. What few realized was that it could also be used to manipulate it. I might not have enough information to make this a specific spell, but it would still work. Somewhere out there was a



Maybrook wixen. Someone carried the same blood and could touch the power. I was sure of it.

So I pushed. Encouraging the right symbols in the tea leaves, I moved to the coffee grounds next. Bits and pieces began to coat the chicken leg, staining it. On the plates, the signs of the desired future were left behind.

The next Maybrook needed a reason to accept their inheritance. They needed a push to come here. They needed to take that property, claim it, and block the Grimsons before their plan could be fulfilled. I neither knew nor cared who it would be, but with the power I had, I summoned them here. I twisted the chances around them, knowing some combination of events would soon happen to send them running.

Because this was my only chance.

Maybe this Maybrook would make things harder, but as I worked my spell, I hoped for someone who might be strong enough to resist. A wixen from another line who knew enough to understand when things had become corrupted. Someone with reasons of their own to push against the traditions this coven had grown to love.

Someone strong enough to destroy the coven I was a part of.

As I tapped my deck of cards, a few edges jutted out. I withdrew the first one, laying it face down above the plates I was working with. The next went to the right. The third went at the bottom. The last went on the left. I didn't bother looking at them, because it didn't matter. Fate would decide who came to claim the position of the Maybrook. All that mattered to me was that it wasn't a Grimson.

When it was done, I stood and headed to my balcony. There, a small grill would work for the closing act of this spell. Setting the chicken leg on the grate, I found a bit of charcoal, thankful it was the easy-to-light kind, and then started the fire. It took a moment, but the rectangles of preformed charcoal were starting to burn.

"So let it be," I breathed softly as the fire grew.

Soon enough, the dried skin over the leg began to crackle. Shortly after, it burned, smelling as bad as an overdone meal, yet I refused to leave. I stood there for as long as it took, watching as the tea- and coffee-coated chicken leg burned down to nothing, releasing its magic into the world.

“So let it be,” I said again, and this time I was almost begging.

Because there was one thing I wanted in this world, and that was to make the Grimsons pay. I didn’t give a shit who ended up winning, so long as it wasn’t them. Those assholes had ripped away my life and the lives of countless others to make their own easier. Eventually, the pendulum had to swing back the other way, and I had no problem giving it a little push.

When the leg was finally ash in the pit of my grill, I closed the top and vents, letting the fire smother itself. Then I headed back inside. In the middle of my table, the plate of tea and coffee looked like some child’s plaything, but the clumps left behind were what really mattered. Never mind the cards.

Out of curiosity, I flipped over the first one. The Empress sat proudly on her throne, upright. To the east, I revealed the Tower, reversed. To the west was the Moon, also reversed. Pulling in a breath, I reached for the last card, taking my time about looking at it. The Magician, upright.

Which meant a woman was coming, one with the power and determination to make a difference. She would be a nature witch with insecurity issues who would help me divert this disaster. Well, well. That sounded even better than I’d expected.

With a smile on my face, I put my cards back on the top of my deck, wanting to caress them in praise for working so well. Let the Grimsons think I was little more than a fortune teller. By the time they figured out that I’d mastered a few more tricks than simply flipping cards or reading tea leaves, it would be too late.

And the whole time, those fools would keep letting me closer and closer, never seeing a divination wix as a threat. All

I had to do was let them see how much power I *wanted* - without exposing that it was theirs I was chasing. Not for me, but as payment for their crimes - because this? This was the start of their downfall.

As I headed into the kitchen to put my things away, I chuckled softly under my breath. "So let it be," I said for the third time, binding my spell into the fabric of the world. Now, it was out of my control. This was happening. Change was coming.

It had finally begun.

# CHAPTER ONE

---

Magic battles could fuck shit up.

Sylvia's place was trashed. My first thought when I saw it in the daylight was that Reese and I were missing out on a major market in this town. The founding families were assholes, and fucking with others wasn't exactly unheard of for them. We should start offering "evil coven aftermath" repair services or something.

Then again, most people in Summerpoint weren't witches. They wouldn't be able to fight back against the kind of magic that had been used here last night. Syl had. Somehow, she'd found the magic necessary to not only hit the coven where it hurt, but also to secure her own power without them.

And it hadn't been pretty.

So, the day after the coven attacked, Reese and I cleaned up the worst of the mess. Sylvia's top priority? Getting Lupe - her cactus - into a pot. That crazy prickly pear had been willing to sacrifice himself for his witch, just like the rest of us. Thankfully, my mother came through, reading the text I'd sent her last night just as soon as she woke up today. The only downside was that she'd hurried over with a pot while we were still sleeping.

Then she'd blown up my phone with messages, letting me know the pot was on the front porch and demanding I reply to her so she knew I was okay! When I finally did - because her incessant messaging woke me - I got my ass chewed for

scaring her like that. She also asked if I knew the front window was broken.

Needless to say, I decided she didn't need to hear about the midnight battle of magic that had taken place. In Summerpoint, normal people weren't supposed to know anything about magic. Reese and I had gotten caught up in the middle of it for Syl, but my mother? No, it was safer to leave her out of it, so I simply told her we were working on the repairs.

Sylvia was dragging, though. I saw it. Reese saw it. I was pretty sure even Lupe saw it; I just couldn't hear him to know. The battle had taken its toll on her. After all, a *lot* of magic had been thrown around last night.

Still, this amazing woman refused to give in. While Reese and I focused on the big issues - like the broken window - she swept and vacuumed the entire house. And when she was finished? Our witch headed to her cellar to make a few more skunk-stink-remover jars and a handful of protection spells, just in case.

That was when Reese noticed something. We were in the middle of discussing whether it would be worth boarding up the window now or simply putting in the new ones Syl had ordered when my boyfriend's attention snapped across the house. Without a word, he walked away.

"What?" I asked, because that wasn't like him.

"Jackson," he breathed, pointing at the one window that overlooked the screened-in back porch. "Do you see that?"

I did.

From the opposite side of the house, I couldn't make out which one, but I could tell there was a tarot card stuck in the frame of the window. I wasn't sure which side it was on until Reese stepped onto the porch to get it, so I headed that way. He came back in and we met at the table. There, he dropped the card face up so we could both see it.

"Ten of Swords," I breathed, knowing the deck that came from. "Which way did it face?"

“Upside down,” he told me.

So I grabbed my phone and quickly googled the meaning. Sadly, while I knew the names of most of these cards, that was the extent of what I’d learned, and it had been a very long time ago. Still, finding a website was easy.

“When reversed,” I read, “it signifies recovery, rejuvenation, resistance, and an inevitable end.”

Reese stood there in silence for a long time, both of us letting that sink in. The card had been pressed against the house. That meant it had been part of some kind of spell, right? And from what the description meant, it sure sounded like protection to me.

Then Reese slid the card off the table, looked at it one more time, and thrust it out at me. “You need to take it back to him.”

“Uh...” Because the guy my boyfriend was talking about? Yeah, we had history. “I’ll tell him to come get it.”

“The forest won’t let him onto the property,” Reese countered as he pressed it into my hand.

“Well, yeah, but Syl...”

The love of my life gave me an exasperated look. “Zane won’t hurt you. Shit, he won’t even tell the coven about you. Just take the damned card back, because if you don’t, the next one might not be a protection!”

Okay, he had a point. A good one. Still, I had a pretty good counter argument. “I don’t want to leave Syl here alone. Not with the way she looks.”

“Yeah,” Reese mumbled, glancing back at the cellar door. “So it’s not just me?”

“No.”

This time, the answer didn’t come from me. Reese and I both spun to find Gythiom, the wild thing we’d fought so hard to protect, standing at the edge of the sliding glass door. Clearly, he’d been listening.

“So what’s wrong with her?” Reese demanded.

“She is tired,” Gyth assured us. “Sylvia is a new witch. She is not used to making magic, but she made a lot of it last night. Now, she is paying for it the way you do when you run too far or lift too much.”

“Muscle pain,” I realized.

“But this isn’t her muscles,” Reese insisted.

“No, it is her magic muscles,” Gyth said. “They are not like the ones in your body, but they almost are. They must grow. They must be trained. If used wrong, they will grow wrong and can be damaged. This is why she needs to learn.”

“Can you get her to at least take a nap?” I asked, my question for Reese.

Gyth squeezed his way through the gap in the door, his long, strange body seeming to fit wherever he needed it to. “I will make her sit and learn spices,” he decided. “It will relax her fears, make her feel like she is useful, and prevent her from pushing too hard.”

Which sounded almost as good as a nap, and probably a lot more likely to happen. I was willing to take it and call it a win. Evidently, my boyfriend felt the same.

“Thank you,” Reese said as he reached out to clasp the monster’s arm.

Gyth flinched, but not to pull away. The creature’s animal-shaped head shifted to the contact, his body tensed, and his eyes flared. Then, slowly, those weird lips of his curled into something like a smile.

“May I call you both friends?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said quickly.

“Of course,” Reese assured him. “I’d like to think we’re all on the same side.”

“Sylvia’s,” Gyth guessed.

“Yours,” I corrected. “You are the source of magic. You are the last of the wild things.”



“Free wild things,” he reminded me.

“Still,” I said, “you’re the thing we’re trying to help. That means it’s your side. We’re just the soldiers, right?”

“The witch’s familiars,” he said before turning for the cellar stairs.

Which meant that was one problem handled. Syl would be in good hands with him, and while Gyth’s magic was still low, he said he now had some, thanks to the spell Sylvia had cast to return magic to the forest. After the new moon, he’d start regenerating more, and I couldn’t wait to see what he could do with it.

What it didn’t help with was the card I now held in my hands. “Reese,” I tried, glancing at it.

“Just go give it to him,” he told me. “Tell him we found it. Shit, say he must’ve lost it, if you’d prefer. I don’t care.”

“Yeah, but you should come with me,” I countered.

He huffed out a little laugh. “So he doesn’t attack you? Please. We both know you’re the reason he’s helping Syl.”

“Probably,” I grumbled. “But taking a tarot card to my wixen ex-boyfriend?” I shook my head. “Yeah, that feels like it’s crossing so many lines.”

So Reese caught the side of my neck and pulled us together. “You’re the one who told me it was okay to have a crush on Syl. You’re the one who encouraged me, trusted me, and loved me enough to make all of this happen.”

“And Zane is not Sylvia,” I reminded him.

He smiled. “I know. I also know I trust you. I love you, and that love is enough that my only fear is another wix seeing you alone. Jackson, take the card back to him so he’ll keep doing whatever fucked-up thing he’s doing.”

“Helping,” I realized.

Reese just nodded. “Yeah, that’s kinda what I’m hoping this is, because the first time he came here was for another of

those. One that helped Syl stay out of their coven, if I'm understanding right."

Then he leaned in and pressed his mouth to mine. I let my eyes close as I felt the crush of his beard against my longer one, and then my lips parted. He was right there, sliding his tongue against mine, claiming me slowly and softly, the pressure of his fingers growing against the side of my neck.

Damn, I loved this man. I had for so long, and every day just made him better. My hand found his hip, but when I tugged, he resisted, preventing me from grinding against him. Instead, his lips curled into a smile.

"Take the card back," he whispered against my mouth.

I groaned but relented, stepping out of his embrace. "Should I get cleaned up first?"

"Do you think it would make him hate me more, or less?" Reese teased.

I tossed my hands into the air, giving in. Snagging my keys from my pocket, I looked at the card I still held and realized I had nothing else to delay me. So, catching Reese's eyes one last time, I turned for the front door, hoping like hell my truck hadn't been pulverized in last night's mayhem.

Lucky for me, it seemed fine. Yes, there were a few more scratches in the paint, but this was the work truck. I expected it to get trashed on a job site. That all the windows were still intact and I didn't see any large dents from bodies or tree limbs being flung into it? I was going to consider that a win.

The problem was that I didn't want to do this. I knew Reese was right. I honestly did, but it didn't make me want to face one of the wixen who wanted my girlfriend dead - or at least disappeared. Then again, for all I knew, those might be the same thing.

I had spent thirty-six years doing everything I could to be ignored by the wixen in this town. Now, I'd just put myself right in the middle of this magical mess. Reese and I had not only picked sides, we'd also fought back. I had a bad feeling they would find a way to make us pay for it. That Zane was

one of them? It made me wonder just how far I could really trust him.

Most likely, the answer was “not very.”

So I took my time. I may have even taken the long way. Once I left Syl’s property, it was a straight shot into Summerpoint, but a winding one to Zane’s apartment complex. For a moment, I debated stopping at the bakery for coffee just to delay a little longer, but I knew it wouldn’t help.

I was also in town, alone, and hoping like hell the coven wouldn’t expect it. Today, they should all be licking their wounds, especially Kingsley and Lucien Grimson. Those two had taken the brunt of Syl’s spell. They were also the ringleaders, so if they weren’t giving orders, the rest of the wixen wouldn’t rush out to find me.

That didn’t mean I wanted to tempt fate.

Soon enough, I pulled into the nicest apartment complex in town. The parking lot was filled with newer-model cars. The lawn was overly manicured and the flowerbeds were blooming. It was a pretty place, and I’d been here a few times before, so I knew my way around. Driving to the back, I found a close-enough visitor parking space, parked, and reached for the tarot card on the seat beside me.

Then I had to hype myself up a bit. I was not a weak man. I wasn’t afraid of much. Magic didn’t even really bother me. Sure, I respected it, but that wasn’t the same as being scared of it. But this? I was so far out of my depth right now.

Taking one more deep breath, I climbed out of the truck, jogged up the stairs to the second floor, and banged on the apartment with the number one on the door. Seconds ticked past in silence. For a moment, I started to wonder if maybe Zane wasn’t here. Just to be sure, I pounded on the door again, harder this time.

Finally, I heard the chain being released. A lock clicked, then a second. And yet when the door opened, I was not prepared for what was on the other side.

Zane stood there in a pair of old sweatpants and a t-shirt with a hole by the collar. I couldn't miss the stain on his thigh, or his bare feet. Never mind the dark rings under his eyes. The guy looked like complete shit.

"Here," I said, thrusting out the card. "You left this."

Those pale blue eyes of his narrowed for only a moment, and then Zane opened his door a little wider. "Come in, Jack."

"No," I grumbled. "I just brought your fucking card back."

He pulled in a deep, slow breath, then glanced down to the threshold between us. My eyes followed, aware of the groove that had been carved out and filled with salt. It would be easy to overlook, and I had before, but now I knew exactly what it was for.

"Come in," he said, stronger this time, "because we need to talk, and this is not a conversation I'm having outside."

He also never reached for the card I was holding out.

So, letting my arm drop, I sighed heavily and stepped across the salt meant to keep wixen out. This was not going at all how I'd hoped.

## CHAPTER TWO

---

JACKSON

Zane's apartment was impressively large. I suppose it would be called the penthouse if the building were taller. Still, he owned the entire complex, so he'd had this place made the way he wanted - and right now it was a complete mess.

Dirty dishes cluttered the small table in his dining area. I had a feeling the sink wasn't any better, but I couldn't see the kitchen from where I was standing. A skunky musk hung in the air, a pair of shoes were kicked haphazardly beside the door, and there was a blanket tossed over the cushions on the couch. It looked like it had been used recently. On the little table beside that was exactly what I was looking for.

Zane's deck of tarot cards was always within reach. For as long as I'd known the man, he'd been obsessed with them. Granted, back when we'd been kids, I hadn't really understood why. Now I did.

I didn't bother asking; I simply crossed the room and dropped the Ten of Swords onto the top of the deck, face up. Everything else was face down, but I wanted him to know I'd seen the card. When I turned around to storm back out, Zane was standing right in front of me, blocking my path.

"Thanks for bringing that back," he told me.

I just scoffed. "Thanks? Really? This is the second time you've left one of your cards with her. I don't know if she's figured out how important those are to you, but I'm not that fucking stupid. You painted every single one of them yourself.

This is the deck you put your all into. And how many times have you just handed them out to someone else out of the kindness of your heart?"

"Who said it was the kindness of my heart?" Zane asked, but his voice was calm, almost lazy.

Even in this state, he was stunning. Maybe an inch taller than me, he was a bit leaner, but fit in the way I liked. Elegant. Like Reese, if I was honest with myself. He also had the sharp and striking facial features that got me going. The bags under his eyes, however, weren't on my list of sexy things.

Trying my hardest not to bite his head off, I shoved a hand through my hair. "That's the Ten of Swords, Zane."

He laughed once. "So we've established you can count."

"Asshole," I grumbled under my breath. "I also know it's a protection card. I looked it up. What I don't understand is why you'd stick it to the outside of her window when everyone else last night was doing their best to get inside the house."

He just shrugged and made his way over to drop down on the middle cushion of the couch. "Maybe I saw something inside I didn't want damaged."

I slashed a hand through the air. "Do not do this."

"Do what?" he asked, a sly smile touching his lips.

"That." I stabbed a finger towards his annoyingly sexy expression. "You know damned well I'm with Reese. Things between us are over. They've been over. You're the one who told me to stay away from wixen, and I have done everything in my power to do that—"

Zane surged to his feet as anger consumed every line of his body. "Bullshit! In case you missed it, Sylvia is a *witch*. I'm also not as fucking dumb as you think I am. I saw Reese hold her hand to keep her from following me. I hear how you talk about her. The two of you are involved with that woman, and she is just as magical as everything else I told you to stay the fuck away from. *Goddammit*, Jack. If anything, being around her is more dangerous than being around me!"

“And I didn’t know that!”

“What, until it was too late?” he snarled.

I tried to say something else, to shove it back in his face, but when my mouth opened no words came out. In truth, I’d had my suspicions about her. The moment she’d said she was related to Marjorie Maybrook, I should’ve cut ties. I should’ve refused the contract. Instead, all that had mattered to me was how Reese looked at that woman like she was everything he’d ever wanted – and I’d needed to make that happen for him.

“Yeah.” And my head dropped to my chest.

“She’s cute,” he admitted, “I’ll give you that.”

“And she’s Reese’s type.”

“Oh.” Zane dropped back down onto the couch again, almost like he was too weary to stay standing.

Huffing out something that was supposed to be a laugh, he reached over for his deck of tarot cards. Flipping over the Ten of Swords, he pulled the whole pack into his lap and then shuffled once. When I grunted, unimpressed, Zane tipped his head at the chair behind me.

“Sit.”

“I didn’t come here to get my fortune read,” I grumbled.

Leaning forward, he pushed everything in the middle of the coffee table towards the ends, then set the deck down in the gap he’d made. Gesturing to it, he leaned back. “You know how this works.”

“I don’t want to know my future,” I told him. “I came here to figure out what the fuck you’re doing, Zane.”

“Cut the fucking cards, Jack.”

“Fine.”

I reached for the deck, but paused before grabbing it randomly. For a second, I allowed my hand to hover over the cards, trying to see where I should split it. If I’d learned anything from Zane, it was that this should not be taken lightly. It was not a joke. So, when I felt like I knew the right



spot, I grabbed the cards off the top, then set them down beside the rest.

“Gonna tell me why you left a protection on Sylvia’s back window yet?” I asked as I leaned back in my chair.

“To protect her,” Zane said as he gathered up the cards and began shuffling.

“I will walk out the door before you finish that,” I warned.

His hands paused. “Jack, that’s the reason.”

“And you know that’s not what the fuck I’m asking!” I shot back. “Why are you helping her? What’s in this for you? What the fuck are you *thinking*, Zane?”

His eyes dropped down to the cards in his hand, and he began shuffling them again. What he didn’t do was talk, at least not until he had them sorted the way he wanted. Then, while he laid them out on the space between us, Zane decided to tell me what I really wanted to know.

“When Lucien said the new Maybrook was joining us for dinner at his place, I expected someone like Nancy Redmoon. You know, a mature woman, somewhere between forty and sixty years old, well-versed in her witchcraft, and as power-hungry as every other fucker in that coven. Instead, it was Sylvia.”

“And?” I pressed.

“And she clearly didn’t know a damn thing about magic. Looking at her, all I could think about was the day I was inducted into the coven. The difference is that no one asked me. I wasn’t invited. My mother dragged my ass to another ritual and I was bound, chained with magic, and made a part of their whole. The life I saw for myself? Gone. The boy I loved? They would’ve killed you.”

I rocked my head in a slow nod, because I knew that. “What does this have to do with Syl?”

“A lot,” he admitted. “Did you know the Grimsons’ ritual magic requires all six bloodlines to be the most potent? Do you have any idea how fucked they’ll be if they don’t get her

into their little coven? More than all of that, do you honestly think I'm going to look at someone in the same place I was all those years ago and ignore it? If I could give her the freedom I was never granted, then why the fuck not? Especially when it's going to fuck over those bastards."

Slowly but surely, the cards were starting to form columns and rows before me. This wasn't like the normal tarot reading, though. Zane was putting a *lot* more cards on the table than I was used to, and all of them were face down.

"So you helped Syl because you wanted revenge on the coven?" I asked, just needing to be sure I was following him.

"At first." He laid out two more cards. "She's a nice girl. Cute, too. I'll admit that for a moment I even thought about how they want me to marry a witch. Making a few heirs with a woman like her? Well, let's just say the *trying* certainly wouldn't be painful for me."

"Stay the fuck away from her," I warned.

He chuckled. "And I showed up at her house to find both you and Reese there. Both of you, looking at her like needy little puppies. The fact that you wouldn't even let me in her house? Jack, you know how this works. Invite me in and I can suddenly cross that salt. It alters the spell. That you not only pushed me away from her door, but all the way down the steps, and wanted nothing more than to get me out of there? That Reese hooked his fingers in hers so easily? I'm not an idiot."

"And?" I pressed.

"Reese is good for you," he said.

"Of course he is, that's why I'm with him."

Zane slammed his hand down on the coffee table, making the cards jump. "That man is everything you need in your life. He has always been better for you than I ever was. When I heard you two had gotten together? When he finally realized there was nothing wrong with loving a man? That's what I want for you. Don't you get that? You *deserve* him, and if this

woman is half as good for you as Reese is, then you deserve her too, and I will fucking *protect that!*”

Which was when he started flipping over cards. Not all of them. Zane’s hand moved, seeming to select certain ones at random, and I couldn’t pull my eyes away. The first one was The High Priestess. In the second row, he found The Magician and The Empress. Over and over, he kept flipping over cards from the Major Arcana - and nothing else.

I recognized Death, The Chariot, The Hanged Man, The Tower, The Star, and The Sun. And yet, that was only half the cards on the table. Then, Zane flipped over the lone card at the very bottom of the stack to reveal The Lovers.

“What the fuck is this?” I demanded.

“This,” he told me, “is what happens every single time I try to look at her future. The deeper I go, the more confusing it gets.”

“Why are you looking at her future?”

“Because I can no longer look at mine,” he replied. “Jack, something is happening. Something big, and I have no fucking clue what it is.”

So I leaned forward and started flipping over the cards he hadn’t touched. The Ace of Swords, the Two of Swords, the Three of Swords, and it kept going. In complete and perfect order, even after I’d watched him shuffle the entire deck, the cards had somehow sorted themselves out. When I reached the Ten of Swords, the next card was the Ace of Pentacles. Those were also in order, with the Ten of Pentacles being the last card before The Lovers.

“What the fuck?”

Zane lifted both hands palm up and shrugged. “I was hoping that because you knew her, you might give me a little more insight.”

“How is that even possible?”

“It’s not,” he insisted. “That’s why it’s called magic.”

Yeah, he had a point. Still, this was some of the weirdest shit I had ever seen. Considering that last night had been filled with wixen chanting a ritual, my boyfriend throwing little glass jars like spell grenades, me using a skunk like a fire extinguisher, and Lupe becoming an attack cactus? Weird had become a very vague concept for me lately.

So I gestured for him to put the cards away. “So this means she’s a big deal, huh?”

“I have no idea,” Zane admitted. “I’d like to think so, but I have no fucking clue how to interpret any of that. What I do know is my hair still smells like skunk, and the rest of the coven won’t be doing a damned thing until after the new moon.” He lifted a brow at me and then relaxed back onto the couch.

He looked tired. It was the same kind of exhaustion I’d seen on Syl. The difference was that Zane knew how to use his magic. He’d been doing it ever since he was a child. Stretching his magic muscles, or whatever Gyth had said, didn’t apply here.

So I grabbed the tarot cards, set them back in a pile, then pushed to my feet. Crossing the distance between us, I moved the cards onto the table beside the couch, then kept going until I got to his dining room table. There, I picked up the used bowl that looked like it had once held chicken noodle soup and headed into the kitchen to put it away.

“So, what’s wrong with you?” I asked.

“Jack, leave it alone. I’ll get it later.”

Sure enough, his kitchen sink was filled with things he hadn’t taken care of yet. I knew Zane wasn’t a clean freak, but this was bad, even for him. So, turning on the water to fill the sink, I went back to the table to grab the remaining dishes. Clearly, someone needed to take care of him.

But when I moved the last plate, my eyes fell on a tiny little vial attached to a silver chain. A vial I knew well. One that was now empty instead of filled with drops of blood.

“You broke the oath?” I asked.

“Yeah...” Zane twisted so he could see me. “About that. I figured someone needs to fill her in on what’s going on, and that someone is you.”

# CHAPTER THREE

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“Is that what’s wrong with you?” I demanded, snagging the chain off the table to hold it up. “You told me breaking this oath would hurt. You made it very clear this was binding and would last forever.”

“And I am a wix,” Zane reminded me.

“Who is also living like a slob, sleeping on his couch, and covered in whatever the fuck the skunk sprayed on you!” I tossed the necklace towards him, grabbed the plate again, and then stormed into the kitchen. “Zane, you are not okay. Jesus Christ, man. I’ve gotten pretty fucking good at talking around the limitations put on me. Never mind that she has a wild thing helping her.”

I quickly shut my mouth, and then shut off the water.

But Zane had heard. “What? She actually has it? We didn’t see a hint of it last night.”

“Why the fuck do you think we were fighting so hard?” I demanded.

A single laugh fell from his lips. “Kingsley’s convinced it’s gone. They thought Sylvia was fighting back because they tried to force her into the coven. Well, because we attacked her in the middle of the night, too. Still, they don’t have a clue she has it.”

“She doesn’t *have* it,” I corrected. “She gave it sanctuary.”

“Which means she controls it,” he pointed out. “Right now, that thing should be so weak it can’t do anything. She

needs to bind it.”

“Not gonna happen,” I said as I returned to the chair directly across from him. “And if you breathe a word of this to any of the founding families? Reese and I will find you, we will tie you down, and then I will cut off your balls and feed them to you. Do you understand me, Zane?”

He blinked at me a few times, but didn’t look like he was scared at all. “Jack, that thing can make her more powerful than the Grimsons. In order to achieve our full potential, a witch needs to bind a wild thing to them, and she has one!”

“Yeah, well, just imagine what it can do if it’s helping because it *wants to* instead of being forced to,” I countered.

He pushed out a heavy breath. “That’s how she’s learning magic, isn’t it?”

“I’m not telling you shit,” I decided. “Maybe you and I have some history between us, but right now you’re the enemy, and I like that woman.”

He lifted a brow, smugness taking over his fucking beautiful face. “Like?”

“Yeah, I like her,” I said. “So what?”

“*Like?*” he asked again, this time with snark. “Jack, when she ran into the middle of a group of chanting wixen, you didn’t hesitate. When the strongest wix in Summerpoint turned his attention on her, you shoved whatever the fuck her powder was into his mouth! Instead of staying hidden like you were supposed to, you fought back against fucking *magic* for that woman. And Reese was right beside you every step of the way.”

“And?” I shot back.

“The word to describe that is not like. It’s called love, you dumbass.”

His words felt like a punch in the gut. The air rushed from my lungs and then came back in. This time, I was the one left blinking in confusion, because he wasn’t wrong. Still, it felt like it was too soon. Wasn’t this too fast? Reese and I had



known each other since we were kids. Syl? I'd only known her for six weeks.

But in six weeks, I'd spent so many hours with her. Six weeks of seeing how she thought, what she liked, and the ways she reacted. I'd thrown her against the wall, fallen asleep beside her, and woken up holding her the next morning. I knew her, and while not as well as I knew Reese, it was definitely enough to feel something.

And yet love was a very big word to throw out without being sure.

"I'm not seventeen anymore," I told him. "I don't fall in love at the drop of a hat. Yeah, she's my girlfriend – and Reese's – and we're getting there, but don't jump the gun."

He just smiled at me, and this time it wasn't sly, mischievous, or all-knowing. This smile was the sweet kind, almost like he was proud of me. It reminded me of the young man I'd known so long ago. The one who'd taught me that secrets could bring people closer together and love didn't have to have limits.

"Margie Maybrook was a very weak witch," Zane told me. "Sylvia doesn't have that problem. Instead, she has another. Jack, a wixen's power comes from the land they own. In the centuries since this town was founded, most of our ancestors sold off a little acreage for a quick buck. They didn't realize they were pawning off their magic in the process."

I nodded, having heard some of this from Syl. "Okay? And?"

"For generations, the Grimsons have been the strongest wixen in Summerpoint," he continued. "They gave a portion of their land to the government for the national park, but they still own more than any other bloodline..."

"Except Sylvia," I realized.

Zane just nodded slowly. "The Maybrook land was incorporated into the edge of the national park. No one wanted it because of that, so it was never sold. The Grimsons have about one hundred and fifty acres. After them comes Nancy

Redmoon with about seventy-five. Then there's the Undergroves, who have about seventy. I'm not exactly sure how much they own, but it can't be far off. The Spellmans sold off everything but ten, although they've bought back another fifteen."

"And you?" I asked, aware his family didn't own a lot of land.

Zane just spread his arms, gesturing around us. "I started investing in real estate. Right now, I'm up to forty acres. Most of them are rental properties that I lease out to families in need for well under market value – because I don't care about the money. I want the acreage."

"And every piece you buy pushes you higher in the coven's hierarchy, doesn't it?" I asked.

Zane nodded, looking impressed that I was keeping up. "Exactly. It also makes the Grimsons trust me a little more. The more they trust me, the closer I get to them."

For a long moment, I looked at him, trying to decide which version of this man I was talking to right now. Was this the Zane who'd blushed when he first saw me? Was it the version who'd learned every way to make my body feel good? Most likely, it was the Zane who hadn't shed a tear when he'd stomped on my heart and walked away forever.

And yet all of them were the same man. The one who kept leaving his most trusted treasure with Sylvia because he was protecting something. Her, me, us - I wasn't sure. He was still doing it, and that one act was enough to convince me to give him a little something back.

"You're wrong," I told him.

Confusion took over his face. "What do you mean?"

"It's not just about the land," I explained. "It's about the fucking wilderness. It's about how wild it is. Where the fuck do you think magic comes from?"

"From wild things."

Which meant he knew. How the fuck could he know and still help them hunt those things? How could he be a part of what had happened to Gyth? Was Zane Harkness really the guy I had known so long ago?

“And you fucking *helped*?” I shoved to my feet. “I guess I was wrong about you, Zane. We’re done. Stay the fuck away from me.”

I turned for the door, but I only made it two steps before his voice stopped me. “Why do you think Finn Undergrove fumbled his chant? Because I made him.”

My feet froze, but I couldn’t turn back around. “Whose side are you on?”

“Mine.”

Slowly, I looked back. “Then we’re not on the same side. I’m not gonna tell you anything that will hurt Sylvia.”

He nodded once, accepting that. “I’m still going to protect her.”

“Why?” I demanded.

His answer was to rock back to his feet and walk across the room to a set of shelves at the side. There, he began to rummage, pushing aside books, vials, and other things I really didn’t want to look at too closely. Finally, he found what he seemed to want and turned back to me.

“Here.” And he tossed it over.

What I caught was a tiny little jar no longer than an inch and no bigger around than a pencil. Inside was what seemed to be a very tiny bone. Even more confusing, something was written or painted on it.

“What the fuck is this?” I asked.

“Give that to your mom,” he said. “Even better, just put it in her house. Preferably someplace she won’t see it.”

“What the fuck is it?”

He made his way back to the couch and once again sat down. This time it was with a very heavy and exhausted-

sounding sigh. “That is the leg bone of a mouse. It is inscribed with every sigil for silence, avoidance, and protection I know. Put simply, it’s a spell to make people ignore something.”

“And you want me to give this to my mom?” I was pretty sure my brain was breaking right now.

He rocked his head from side to side as if that wasn’t quite the right answer. “We both know how Jennifer feels about magic. If she saw that, she would throw it out. However, if she doesn’t see it, it will keep the rest of the coven from even thinking about her, how much she means to you, and how easy it would be to turn her into a casualty of this.”

Yeah, while I heard him, I still had to ask one more time, “You’re protecting my mom?”

“I’m protecting *you*, Jack,” he clarified. “Your family, Reese, and Sylvia seem to be your weaknesses, so I’m going to do everything I can to keep them safe.”

“Why?!”

He ducked his head with a heavy sigh, then reached up to rub at the bridge of his nose. “Because I never stopped loving you, okay? Because I’m happy for you. Because Reese is everything you need, and I am not. So this? This is what I *can* do.”

My eyes dropped to the tiny little vial I held, mostly to avoid the way those blue eyes were staring at me. Dammit, Zane was still under my skin. He was still as sexy as he’d been back in high school, but now he also seemed dangerous. Fuck that, he *was* dangerous. And he was throwing that word out at me? The same word I’d just said I wasn’t ready for?

I couldn’t deal with this.

“I told Reese I shouldn’t come here,” I grumbled, trying one more time to make my exit.

Zane just chuckled. “But Reese trusts you.”

And again my feet betrayed me. “Of course he does - that’s why we’re together.”

“And yet most people can’t say the same,” he countered. “Jack, you and Reese have something special. I’m starting to get the impression that the two of you and Sylvia also have something special. And by the way, did you know three is a very powerful number in witchcraft?”

“What’s your point?”

“Three is the smallest number needed to find a pattern. The three of you? You are definitely a pattern,” Zane told me. “So stop holding back, Jack. Fall in love with her. Let Reese fall in love with her. Don’t ignore the strange things she can do, but help her. Tell her it’s okay. Remind her that being different doesn’t mean she’s unloved – because you will love her.”

So I spun back to him. “*Why!*”

“Because something big is happening,” he told me, “and it all keeps coming back to her. Right now, she is a little lamb that has been thrown in with the wolves, and she can’t survive on her own. Just make sure she *isn’t* on her own, okay?”

“Does this mean you’re gonna help me?” I asked.

He flicked his hand at the door. “Go take that to your mom. The last thing either of us wants is for anything to happen to her.”

“Yeah, that means yes, doesn’t it?”

He just leaned over to rest his head on the pillow beside the arm of the couch, then yanked the blankets over him. “I’m sick. In truth, your little witch’s spell pulled the magic out of everyone in our coven – even the relatives who are barely associated with it – leaving us all helpless. All I can fucking do right now is tarot, since the deck is already charged. Worse, your witch fucking sapped our health as well. Right now, all the founding families are in the same situation I’m in - and we don’t know how long it’s going to last, because this spell is still pulling.”

“Sick?” I asked, not quite keeping up this time, because he’d mentioned both magic and health.

“Weak. Powerless. Worn the fuck out. Calling it sick makes us feel a little less like we got our asses kicked -

because we did. This witch who doesn't know shit threw out one of the strongest covens in North America, and I don't think she even broke a sweat. So, yeah. Am I going to help you? As soon as I have my energy and magic back, I'm gonna make sure your girlfriend's stunt gives me every opportunity to fuck the coven up from the inside."

I paused, looking at him for a long time. The problem was he just stared back. Those eyes of his had always been my weakness. They were cold, hard, and I knew exactly what they looked like when passion filled them. I'd read silent questions in them and had seen promises of forever fill them. Now, they simply held me, waiting, giving me the chance to make what might be the biggest mistake of my life.

"It's not how much land," I finally said. "Zane, the amount doesn't matter as much as the bond you have with it. That's what the wild thing said. It's the bond that gives you access to power, and the more wild it is, the more power there will be."

His lips parted and I watched as his breath slid out, deflating his chest. "Fuck," he whispered.

I nodded, shoved the mouse bone vial into my pocket, and headed back towards his kitchen. "So maybe think about buying a pasture or some land, and go camping sometime. If nothing else, it'll keep you away from your coven for a while and prove to me that you haven't become my enemy."

His response was to smile after me. "Do you think I'm still hanging out with them because I *like* them?"

No, I really didn't. I had a feeling Zane had his own plans. Sadly, I couldn't rule out that whatever he was getting up to might not be good for Syl - or the rest of us. Still, he was slowly but surely changing my mind. Plus, he really was "sick" enough to need a little help, and his house was a complete mess.

I pulled open the dishwasher and started moving things from the sink into it. Immediately, Zane sat up.

"Leave that, Jack. I have a maid who'll come handle it."

“And you hate living like this,” I countered. “Tell yourself it covers my debt for the hex that will protect my mom.” I glanced back, then pointed at the couch. “Lie down and take it like a man, Zane.”

He did, but those winter-sky eyes of his hung on me. “Thanks,” he mumbled softly.

I just nodded. “I’ll get this mess under control so you can actually rest and recover in peace, okay? I mean, it’s the least I can do.”

“I don’t deserve this,” he said. “Not after what I did to you.”

“But you didn’t want to do it, did you,” I pointed out. Which brought up another point. “Zane, have you ever considered that your side might be our side?”

He shrugged. “Once or twice, but the way I see it, you’re the one who’s getting the happy ending. I’m not. That changes everything.”

# CHAPTER FOUR

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**A**t some point, I fell asleep on the couch down in the cellar. Gyth had been talking to me about herbs, and his voice had become smoother and softer. The next thing I knew, Reese was carrying me up two flights of stairs to tuck me carefully into my own bed.

I'd asked him to stay, and he had - until I fell asleep again. I only knew that because I'd woken up a few hours later to use the bathroom and heard him and Jackson outside. Sadly, I was so exhausted that I'd crawled back into bed - and slept until the next day.

In that time, the guys had been busy. When I finally woke up late Sunday morning, it was to the sound of glass being thrown into what sounded like a metal garbage can. Curious, I followed the crashing out to the Juliette balcony to find both of the guys - along with three baby skunks - picking up every shard Reese must have broken out there.

Damn, they were gorgeous. Jackson was broad and muscular. His shoulder-length hair was once again pulled back into a ponytail, showing off the sun-streaked highlights. That made his beard look a half shade darker and gave him an almost "biker" type of look. Combined with the tattoos that covered his entire body? I couldn't get enough of it.

Reese was just as muscular, but in a very different way. He reminded me of a swimmer or martial artist. Tall, covered in ripcords of muscle, with his hair pushed back to reveal his elegant profile, he was the pretty boy of the pair. Gorgeous,

definitely, but also gentle, caring, and more brave than I could've imagined.

I could never decide which one was more appealing to me, in all honesty. They were different. They were amazing. That they wanted to have a relationship with me still felt like a dream I was going to wake up from, but this thing between us had become comfortable. The kind of comfortable that was filled with butterflies in my stomach, but not the paranoia in my mind.

“Morning, princess!” Jackson called up at me, which made Reese turn with a smile.

“Morning,” I mumbled, aware my voice was hoarse and I probably looked like a wreck.

“Hungry yet?” Reese asked.

I just nodded. “And I’d kill for a coffee right about now.”

“Then meet us in the kitchen,” Reese said.

First, I needed to find clothes. Next, I *had* to do something with my mass of hair. Twisting it into a messy bun, I decided to call that good, and then headed down. Jackson was waiting. Grabbing my shoulders, he steered me to a chair and then helped me into it. A second later, Reese placed a coffee before me.

*You are not done sleeping.* The voice of Flower, my skunk familiar, made my eyes drop down to find her on the floor beside me.

“I’m sick of sleeping,” I told her.

*Does not mean you are done,* she countered. *The kids are helping to find all the glass. Gythiom and I have been checking the protections on the house. Lupe is recovering.*

“Lupe!” I gasped, having forgotten all about my abused cactus.

I turned to see the new pot Jackson’s mom had gotten for him. It was much bigger than the old one and had been placed beside the door. The cactus inside was standing upright and looking much better than I’d expected. Considering his pot

had been shattered, his roots had been jostled, and we'd had to leave him in a bowl overnight? That he was still alive was a miracle, in my opinion.

But before I could jump up to go talk to him, Jackson's hand gently rubbed my shoulder. "Reese found a system. Lupe can talk to Gyth. Gyth can talk to us. If he needs anything - like water - we make sure he has it."

"And," Reese said, "I moved the grow light over there and put it on a timer for him. He says he needs to rest a bit too, so his roots can repair."

*He's sleeping right now, Flower assured me. He will be fine. We have been handling everything so you can rest. That is what familiars do.*

Which was exactly what I needed to hear to let me relax. "Okay, thank you. And where's Gyth?"

Reese waved towards the back of the house. "Eating sticks. Standing in the sunlight. You know, the usual wild thing stuff."

"And he's fine too?" I asked.

"Stronger than I've ever seen," Reese assured me as he claimed the chair across from me.

That let Jackson head back into the kitchen. "Want one of these, babe?"

"Love one," Reese told him before turning his attention back on me. "You should also know about Zane."

"Asshole," I grumbled. "I'm glad Flower sprayed him."

"Well, he left another tarot card," Reese said. "Jackson took it back."

I looked over just as Jackson returned with a pair of cups. Tea, it looked like, which made me realize it wasn't really morning anymore. Curious, I looked at the clock to find it was almost noon, so much later than I usually had the luxury of waking up.

"He seems almost determined to lose those," I pointed out.

“Not really,” Jackson said as he took the chair beside me. “Syl, in all the years I’ve known him, he’s never let any of them out of his sight. Now he’s done it for you twice?”

Which was when I lifted my cup and took a sip. Yep, I was going to need some caffeine to kick my brain into gear, because that made it sound like he’d been helping me. Zane was part of the coven, and the coven wanted to capture Gyth, which meant Zane had to be my enemy - didn’t it?

“Why?” I asked, deciding that was the safest question.

“Because he has a thing for Jackson,” Reese answered.

“No,” Jackson grumbled. “He says it’s because he wants revenge on the coven. Syl, he’s the reason Gyth wasn’t caught. He cursed one of the others to screw up his lines, or whatever they do.”

Nope, my brain was still in slow-mode. “I don’t get it,” I said.

Reese gave Jackson a pointed look, so Jackson decided to fill me in on everything they’d talked about. Every single thing, from the tarot reading about me through Jackson explaining about bonding to the land. A few times, Reese broke in to add how Zane clearly still cared about Jackson, only for Jackson to deny there was anything there more vehemently than I’d expected.

“Okay,” I finally said, pretty sure I was now keeping up. “So Zane’s in love with Jackson and is using his power to protect him, right?”

“And what I care about,” Jackson mumbled under his breath. “He gave me a spell to put in my mom’s house.”

“Did you?” I asked.

Looking guilty - which wasn’t easy for a muscular guy covered in tattoos - he grimaced. “Not yet. It’s supposed to make the coven ignore her, and I don’t want her to disappear, so I will the first chance I get.”

Which said a hell of a lot more than he knew. “So you trust him.”

“He does,” Reese assured me. “He’s trying to make it clear he’s moved on, but they didn’t break up on bad terms, Syl. Zane dumped Jackson because he had to, not because he wanted to. Never mind that those two were off and on for most of our childhood.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked. “How long is most?”

“Since middle school,” Jackson admitted, sounding like he’d rather keep that to himself.

“His first kiss,” Reese said. “His first male lover. Um, I’m sure there were a few more firsts in there, but it made sense. They were the only two bisexual guys in school. The gay guys were either so far in the closet or so paranoid of a bi guy running off with a girl that those two were on their own.”

“And then you,” I reminded him.

Reese scoffed. “Yeah, but I didn’t have a clue. It’s also not a secret that I do prefer women. I like some men. A handful.”

“He likes the kind that belong on those romance novels you have in your bookshelf over there,” Jackson teased. “The pretty ones.”

“Like you?” I teased.

“Just like me,” Jackson promised. “But as for Zane? Well, he wasn’t asked to be inducted into the coven. For most of his childhood, he helped with those rituals. When he turned eighteen, they forced him into the coven, binding him before he knew what was happening.”

“How does that even work?” I asked. “Because it sounds like only the main six wixen - the ‘leader’ of each bloodline - are a part of it. But then other times, I’m convinced it’s their entire families.”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Jackson admitted. “I also really don’t want to ask Zane about it, no offense.”

“Good point,” I relented.

“But here’s the big news,” Jackson said. “Syl, the founding families? They’ve all been drained of magic. Whatever spell you tossed at them worked, and it worked a lot better than

anyone expected. Zane's a wreck, and he says the rest aren't any better. Right now - and it sounds like at least until the new moon - they're all but useless. Zane made it sound like it could be longer. I guess the spell is *still* draining them."

"Which means you and Gyth are safe for a bit," Reese clarified.

Yeah, but that also meant something else, and from the way they were talking around it, I could make a pretty good guess. "And you two can go back home."

Jackson rocked his head in a way that was neither a yes nor a no. "Eventually we'll give you a little privacy back, check on my mom, and let Nora know things might get tricky around town, but not yet. Someone still has to keep an eye on you."

"Which means we're not leaving soon," Reese clarified. "We know you're wiped out from the magic stuff, so we're staying until you're okay. Doesn't matter if that's a few weeks. We just wanted to put it out there. But the main reason I think we should? I'd kinda like to do this dating thing right."

"So, maybe we can take you out for real?" Jackson immediately asked.

His request made the idea of them leaving feel much better. I liked these guys, and probably a lot more than I should. I didn't really want them to go, but I also knew they'd only started crashing here because they'd been worried about the coven of founding families coming after me.

In truth, we barely knew each other. Things were still a bit awkward and new. Yes, waking up between or beside them was nice, but it was moving too fast, wasn't it? This was all the rush of a new relationship, and moving too fast would be the best way to screw it up.

Never mind that they deserved a little time together too. These two had been dating for over three years. They'd figured out how to make things work. And while I loved the attention they heaped on me, I also really wanted to get this right. I wanted to make this something that would last.

So I nodded, accepting Jackson's offer. "I'd love a real date. You still owe me, after all, since we're going to do this right. And yeah, I'm a little sad about you two eventually leaving, but that's just because I got spoiled."

"We'll still be here all day during the week," Reese promised.

"And probably sleeping over on the weekends," Jackson joked. "I'm down for a few sleepovers."

"And dates," Reese said. "I'm also keeping my drawer."

"But it's honestly easier for us to get our tools and supplies if we're at our house," Jackson explained. "You need windows, doors, skunk entrances, and more. We got a screen put up over the broken window, but fixing those just jumped to the top of the list."

"And the front door latch," Reese added.

*The door doesn't agree,* Flower said, reminding me she was still lying half under my chair.

"What?" I asked. "The door has opinions?"

*The house does,* she explained. *It knows you and likes you now. Leave the door alone.*

"We're leaving the front door alone," I told the guys. "Flower says the house has opinions too."

Jackson just ducked his head and started laughing. Reese leaned back and dragged both hands down his face. Their reaction was cute, but also reflected how I felt. A cursed forest? A forest monster who called himself a wild thing? Magic? Talking skunks? A cactus I'd had for years who now spoke in my head? Yep, adding in a house with opinions on top of that was a lot, but I was getting good at rolling with the weirdness out here.

"The windows first and then the back door," Jackson decided. "Plus, we need to get a contractor out for an HVAC unit so you'll have heating and cooling. I think we'll put the cellar last, so you can do your thing down there while we tear

things apart up here. I want to put more light in down there, softer ones, and add a sink.”

“Really?” I asked, because a sink sounded amazing.

“Makes sense, doesn’t it?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, but we didn’t talk about that, and I didn’t even know it was possible.”

“We’ll make it possible,” Reese promised.

“And the cleanup?” I asked. “Since I slept through most of that?”

The men shared a look, which meant it wasn’t all good, but it was Jackson who answered. “One of the smaller trees along the drive fell. Gyth helped us get it out of the way, but she isn’t looking so good. Plenty lost branches, so we’ve been moving debris out to your compost area. Reese and I salted everything again to make sure that’s good, which means all that’s left is the glass.”

“And there’s a lot of glass,” Reese admitted. “Every jar and vial we broke? Yeah, it’s all out there, but the skunk kids are helping us find it.”

That made me look down at Flower again. “And they’re just on their own?”

*They are weaned now, she pointed out. Soon, they will be old enough to go out on their own. A few more months. They do not stay children for long, Sylvia.*

“No...” I breathed, hating that.

“What?” Reese asked, not hearing any of Flower’s comments.

“The skunklets are growing up,” I told him. “She says they’ll eventually go off to live their own skunky lives. I’m not ready for that.”

“What?!” Jackson asked. “No! Sprig’s my man!”

*They may visit, Flower assured me. Growing up does not mean they will forget. It just means that one day they will have kits of their own.*



Kits. So that was what baby skunks were supposed to be called. I filed it away in my memory, and then ignored it, because I preferred skunklets.

“Well, make sure they know they’re always welcome,” I told my familiar. “As far as I’m concerned, they’re a part of this crazy coven we’re doing.”

*They will like that, she told me. And I like the idea of my children staying close, so thank you.*

I just lifted my cup and took another sip of coffee, then laughed once. “You know what? I’m actually starting to feel like a witch. I’ve got my skunks, my cactus, my guys, and a monster wandering out there eating sticks. I mean, this is at least a little cool, right? It’s not all bad or weird?”

“Definitely cool,” Jackson assured me.

Reese just caught my eye, then smiled. “As cheesy as it sounds, it feels magical.”

“Yeah, magical is a very good description,” I agreed.

# CHAPTER FIVE

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The guys fixed brunch for me. They made way too much food, insisting I needed to eat to get my strength up. I had to giggle at that, because it was such a guy thing, but it was also very sweet. So, once I was completely stuffed, I headed upstairs to get a shower, tame my overly curly hair, and get dressed.

I was in the middle of braiding my hair when the trees started to whisper in the back of my mind. At first, I couldn't make out what they were saying. There were simply too many voices to distinguish any specific words. Thankfully, it didn't take long before one took over. I was pretty sure I recognized it.

*A visitor is coming, the oak beside the house warned me.*

My fingers moved a little faster, wanting to finish my hair before they made it all the way up to the house. Sadly, I couldn't simply think to the trees the way they thought to me. I was stuck to the limitation of my voice, so I raised it, yelling towards the front of the house.

“Friend or foe?”

*We do not know.*

“Magical? Is it one of the wixen?”

*No.* Its answer sounded definitive.

I hoped it was right, and I had a funny feeling there was no way the forest would let any of the founding families' coven members onto the property again, but who else would be

coming here? It wasn't like I had a large group of friends who just stopped by for no reason. In truth, I still barely knew anyone in town. I needed to fix that, but right now I was more worried about my latest visitor.

I finished my hair and was hurrying down the stairs when I caught a glimpse of a large white car through the broken front windows. I didn't recognize the vehicle, so I headed over to slide on a pair of flip-flops. Sadly, I was dressed more for cleaning the house than entertaining, but this would have to do. Pulling open the front door, I stepped outside just as a man climbed out of the car.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

He turned to me with a smile, and I recognized his face. This was the same real estate agent who'd given me the keys to the property back when I'd first inherited it. Moving to the back door of his car, he reached inside for a briefcase even as he replied.

"Sylvia Holt? I'm Stephen Hill. I don't know if you remember me, but we met a couple of months ago. Marjorie Maybrook's estate hired me to handle the transfer of this property."

I nodded slowly, watching as he walked towards the porch. "Yeah, I remember. Please tell me there isn't a problem."

Still holding on to his overly charming smile, Stephen jogged up the stairs and reached out his hand, offering to shake. I took it, clasping his palm, and tried my hardest not to look at the ivy that surrounded the banister. A few of the vines were twitching while others were reaching out. Thankfully, it was minor. Not something most people would notice.

"No problem," Stephen assured me. "Also glad I caught you at home. Now, I'm not sure of your plans for this property, but I just had an offer come in today that I wanted to present to you in person."

"An offer?" My eyes narrowed.

Who would want to make an offer on this place? Most people in town called the forest cursed. Okay, the truth was

that it was magical, but it was still weird and had plenty of opinions of its own. Most normal people wouldn't want to live here. Never mind that the cottage was small, only two bedrooms, and not exactly up-to-date.

In other words, I couldn't imagine the draw for someone to want this property. When I'd inherited it, I'd assumed I would turn around and sell it – at least until I'd caught my at-the-time boyfriend cheating. Maybe for hunting? Sadly, there was no way the forest would tolerate that. I also couldn't exactly explain why to this guy.

“A very generous one,” Stephen assured me. “Maybe we can go inside and talk about it?”

I shook my head. “Sadly, I'm in the middle of construction right now, so the inside of the house is not exactly fit for human habitation. Trust me, it's a complete wreck.” To prove my point, I gestured to the broken windows.

So the real estate agent moved to the banister, setting his briefcase down on top so he could open it. “Well, as you know, you have three hundred acres of land that connects to federally-owned property. That means you don't have to worry about neighbors sharing a fence line, which is appealing to a certain type of people.”

“Uh huh...” This was the point where he was gonna start buttering me up, wasn't it?

“Unfortunately, you're also outside of town, which limits your services.” Stephen withdrew a set of papers from his briefcase, then closed everything back up. “That makes the value of a place like this hard to determine for the average buyer. Still, going by your tax assessment, other farmland in the area, and properties with comparable residences on them, it seems this offer is more than generous.”

I didn't bother to take the paperwork he offered me. “I'm not selling.”

“Look at the offer, Miss Holt.”

Letting out a heavy sigh, I grabbed the page and flipped, looking for nothing but numbers. On the pages in between, I

saw lists of bulleted points. Those didn't matter. This man wanted me to look, so I was going to look. Nothing else.

Of course, it was on the last page. I should've known - because it always was. But there, I saw a number bigger than anything I could imagine. I had to count the digits to make sure. Over seven of them. The place at the beginning of it was for millions. *Multiple* millions.

I couldn't even imagine a million dollars. Shit. That was a lot of money. Probably more than I would earn in my entire lifetime. And yet, seeing it gave me a reaction I hadn't expected at all. It made my stomach turn.

Because what was the price these trees would pay if someone else owned the land? My eyes jumped over to the oak at the edge of the drive, closest to the house. How much was its safety worth? Never mind the magic of this place! My eyes returned to a number bigger than I could ever imagine seeing in my bank account, and the concept of it disgusted me.

"I'm not selling," I told Stephen, thrusting the papers back towards him.

"Sylvia, that's more than this land is worth." Stephen shook his head in confusion. "You will never get an offer like that again. For that much money, you could buy this many acres, the house of your dreams, and have a better place in the end."

"And it wouldn't have been in my family for dozens of generations," I countered.

That was what made him finally accept the papers. "But how much money are you going to sink into trying to make this place livable? This old house is just a money pit. If I was you, I would take the offer, smile all the way to the bank, and never look back."

"But you're not me, are you?" I gave him a smile to make it clear that wasn't meant to be rude. "There's no amount of money that can replace the memories I made here as a child. I'm sorry, I am not selling. This, Stephen, is my home."

*Home.*

*Mine.*

I hadn't even realized until the words fell out of my mouth, but they were true. For the first time in my life, I honestly felt like I belonged somewhere. Maybe it was the way the trees whispered my name like they were greeting an old friend. Most likely, it was the comfort of dappled sunlight on powdered dirt, the excited squeaks of my skunks, and the solace that came with all of it.

In truth, I didn't know, and it also didn't matter. I felt like I belonged here. Every time I stepped into the forest, I felt grounded in a way I just couldn't explain. It wasn't the same as meditating. This was nothing like having a good day. It was deeper than all of that.

It was more like something about this very ground had been woven into my DNA. The closest example I could think of were the stories my father's parents had of the olden days and their grandparents. No, I hadn't been a slave, yet that ancestral trauma had been passed through me and I could feel it too. But this? This place? It was the good part. It wasn't trauma. It was potential – and it was *mine*.

However, none of that would matter to Stephen. I knew enough about how the real estate market worked to know his real motivation was his commission. I wasn't sure what percent he made, but any portion of a million dollars had to be a huge chunk of change. Of multiple millions? I was braced for him to get pushy.

Instead, he simply opened his briefcase and put the paperwork back in it. "I'm going to sit on this for a week," he told me. "If you change your mind during that time, give me a call."

"I won't."

He chuckled. "A lot of people say that. A lot of people also change their mind. There's nothing wrong with it, and with a deal this good, it's the right decision. I'm also not going to try to strong-arm you into taking it."

"Thank you," I told him, honestly meaning that.

He just smiled, picked up his briefcase, and turned for the stairs, calling behind him, “Just keep in mind that one day you might want a few extra bedrooms. I’m not sure how easy it will be to add onto this place, but if you decide to start a family...” He paused at the door to his car to give me another one of those overly charming smiles. “Just something to think about.”

“I have some really good contractors,” I assured him. Then something else jumped to mind. “Hey, Stephen?”

“Yeah?”

“Who wants to buy the land anyway?”

He put his briefcase back into the back seat and closed the door before turning back to face me again. “I’m afraid that’s confidential. Keeping their anonymity is part of the reason they’re offering such a high price.”

Right. Of course it was. And that it came today probably wasn’t a coincidence at all.

“Well, tell whichever one of the founding families that wants to get rid of me that I’m not selling.” I smiled back with that same overly friendly curl to my lips. “I also won’t be changing my mind. I’m sure they’ll understand why.”

“And you still have a week before I tell them you said no,” he promised. “Thank you for seeing me today. I’m sorry to have interrupted.”

Then he climbed into his car. I moved to the banister, bending over to rest my forearms on the same place he’d had his briefcase before. It was one of the few spots without ivy. Normally, it wasn’t. That neither I nor this real estate agent had seen the vines moving was actually a little impressive.

So, while I waited for my latest visitor to back his car up and leave my property, I reached over to caress the closest leaf. Another vine stretched to brush against my pinky. It wasn’t a lot of movement, but to me it was one more sign that I belonged here.

The plants were my friends. The trees had more history than I could ever comprehend. There was magic here, and this



magic was mine by birthright. Aunt Margie had left me this place because it honestly meant something, even if it wasn't fancy or flashy.

But it was home. It wasn't simply my house, where I lived, or a place to rest my head. I wasn't even sure when the change had happened, but somewhere between the first day when I'd been jostled as I tried to make it up the ruts that had made up my driveway and the other night when the wixen came to attack me? Something had changed. Something big.

It was me. I was what had changed. For the first time in as long as I could remember, I'd found where I belonged, and there was no amount of money that would make me walk away from that.

# CHAPTER SIX

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Sadly, even that little bit of effort wore me out. It was like standing had gotten a lot harder. I felt like I'd run a damned marathon, and even though I'd slept for what felt like an eternity, I wasn't fully recovered.

The guys tried to say I should sleep more before worrying about magic. Flower told me the forest understood, and it would not expect more of me than was possible. Fruit could not be born in the wrong season, after all. Me? I felt useless.

Not wanting to cause a confrontation, I gave in and rested for the rest of the day. I even went to bed early that night. The next day, however, I was up and had plans. I didn't have the luxury of sitting on my ass for weeks at a time.

Okay, my real job required me to do a lot of sitting, but there was more to life than working. I also needed to clean, do laundry, and just all the basic things that came with life. But today? I was going to help the tree that had risked itself for us.

So, once I was dressed, I headed outside and down the driveway. I had a feeling I'd find the wounded tree one way or another, but I didn't head out alone. Flower trotted at my side, flicking her tail up as she showed me which way to go.

The parking area in front of my house looked pristine now. I knew it hadn't started that way, and the recycling bins in the bed of Jackson's truck convinced me they'd picked up a lot of glass already. In the back, the skunklets were still searching out the tiny bits that would be easy to miss from six feet above

ground. Ahead of me, the driveway was a lot longer than it seemed in a car.

The gravel slushed under my shoes, making an almost wet sound. That was just the rocks rubbing against rocks. Above, the leaves rustled softly. Maybe it was my imagination, but I honestly felt like a crowd was turning to watch me as I passed. I couldn't put my finger on why, and the leaves weren't whispering words this time, but it was still there.

And then I saw the tree. It was a mature red maple. Jackson had called it a "she," which made me think Gyth had been involved. A rope had been wrapped around the trunk about ten or fifteen feet off the ground, then secured to the trunk of a much larger tree beside it, but the maple's leaves were visibly wilted and already fading towards yellow.

"Oh, you poor thing," I breathed as I moved close enough to press my hand against the trunk. "Thank you for helping. I have no idea how they pulled you down, but I'm going to try to help, okay?"

*I leaned too far and the vehicle hit me.* The answer was soft, but it did sound rather feminine.

"Is it your roots?" I asked.

*And my trunk,* she explained. *My wood is splintered inside.*

So I pressed both hands to her and reached for that rush of power. I might not be good at this yet, but it got easier the more I did it. At least it had before the battle the other night, but now, the deeper I leaned in, seeking out the magic, the further away it felt.

Yet this tree had helped me. I was the witch of this forest. I was supposed to be the one who protected them. I'd turned them loose so they could help, not be cut down like they didn't matter. This, the oldest forest I'd ever heard of, should be wild, cursed, or whatever else people wanted to call it. To do that, the trees needed *my* help.

That was our agreement.

So I reached harder. I let myself think back to how the Grimsons had assumed they'd just take Gyth like it was their

right. And if they couldn't have the last free wild thing, Lucien Grimson had made it clear he would take me instead. Take me, enslave me, and then use me to enhance his own magic.

That fucker had never even considered what those words might sound like to a Black woman! He was so caught up in his own power and prestige that he didn't give a shit about anyone else's, let alone the creatures and plants I was now responsible for, so fuck him. Fuck his entire coven. Fuck all the wixen who had forgotten where their magic came from!

The magic finally began to flow. Slowly, like a trickle I was still too weak to hold onto, it made its way from me and into the bark under my hands. When I'd helped the trees around the wild things' decay rings, this had been so much easier, but I wasn't about to stop.

I pulled a little harder, and the rush of power began to feel like splinters under my skin. Shards grated against my insides. Not of my body, but of my thoughts, of my breath; the inside of things that couldn't be turned inside-out!

And still I pushed. Like sandpaper on skin, it didn't feel good, but that wasn't the same thing as true pain. Discomfort I could ignore. I could work with it. I could easily push through this, because I had no other option. I would not lose this tree to an asshole with a power complex. I certainly would not lose her on my watch.

Then a little paw pressed against my leg. *Syl*, Flower said, *she's better. You need to recover too, and she'll be fine for a few more days.*

"Nope, I'm fixing her," I told my skunk. "All the way fixed, not just patched up. This maple helped me when I needed it most, so the least I can do is return the favor."

Then a branch nudged my shoulder, easing me back. My eyes jerked open to see green leaves with that distinctive maple shape to them. Shocked, I looked up at the top of the tree, then to my hands that were still stretched out, even if they were touching nothing.

"Wha..." I tried.

The leaves all around me rustled. *The Holt is still a sapling*, one said.

*She is willing to prove her intentions, though*, another pointed out.

*I am much better*, the maple told me, and it was her branch on my shoulder. *You, Sylvia, must grow your roots before you can reach as far as an oak. I must also grow new roots. I think we should both focus on growing them rather than relying on magic.*

“But will you at least be okay?” I asked her.

*Yes*, she promised. *My forest will help as well. Rest, witch. You cannot grow if you do not take care of yourself too.*

*See?* Flower asked, sounding a little snide.

Then again, she was right, and she had a point. So, giving in, I turned to head back to the house - or so I thought. I made it exactly seven steps before my head felt light and my world began to turn a bit. As the vertigo hit, I reached out, grabbing at a tree for stability.

Flower squeaked. A trunk shifted to meet my hand. Branches creaked as they all bent in my direction, and then I was down. Not flat on my back, but on my rump, with trees encircling me at odd angles and the leaves blowing harder than I'd heard in a while.

*The witch.*

*Gythiom, you are required.*

*Sylvia is weak.*

I felt like I couldn't keep up, so I pulled both knees up and bent to put my head between them. My heartbeat was thrumming loudly in my ears, but it almost sounded distant. My eyes didn't want to focus. The one thing I could do was breathe, so I made sure to do that deeply and slowly, fighting against the urge to pass out where no one would be able to find me.

Yet the chittering of Flower, the creaks of wood, and the tromping of animalistic steps made it clear that my definition

of “no one” should probably be called “everyone.” These things weren’t people per se, but they were my friends. They were the life that existed around me, so easy to overlook and take for granted. The same life that was here to help me more than I’d ever imagined, it seemed.

“Sylvia?” The deep voice belonged to Gyth.

I murmured in response, refusing to lift my head from my knees.

“Are you wounded?” he asked, and I heard leaves crunch on the ground as he knelt beside me.

“Feel like I’m gonna pass out,” I admitted.

*She had to heal the maple,* Flower informed him, completely rattling me out.

“Thought you were supposed to be *my* familiar,” I joked.

That was enough to make Gyth chuckle. “She is. She is taking good care of you, little witch. You, however, are not taking good care of yourself.”

*No one has explained to her about growing her magic,* Flower said, and her voice sounded like an accusation this time.

“That,” I agreed, reaching out blindly in the hopes of petting my little stinky friend.

She moved her head under my hand. Yes, I could smell her musk out here in the forest, but I was starting to get used to it. That wasn’t the same as liking it, but somewhere between the time I’d moved in and the moment I’d thrown a mayonnaise jar filled with flour and spices at wixen to stop magic, I’d changed a bit.

I’d started out as a city girl who was used to her Starbucks in the morning and manicures with friends. Now, I was a hedge witch living in a cursed forest. My friends were plants and impossible creatures. I had two boyfriends who were possibly the sexiest men I’d ever seen - and made out with each other often enough that I could get my kink satisfied. I lived in a town where no one was able to blindly hate anyone

else because there was a spell to prevent bigotry. Compared to all of that, the smell of a skunk felt like it was easy to get used to.

Gyth gently caressed the back of my hair, somehow not tangling his talons in those spiral curls of mine. “You were supposed to be resting, Sylvia.”

I chuckled, finally feeling stable enough to look up at his goat-like face. “I had to help the forest. It accepted me so I have to be a good witch, right? I can’t let a tree die!”

“Things live and things die,” he countered. “That is the way of the world. It is how it is meant to be.”

“Including you?” He blinked, the lack of expression making me think he hadn’t expected that question. So I decided to press my advantage. “What about your brothers? When they die, they leave scars in the forest. Wild things are the forest’s soul, right? You’re the source of magic, so does that mean magic is supposed to die?”

“No,” he relented.

“So not everything should die just *because*?” I asked.

His eyes shifted up, looking at the biggest tree around us. “Life has limits.”

“Then are you not alive?” I asked. “Gyth! What I’m saying is that just because a bad thing happens, that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t help. I helped you when you needed sanctuary. The forest helped us when the coven attacked. Doctors help the sick and wounded with medicine, and hedge witches help people and things with magic, right?”

“Yes...” he relented.

“That’s all I’m trying to do,” I assured him. “I’m trying to be a good witch - not one like them.”

“You already are,” he promised, “but you are also impatient. You must recover from your spell, and then you can work up to using more and more magic easily.”

“Well, yeah, but...” I tried.



“But you are too weak to stand,” he broke in.

Shoving my hand to the forest floor, I leaned into it and forced myself up to my feet. It wasn't pretty, and there was a moment when my ass was the highest point, but it worked. Sadly, my head still spun a bit when I tried to turn and face Gyth. Even worse, the wild thing smirked like he could tell.

I just ignored it. “Gyth, I'm used to having no one else to rely on. All my life, I've had to do it myself, so I'm very, *very* good at it. I also don't want to lose this little slice of perfection that I've found out here, okay?”

He reached over to stabilize me, pressing one of those long-fingered hands against my back. “You are not alone anymore, little witch. You made your own coven. One filled with trees, familiars, and me. Let us help?”

“Yeah, but your brothers are alone,” I reminded him. “The coven is hunting you, has already caught them, and I'm the only one with magic who can stop them, right? That means I don't have time to sit around and be lazy.”

*It is called healing,* Flower corrected.

“I don't have time for that either,” I grumbled. “The guys said we knocked the magic out of the coven, and they can't do anything until at least the new moon.” I looked from Gyth down to Flower, then back, only swaying slightly which meant I was getting better. “Guys! That means we can free the wild things *now!*”

Gyth simply sighed, then stepped in and scooped me into his arms like I was a child. “No, you cannot,” he grumbled, storming back towards the cottage. “To free them, you have to find them first.”

“Well, fuck,” I mumbled.

“And before that,” he went on, “you must rest.” Gently, he shifted me so I all but had to put my head on his brown and green fuzzy shoulder. “You need to grow your magic so you can be a powerful witch. You must have patience. My brothers have been captives for years. Many, many years. The time for hurry has long passed, but the time for healing you is now.”

“Well, yeah, but...”

His chuckle cut me off. “You could be a very strong witch if you listen. If you do not, you will become little more than amusement for those you just defeated. Rest, little witch. You need to grow your roots.”

Yeah, but I had a feeling I was going to hate every second of it.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

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My “friends” didn’t let me out of their sight after that. Even the skunklets were willing to rat me out if I tried to do so much as step onto the porch. Reese and Jackson promised they weren’t keeping me captive, but they still insisted I needed to rest.

So I rested.

Over the next few days, I got so much work done. Sitting at the table or on the sofa in the living room counted as “relaxing.” Typing up ad copy and website code was deemed to be easy enough for my magical abilities to recover. And while I hated to admit it, I could feel it happening. I was also finally getting ahead on the website.

I also made a point of seeing the doctor. If the coven was truly out of commission, this was my chance. I wanted to make sure I really wasn’t insane, poisoned, or suffering some medical problem. Because while I could see that magic was real, the effects were too. To me, that meant getting my body checked out and treated with science only made sense.

And while I was there, I had the woman pull bloodwork for a few extra tests. Normal, routine, regular stuff - like STIs. A little updating of my birth control made me feel like I was being responsible. It was one thing I had control of in a world that had spiraled into chaos around me.

Beautiful chaos, but still chaos.

After that, I focused on the amazing remote job that paid my bills while my guys focused on fixing the house. The front

windows had been destroyed. Now I had new ones with high-efficiency everything. The warped glass from the kitchen windows had been removed. New crystal-clear glass had been put in its place. I could see all the way across the property when I stood at the sink. And while I missed the old windows, the view was definitely worth it.

The whole time, the forest kept talking to me. It started with little things, like updating me on the maple near the front gate, who was getting better. When I replied, simply yelling towards the front of the house, that did nothing but encourage them. Soon, all the trees sent me a thought when anything happened that I might possibly need to know. Combined with Lupe, Flower, her kids, Gyth, and the two men rebuilding the house, I was starting to feel a little overwhelmed.

Maybe I wasn't doing any magic, but I was doing a whole lot of organizing. The strange thing was that I liked it. Not necessarily the organizing part, but that I felt needed. When I'd moved here, I'd braced myself for living alone and becoming an introvert. The reality was that I liked having a few people around, so this was sorta nice. It kept me from going stir crazy.

The sight of Reese and Jackson working was a different sort of distraction. My central air conditioning had been ordered, but it would be a few more days before it was ready. That meant the house got warm during the middle of the day, which led to the guys pulling their shirts off. I was pretty sure they did it intentionally, yet I still drank up the view. The way their muscles flexed was almost magical.

Bit by bit, my house was coming together. That part was amazing – except for one tiny little thing. With every job completed, my bank account got a little lower. Not that I minded paying the guys for the exceptional work they were doing. It was just that I also liked the comfort my great-aunt Margie's inheritance had given me - but I figured the house counted.

Because this really was starting to look like my dream home. Five days after I healed the tree, the sliding glass door was removed. A set of French doors was put in to replace them

– and I found out what had happened to all that warped glass. It had been cut and reframed into the French doors! Even better, one of the bottom panes was made of plexiglass and swung to let my skunks in and out as they needed.

The screened-in back porch was quickly becoming their home, but it had also been upgraded. In the attack, the coven of wixen had shattered not only my anti-skunk-stink jar out there, but also the protection spells I'd made. Reese and Jackson had cleaned up the glass, replaced all the screens, stained the wood, and leveled the floor, making the whole place look like new. And then, just to prove how amazing they were, they added a collection of doggy beds for the skunks to sleep on.

The whole time, my magic eluded me.

That scraping or rough feeling I'd felt out in the forest didn't go away for days. When I tried to do something as minor as making a new anti-skunk-stink jar for the porch, it came back with a vengeance. That, more than anything else, convinced me how much I needed this magical break, but it also made me worried.

Had I burned out my power? Gyth had said something about being a weak witch if I didn't listen to him. I couldn't remember his exact words, but it sounded like a warning. At the time, I'd assumed it was no different than the things parents told kids to get them into bed, and now I wasn't so sure.

What if I wasn't a witch anymore? What if I'd won that battle only to lose the overall war? We all knew the coven wasn't leaving me alone because they wanted to. They wouldn't accept the lines I'd drawn and simply continue on like I wasn't here. Nope, these were the kind of rich and entitled assholes who would do everything in their power to make me regret what had happened. I knew because I'd met enough people like that in my life.

So how was I supposed to fight back if I had no magic? How could I fix that? The guys kept telling me to sleep or rest, but was it really that easy? And what happened when I wasn't

sleepy, simply worn out? Since that was the state I'd been at lately.

And then something changed.

*Come*, Flower said when I stumbled downstairs that morning.

Confused, I turned, letting my mentor and fuzzy friend lead the way to the front of the house. At the door, she paused, but this time the latch was easy to release. Once I pulled open the door, she scurried onto the porch, glancing back to make sure I followed. Naturally, I did.

“Okay?” I asked. “What’s going on, Flower?”

*Do you feel it?* she asked.

“Feel what?”

But it wasn't my familiar who answered. This voice was soft, felt like it echoed, and was made from a chorus. *The moon.*

My head snapped around to the ivy. “You can talk now?”

*Yes. Now feel the moon.*

Okay, so the ivy had clearly grown up. I'd been told it would learn to talk once it matured enough to match the magical growth I'd pushed into it. It seemed today was the day that happened. That meant one more “person” to talk to and organize. But what did the moon have to do with any of this?

Confused, I looked up, wondering if this was one of those times when the moon would be out during the day. Peering through the tree leaves, I scanned the sky, but found nothing. Next, I turned, trying to see if maybe it was on the other side of the house. At my feet, Flower sighed heavily.

*They didn't say to look for it. They said to feel it. Today is the new moon. You will not be able to see it.*

“Okay? And?” Evidently, everything else in this forest understood magic a hell of a lot better than I did.

Flower simply turned her face towards the trees, almost like she was gesturing with her muzzle. *The forest gives you*

*power now, since it has claimed you. As a witch, your power cycles with the moon. That means your magic should be back.*

*You are no longer pulling from a dry well,* the oak tree added, joining our conversation. His voice was one I was getting to know well.

“Wait, wait, wait...” I begged. “So that’s why my magic didn’t feel good?” My eyes darted from Flower to the ivy and then over to the tree.

*Yes...* the ivy whispered in its multifaceted voice.

Yeah, okay, that was a little creepy. Or maybe beautiful. I couldn’t quite decide yet. Both? Once I was used to it, I’d probably lean more towards beautiful, but right now, the idea of multiple plants sharing a mind was a bit strange.

*We grow together,* the ivy said. *That makes it easy to think together.*

My head snapped over to the closest green branch. I hadn’t said a *thing!* What the hell? How did it know what I was thinking?

It was the oak who answered. *Plants hear more than words. Your skunks do not.*

“And Gyth?” I asked.

*He is a wild thing,* Flower explained.

“No,” I groaned. “I meant if the trees can hear me, then can he - “

*I know what you meant,* she promised. *That does not change that the rules for him are different. He does not hear your thoughts, but the trees can whisper to him. So will the insects, the flowers, and even the sunlight. Gythiom is a wild thing. He is not a plant or an animal.*

So I nodded my head slowly. “Ok.”

What else could I say to that? I knew he wasn’t, but I was stuck on the fact that plants could read my mind. What sort of things had I been thinking that they’d picked up on? Did they



understand the sorts of things an animal like me would ponder? More than all of that, did it even matter?

*No*, the ivy whispered to me.

Well, there was my answer. And now I had a billion other questions. “So my magic is back just like it was before?” My question was for any of the million things listening to me now.

*Your power will grow and fade with the moon*, Flower explained. *Waxing and waning. Those are the terms witches use. As the moon makes its way towards full, your power will get stronger. After that, if you use too much, you will need to wait until the moon starts over.*

“Okay,” I breathed, deciding that actually made little sense. “So this is the moon cycle Gyth was trying to teach me?”

*Yes!* Flower agreed.

Right on the heels of that, I realized there was another problem. “Wait, does this mean the rest of the coven is getting their magic back too?”

*No*, the oak said. *They are not done fulfilling the spell.*

*It was a very powerful spell*, Flower assured me. *More powerful than a new witch should have been able to create. That is why you have been so tired, so I thought you’d be happy to hear that you’ll start feeling better now.*

“Oh, I am,” I assured her just as the door opened behind me.

“You’re what?” Jackson asked as he slipped through, clearly having overheard my half of that.

“I’m starting to feel better,” I explained. “Flower says it’s because it’s a new moon and so my magic is returning.” Then I gave him the best pouty face I could manage. “Please tell me this means I can stop resting now? I’m so tired of resting.”

Jackson simply chuckled and ducked his head back inside my house. “Reese! She’s on the front porch.”

Which made it sound like they'd been looking for me. Stepping back, I moved so I could lean against the banister, then reached out to caress one of the ivy leaves without even thinking about it. When the thing partially curled around my finger, I couldn't help but smile.

"The ivy also found its voice," I told Jackson. "I guess the new moon has been good for all of us, because that's what it sounds like is making this possible."

"What's possible?" Reese asked, joining us.

"Today's the new moon," Jackson told him. "Syl's magic is back, and it seems the ivy is talking to her."

Reese just smiled over the plant. "Bad news, ivy. We're still going to have to use the yes and no system."

In response, a section of ivy actually lifted up visibly. When Reese laughed, I realized that was part of the system he had with the plant. He'd once told me that one side was yes and the other side was no, but I didn't know which one was which. It also didn't really matter right now.

"Were you two looking for me?" I asked.

The pair shared a look, and then I swore they both turned a little shy. Reese smiled and dropped his face towards the ground. Jackson cleared his throat and shifted without moving. Clearly, something was going on.

"Is something in the house broken?" I asked, dreading the worst.

"What?" Jackson asked. "No! Syl, no it's nothing like that. We just wanted to ask you out on a date."

"Good job," Reese grumbled.

"Well, it's better than you were doing," Jackson shot back.

"Which was why I was trying to let you do it!"

By this point, I couldn't help but grin at the pair of them. "So, you want to go on a date?"

"Yes!" They both said in unison.

Then Reese sighed. “If you’re really feeling better, then we would love to have the chance to take you out on a date.”

“Both of us,” Jackson clarified. “Together.”

“Yeah,” I muttered, “but what about the coven? I mean, don’t get me wrong. I would love to, but leaving the property means they can come after us.”

*The trees say they can’t, Flower reminded me. They are still being drained to pay the price.*

“Until when?” I asked.

Flower made the most human-like shrug I’d ever seen from a skunk. But before I could press that, Jackson said, “We asked Gyth the other day because we kind of got the same idea. So, as long as we stay within the forest –”

“Not just your property, but the entire forest,” Reese clarified.

“– Then you’re safe,” Jackson continued. “Never mind the fact that you can’t stay out here forever. Eventually, you’re going to have to go shopping or something. We need to figure out how to deal with that, but for a date? Staying in the forest actually works perfectly. I mean, if you’re okay with that?”

All I could do was smile at the pair of them. They’d put a little bit of work into this if they’d talked to Gyth the other day. I had a feeling there was even more effort I didn’t know about yet. And I liked it. It made me feel like the whole time I’d been sidelined, these two had been thinking about a way to celebrate me finally being allowed to do things again.

“Yes,” I told them both, “I would love to go on a date with you. Any date, but one in the forest sounds absolutely perfect.”

Because I was definitely ready to get back into the swing of things.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

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Of course, the air conditioning company decided they could install my unit the very next day. That put our date on hold for a little bit, but I understood. I also really wanted to make sure I could heat and cool this place. While the weather in the spring had been nice, I knew it wouldn't stay that way. And maybe I was a spoiled little city girl, but I still liked my creature comforts.

But by Saturday, there was no one working at the house anymore. The guys had nothing left to oversee. Even better, I'd managed to get enough work done that I could now take a month off without my boss noticing - if I needed to. In other words, tonight was date night.

Neither Reese nor Jackson would tell me much about their plans except that it was in the forest. Yeah, that was a pretty broad description. When I pressed, the most I could get out of them was that I wouldn't need hiking boots. Reese caved a bit and admitted that a sundress would be fine, but heels would not. Armed with that knowledge, I made myself look as cute as possible - and yes, my sundress was very cute.

But when I met up with the guys down in the living room, Jackson had his keys out. Wherever we were going, he was clearly driving.

"I thought we were staying in the forest?" I asked.

"There are a lot of places that count as the forest that we can't get to from here," Reese explained. "It's a short drive. Don't worry."

Then the three of us piled into their truck - and our trip really was short. After leaving my property, Jackson turned away from town and headed up the highway for what would count as a few blocks in town. There, he turned onto a little gravel road marked with a sign for the Maybrook Forest State Park. There was no guard to block the entrance, no gate to get through, just a pair of ruts that wove between the biggest, thickest trees I had ever seen.

Considering I lived in the forest, that said a lot.

We reached the end of the trail just as the sun began to set. The sky was filled with pinks and oranges. Long, narrow clouds picked up shades of blues and purples. That only made the sight before me even more beautiful.

Ancient trees bent over to make the perfect woodland glade. At the far end, a collection of weeping willows had just enough space between them to show water reflecting back the pastel colors of this sky. The space they created wasn't a large one. The truck certainly wouldn't fit inside it. This was the sort of place a teenage girl would make into her own fantasy land. It was a nook, or maybe a cranny, and perfect to escape the reality of day-to-day life.

It also looked magical.

When Reese opened my door to help me out of the truck, I couldn't help but giggle at the thought. "Magical," was a word that had been popping into my head a lot lately. Granted, I had a good reason for that, and yet it still seemed to fit so well.

"What has you so amused?" he asked as he led me forward to show me the space. Behind him, Jackson headed for the bed of the truck.

I wrapped my arm around Reese's waist and moved in to press against his side. "I have lived my entire life being a pragmatist," I explained. "And now, out of the blue, I'm a witch who can do magic." I gestured at the canopy above us. "I can speak to these trees. It's like I slipped, fell, and ended up in some kind of fairytale."

“Well, except for the evil coven that wants to run you out of town,” Jackson said as he joined us.

Letting go of Reese, I turned to face him just in time to see him spreading out one of Margie’s old blankets. Beside his feet was a toolbox. For a moment, that confused me, until he popped the lid and pulled out a bottle of wine. After that came napkins and other supplies for what was clearly about to be the perfect picnic.

“But don’t you see?” I asked. “The evil coven makes it *more* like a fairytale. There’s always the bad guy and the good guy. The good guy gets to have all of the fantastical things happen to him. Or, if it’s a Disney cartoon, then the princess gets to have the magical things.”

Reese moved behind me to wrap his arms around my waist. “Well, considering that you talk to plants and animals, I’m going with the Disney princess theory. Just know that if you decide to break out into a song, I am *not* joining you.”

“I will,” Jackson teased before gesturing for us to join him on the blanket. “Don’t expect me to be in tune, but I’ll definitely sing, get all the words wrong, and completely destroy your Disney moment.”

Which had me giggling as I lowered myself down to see what exactly this picnic was going to entail. Much to my surprise, it had been well thought out. The wine was Riesling, which made sense. That seemed to be the only kind Reese liked. The meal was made of finger foods and little sandwiches. Then there was the illumination.

Caught in that space somewhere between sunset and dusk, it was just a little too dark to see. Jackson pulled out a hurricane lantern, but when he lit it, I could smell the citronella. It was as if every single detail had been thought of.

“This,” I told the pair, “is amazing. I think this is actually the best date I’ve been on in my entire life – and we’re only a few minutes in.”

“Well, I picked the blanket,” Jackson said, smiling over at Reese. “He did the rest.”

“When did you make the sandwiches?” I asked.

“When you were napping yesterday,” he explained. “That was why we pushed so hard to get you to rest. I needed a chance to get some things done.”

I reached over and grabbed one of the sandwiches in question. “I was wondering why you were so adamant. Ever since the new moon, I’ve been feeling so much better.”

“So losing your magic makes you feel bad?” Jackson asked.

I shook my head. “At first I felt really tired, but the excitement of the battle could explain that. I mean, a lot happened that night. But after that it’s hard to explain. I was tired, but not the physical type. I also wasn’t sleepy. The best example I have is that it was more like being anemic. I just felt drained in a way I couldn’t quite put my finger on.”

“Yeah, that kinda sounds like what Zane was telling me,” Jackson said. “Drained was a word he used too.”

We talked about little things for a while after that, in between stuffing our faces with the food Reese had made. And it was good. Surprisingly, the Riesling actually went well with it. The whole time, the trees whispered silently overhead – keeping their conversation to themselves this time.

I couldn’t get enough of how easily these guys wrapped me up in their relationship. When we’d first agreed to do this, I’d expected to be the third wheel. They’d been a couple forever. I was the new and exotic plaything, right? We’d fuck around, have some fun, but in the end, they’d end up together.

But that wasn’t how things were working out. Instead, Jackson pulled me closer so I could lean against his side as we chatted about nothing. Reese smiled at me in a way that made me feel so beautiful. Little things, maybe, but the kind that made me feel like I was actually important to them.

They noticed me. These two always did, and they treated me as if their relationship with me was no more or less important than their relationship with each other. I liked it so



much. I also just liked them. Everything about them, including how easy all of this was.

Because romance didn't have to be hard to be amazing. It could be a quick kiss in the kitchen as I cooked dinner. It could be fingers sliding between mine as we watched a movie. What made these guys so wonderful was that this was more than sex. This was about me. All of me. Even the confused and magical parts that they accepted so easily - even when I hadn't.

I was enjoying my night out with them right up until Reese had to bring up the one thing I really didn't want to talk about. "Syl, now that the air conditioner's been installed, the main living area of the house is pretty much done."

I quickly took a sip of wine to wash down my last bite before my stomach could twist. "Yeah..."

Jackson leaned forward to begin gathering up the remains of our little meal. "We're not done with all the work you wanted, but the house is livable."

"No, it looks great," I assured them. "It looks like I was hoping for."

"And we didn't move in," Reese reminded me. "We only stayed long enough to make sure the coven couldn't hurt you."

"And to help you recover afterwards," Jackson added. "Syl, that means there's no reason for us to keep pushing our way in, and I know you like your space."

I did - back then. When I'd first run from my cheating ex to a cottage in the middle of a cursed forest, I'd been looking to lose myself in the hopes that maybe I could find something better. And I had! I'd found these two amazing guys, found some skunks I was a little too attached to now, and found out that my potted cactus could talk to me. I'd stumbled into magic, but at the same time, I'd also found people I cared about enough that the fear of losing them was starting to take over.

I liked these guys. Shit, if I was honest with myself, I liked them enough that they could break my heart. Spending day

after day with them had just been so surprisingly easy, not like it had been with Andrew. Jackson always made me feel like I knew what I was doing, and Reese had a way of convincing me I was the most beautiful woman in the world. Yet this talk made me realize our date had been to break the bad news gently.

“When are you leaving?” I asked, looking between them.

“Probably next week,” Jackson replied.

I felt my shoulders slump with disappointment. “Oh.”

Because it was Saturday. That meant next week was only a few days away - and that was too soon! I also knew better. I did, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

“Which is why we wanted a date,” Reese quickly said. “Syl, Jackson and I talked about it. We want to make sure we do this right. Moving in like this? Shit, I mean, you're technically still a client.”

Yeah, that wasn't helping. This was starting to feel like a breakup, or maybe even a “we need space” moment. The problem was that I'd gotten used to having the guys around. The kind of “used to” that meant I'd let myself start to hope for something more. Something meaningful.

Jackson finished clearing the blanket, then scooted over closer to me. “You have magic to learn, a familiar to teach you, and a wild thing looking over your shoulder.” Then he lifted his hand and crooked a finger for me to come closer. “And we're in your way.”

“But I like you in my way,” I mumbled, shifting so I could curl up beside him.

Which he used as an excuse to lean back until we were both lying down. My head was now on his shoulder, yet I was mostly on my side. Turning just a bit, I found myself looking up at the early night sky. The first stars were coming out, yet the shadows of the leaves made a beautiful silhouette in front of them.

Then Reese leaned over, resting his head lightly on my waist. “I don't want to go, but I also do,” he said softly.

“Mm, that’s a good way to put it,” Jackson agreed. “I like it here in the forest. I also know it’s pretty shitty of us to assume you’re just here to entertain us. How much time do you spend cleaning up after us, Syl? How much more cooking do you do?”

“But I like cooking,” I reminded them.

Which made Jackson chuckle. “Yeah, and you’re good at it. But we need to *date*. We need to work up to more. We - Reese and I - need to prove ourselves to you, and not just by throwing shit at the members of the founding families.”

“And to have some time with each other,” I said, since we’d had this conversation a few times before. “No, I get it. I really do. I’m just not looking forward to it. I don’t know, maybe I’ve gotten used to the insanity around my place.”

“But you know the skunks will keep you company,” Reese said, reaching over to lace his fingers with mine.

That made me smile, because he was right. “Yeah.”

“But?” he asked, hearing something in my tone.

Closing my eyes, I groaned softly. “Okay, so this is going to sound crazy...”

“But?” Jackson asked, mimicking Reese.

Which earned a little grunt from me, their honest concern making me feel like I had to answer. “So, you remember how I said something about it not being safe to leave the forest?”

Reese got it first. “You’re feeling like a prisoner?”

“A bit,” I admitted. “I mean, I want to go out and meet people in town. I want to learn more about Summerpoint, but it feels like ever since I moved in, I’ve been working on becoming a hermit. I can’t help but wonder if the same thing happened to Aunt Margie.”

“I don’t think she liked people,” Jackson assured me.

“But was it because she couldn’t?” I asked. “See, that’s the thing. The Grimsons came out to her place, packed her up, and

moved her into their mansion. It sounds like they didn't really ask, and I'm not sure she was powerful enough to stop them."

"You are," Reese promised.

"Am I?" I countered. "Reese, we don't know that. Shit, we don't really know anything about any of this."

"So we'll learn," Jackson decided. "All of us. Syl, this is a partnership. Partners help each other. If you can't do something, then we'll step up."

"And you can ask Zane," Reese pointed out.

Which made Jackson groan. "I'd rather not. I don't want him to know any of her weaknesses."

"I just don't want to be chained to the cottage while everyone else is pulling back," I said, not quite sure who my words were for. Mostly me. "With you two going back home, that's the thing that keeps slipping into my head. It's safer for you to stay away. It's better for everyone. The forest won't care, but what happens if I try to leave? Will the coven be waiting?"

"The oak said they're still being drained," Jackson reminded me. "At least that's what you told us."

"No, that's what it said," I agreed. "But when does that stop? When they're magical again, or powerful, or whatever word fits best there, then what?"

"Then we make it clear you're off limits," Jackson said.

"And we'll hear more about them if we're at our home," Reese added. "Jackson also wants to check on his mom, I want to make sure Nora's okay, and all our tools are there, which we'll need for the next couple of projects."

"You're not really helping your case," Jackson told him.

"I'm being honest!" Reese insisted.

"Yeah, but it sounds like shallow excuses for not wanting to be around her."

"That," Reese said, "is not what I meant, Syl. I'm just saying that it'd be too easy to stay. Being around you is nice. I

really like how comfortable I am in your home, and I don't want to take that for granted."

"And we're not going to leave you alone out there," Jackson told me. "If for no other reason than because we really like you, Syl. We like you enough to do this the hard way if that means it might actually last."

"Really?" I asked, looking up at him.

He nodded. "I've never actually dated a woman before. Reese? He always dives into things with the expectation of forever. So, yeah. This isn't us trying to say you're the 'little bit of fun' in our relationship."

"It's us trying to prove to you that we're honestly serious about the three of us becoming something more," Reese told me. "To grow together instead of apart because we're tripping all over each other too soon."

"I know," I assured him. "I also think you're right. That doesn't mean I have to like it."

Rolling over, he shifted to see my face. "Oh, so you're saying you *like* having us around?"

The best I could do was gesture at the first stars in the sky. "My two boyfriends took me out to enjoy a picnic at sunset. How could I not like this, Reese?"

"Oh, that was merely the warmup," Jackson said. "Forest? Is there any way we can have some privacy?"

Beside me, Reese grinned as the trees began to move, closing in the opening that led back to their truck. Limbs lowered. Branches shifted. It was all subtle, but within seconds, this quaint little hidey hole had turned into a truly private spot in the forest.

"Now this," I breathed, "really is perfect."

"And so are you," Reese told me. "That's why we're trying so damned hard not to ruin it."

# CHAPTER NINE

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While I was still lying there with my head on Jackson's shoulder, Reese moved closer - higher - until his face hovered right over mine. I felt Jackson's arm shift so it was around my side, but my own hands were already reaching for Reese's waist.

"Tonight is to prove to you that we're not leaving for good," Reese said softly.

Then he leaned in, brushing his lips over mine. Beneath me, Jackson rolled slightly, curling his body into mine. My head was too low for him to kiss, but he was still right there as I teased Reese into making that soft kiss something a little deeper.

His mouth parted. Our tongues met. Jackson's fingers tightened on my side, and the sounds of the forest grew still around us. I didn't want the guys to go. I knew they had to. Those two things clashed in my head so I took it out on Reese's mouth, doing my best to seduce him completely.

Until he leaned back to look in my eyes. "You know, it *is* private out here."

A giggle slipped from my lips as I sat up. That all but pushed Reese back until he was on his rump before me. Almost immediately, Jackson moved in behind me, guiding my hair away from my neck.

"This place," he said, his voice growing deeper. "It's where I fell in love with Reese. It's where we came to be alone, fishing in that creek while we talked out our problems."

Then his lips slid against the soft skin beneath my ear. “It’s only meant for those special people, Syl, and you’re one of them.”

I glanced back to see his pretty grey eyes waiting. “The ones you’d burn the world for?”

He nodded. “It’s a very short list, and you’re on it now. *That* is why we want to get this right. It’s why we’re backing off.”

“But not leaving,” Reese assured me. “Shit, the truth is that I don’t want to go. I want to stay, to push in, and to pretend like we don’t still have things to learn about each other. Sylvia, I want this thing between the three of us to be real.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said as I leaned forward a little more so I could kiss him again.

Because that sounded better. That sounded like the way I felt. It was as if this one little word was hiding under the surface, and none of us were ready to use it yet. That didn’t make it go away, though. This feeling I had for these men was intense. It was amazing and yes, maybe even magical. It also felt like it couldn’t be real.

How many times had I thought about them being better than Andrew? Would that be true if we continued to stumble from client to hookup to crazy magical mess? Could distracting ourselves with the problems of the forest and my witchcraft really make up for learning all about each other?

No, but that didn’t mean tonight couldn’t be a little more, so I kissed Reese hard. His hand found the side of my face, and the blanket beneath us shifted, sliding on the leaves of the forest’s carpet. Yet as I rolled onto my knees to keep pressing in, I felt Jackson’s hands sliding up my legs, moving towards my thighs.

“And now I’m having dirty thoughts,” he teased as his fingers slipped under the hem of my short little dress.

Which made me break the kiss with Reese to giggle. “You did ask the forest for privacy,” I reminded him. I was also



eyeing Reese's shirt, trying to decide how easy it would be to get off.

"It's a small blanket," Reese said, clearly having caught my look.

So I decided there was no reason to hold back. Grabbing the fabric over his waist, I tugged. "Well, considering that I still owe you a blow job or two..."

"I'm liking this idea," Jackson said. His hands moved a little higher, pausing to tease the edges of my panties under my dress. "There's just one little problem. I don't think any of us brought condoms."

"Mm, that doctor visit?" I leaned back as Reese pulled off his shirt, taking the chance to look at Jackson. "I had a full STI check. I'm clean."

"We haven't done one yet," Reese admitted.

"It's a chance I'm willing to take," I promised. "I have a feeling you've both been tested since you've been together."

"A while back, yeah," Jackson admitted, a smile growing on his lips. "So, we're doing this?"

"No more condoms?" Reese asked.

"Yes," I said, pointing a finger at Jackson first, then turning it on Reese. "No."

Which made all of us laugh a bit. "Okay," Jackson said. "Reese, lose the shirt." And he immediately began working on his own shoes.

I had it easy there. My sandals slipped off without a problem. Reese pulled his shirt over his head, then thrust out his legs to unlace his boots. It was cute. It was also a little awkward because this blanket really wasn't big enough for all of us to be scrambling, yet we made it work.

But before Reese could do more than release his belt, I was back to help. While he pulled that from the loops in his jeans, I popped the button open and then convinced his zipper to lower. Hearing fabric behind me, I turned to see Jackson pulling off his shirt, but his eyes were locked on my hands.

“You going to stick that dick of his in your mouth?” he taunted.

“Oh yeah,” I agreed, gesturing for Reese to get his pants off.

“Hope that citronella works,” Reese joked as he pushed his jeans down, shifting to get his weight off them. “Because it’s mosquito season.”

*I have asked the insects to go elsewhere.*

The voice wasn’t one I knew, but it was clearly a tree. A soft one, which sounded like one of those weeping willows. My head shot around and then all I could do was laugh.

“Um, I guess the forest is helping,” I told the guys. “No bugs tonight.”

“Nice,” Reese said.

Jackson just looked up at the leaves overhead. “Thank you, forest!”

*You’re welcome.*

*Shh.*

*We’re not supposed to interfere.*

*Then be quieter. The witch won’t be distracted by our whispers.*

And the leaves began to rustle softly. I heard it all, but right now was not the time for me to worry about it. So what if the trees were watching us? They always were. Right now, they were also standing guard, and for some reason, that felt a lot more comforting than I’d expected.

But the sight of Reese pushing down his underwear made me forget to tell the guys about it. Trying to match him, I untied the little belt around my waist, but before I could reach back, Jackson’s hands lowered the half-zipper behind my neck.

Then he began to lift the whole thing higher, gathering the fabric of my dress in his hands to make it easier. Lifting up on

my knees, I ducked out of the cloth and then leaned back, not surprised at all to find Jackson right there.

Once again, his mouth found my neck, kissing his way down to my shoulder. His hands were on my back, sliding until they found the clasp of my bra. Once that was released, I shrugged out of the thing, tossing it towards the toolbox where my dress had gone, and then I had to get out of my panties.

Reese, completely naked, had leaned back to watch the show. But when I shifted, intending to put my hip on the ground, Jackson stopped me. While Reese watched, Jackson slid the thin material of my panties down to my knees, then helped as I balanced, getting one half off, then the other. He barely even paused as he guided them over my ankles and feet.

“Now that,” Reese said, “is beautiful.”

“So kiss her,” Jackson told him.

“I actually meant both of you,” Reese said even as he leaned forward to catch my face and pull me closer.

I leaned in to meet him, dropping a hand down to the ground to support myself, but it worked. We kissed again, then again. I could hear Jackson getting out of his pants behind me, but I didn't care. My hand on the ground was right beside Reese's hip. With my other, I started at his chest, following all of his beautiful muscles down and around until I found his hip by feel.

Then I crawled right between his legs. This man was so very beautiful, and every time we'd been together, he'd gone down on me first, making sure I was more than satisfied before indulging himself. Now, it was my turn to do the same.

My kisses moved to his neck, then to his chest. As I made my way lower, Reese leaned back until he was balanced on his elbows. He also never tried to stop me.

My lips teased his belly button and the folds of skin over those rock-hard abs. Then down until I found a very impressive dick standing up tall and begging for my attention. Ignoring Jackson behind me - and hoping he was enjoying the

show - I bent a little more and wrapped my lips around Reese's length.

Yeah, Jackson groaned. Reese sucked in a breath. Then Jackson's hands found my ass, sliding over the fullness while he put me exactly where he wanted. The caresses were soft. His touches were exploratory, learning my body by feel in the darkness. Then one hand moved in, lower, and slid right between my legs.

I murmured in approval but refused to take my mouth off Reese's dick. Slowly, I slid along his length, taking as much of him as I could, yet I couldn't reach the base. Reese also didn't seem to care. While Jackson played with my pussy, teasing my clit and testing how ready I was, Reese just watched as I swallowed as much of him as I could.

"Oh, that's a good girl," Jackson breathed as he moved closer.

And then I felt him line himself up. He paused as I backed off Reese, and then pushed in the next time I took more, moving in time with my body. I tried to gasp, but it wasn't easy with a dick in my mouth, and yet he felt so good.

The night air was still warm. The little glade we were in was serene. I couldn't hear anything but us and the barely audible sounds of the creek flowing past. No cars, no signs of everyday life, and nothing that would ruin this moment.

It was just us. The three of us, connected in such an intimate way. Gently, unlike the time he'd taken me after his shower, Jackson pressed himself deeper into my body and then leaned back. His hands on my hips took me with him, setting the pace for all three of us, and I let him take charge.

Then he pushed back in, driving me forward. I sucked, using my tongue to please Reese as Jackson filled me. Again, then again, we moved, learning how to work together without words. It was slow, beautiful, and felt like so much more than simply chasing an orgasm.

And I loved all the little things. The way Reese was breathing harder. He couldn't touch me - not without losing his

balance. All he could do was watch, and I was pretty sure he had a good view of Jackson behind me. Then there were the touches along my hips. The hand Jackson shifted to trace the line of my spine.

With each rock of my body, these men appreciated something else. Reese's eyes jumped from my face to my back, and then up to where Jackson's body must be. My gaze was locked on his face, loving the way his lips parted each time my tongue teased the underside of his dick.

Every movement earned me more. Jackson's hands began to roam, gently touching every inch of my back like it was a masterpiece. Reese moaned softly. All those signs of approval, and all of them were for me, but I wanted more.

So I moved a little faster. Jackson followed. Shifting my focus to the hard, thick, and impressive dick between my lips, I began to move my hand in time. I might not be able to swallow all of him, but my hand could reach. Faster, then faster still, I pumped him, devouring this man like a piece of candy.

And the whole time, Jackson kept up. The harder I sucked, the harder he fucked. As Reese's dick pressed into the back of my mouth, Jackson bucked, driving himself even deeper into my body. Under the stars, this was a dance as old as time, and the three of us were perfect partners.

All that mattered was the next touch, the next thrust, and the way my body was responding. Bent over like this, I felt oddly beautiful. All those touches proved it. These men wanted me. They enjoyed me. All the things that had happened with magic and weirdness hadn't scared them off.

No, it had removed the lines between us. These two had been there when I needed them most, and tonight I'd just promised to do the same. They took care of me, each one in his own way, and right now it felt so good.

"God," Reese breathed, leaning onto one arm so he could shove the other deep into my hair. "Baby, that feels amazing."

Which only made me work him a little harder. I loved the praise. I wanted more of it, but Jackson was making it difficult to think. The man was working my body in the best way, driving me higher. Yet when he reached around my body to play with my clit, I knew I wouldn't be able to last.

So I did my best to make Reese lose control first. Swirling my tongue around that swollen head, I toyed with him, teasing the sensitive spot just a bit lower, and then swallowing him again. I sucked gently, adding pressure so he could feel my cheeks wrapping around him, and bobbed just a bit faster.

Because the pressure of Jackson's hand was more than I could take. The feel of him filling me and retreating was causing the best friction. My body was on fire, every nerve awake and aware as his hands slid across my skin, and I loved it.

I loved how these guys worked together, and how they made me feel so fucking beautiful. I couldn't get enough of their attention and how it made me feel special in a way that not even learning I was a witch had been able to do. More than all of that was how good it felt to know they were willing to take care of me.

My body, my mind, and even my problems. These men stepped up each and every time I needed it, never making me feel like I was in the way or a problem to deal with. They treated me like a treasure. They acted like they thought of me as an equal. A true partner in the absolutely perfect relationship they already had. They made me feel like I belonged, and it was almost as good as the sensations they were giving my body.

A moan fell from my lips, muffled by Reese's dick. My legs were starting to tense as the pressure in my body built. I just kept rocking, pushing myself back onto Jackson and then down onto Reese. These two men felt so good inside me, and while I could lead, I also didn't have to. All I had to do was ask for what I wanted - with a little harder buck or moving my hand a bit faster - and they both gave it.

Reese used that hand in my hair to guide my head, showing me exactly what he needed. His dick was so fucking hard. He had to be close, and I wanted to make this happen. Behind me, Jackson made soft noises each time he filled me, proving he wasn't any better. His hand pressed, swirled, and flicked over my clit. My hips twitched, stimulated by the sensation. My mouth just kept moving.

Until I couldn't take anymore. The pleasure took over, consuming me between one moment and the next. My body locked up, but I refused to pull my mouth away from Reese. I wanted to finish him. I'd intended for him to come first. Instead, Reese began to pump, gently rocking himself into my mouth over and over as my body trembled around him.

Until he groaned. I felt the warmth fill my mouth and swallowed, struggling not to lose control as wave after wave of pleasure consumed me. Jackson just kept going, kept rubbing and rocking, prolonging the feeling far past what I thought was possible.

Sliding off Reese, I threw my head back and gasped. Jackson filled me one more time, wrapping his arms around my waist to hold my back to his chest, and together we both collapsed forward. The deep groan in his throat proved he'd found his release as well.

"I got you, Syl," he panted against my back. "Just slide off me and cuddle up with that sexy man."

Reese finally lay back, opening his arm in an invitation. Shifting forward, I had to crawl a pace before I could flop down, claiming his shoulder as my pillow this time.

"There's room for you too," Reese told Jackson.

"Yeah, right here," Jackson said as he moved to curl around my back. Reese's arm became his pillow. "Just wishing I'd brought another blanket."

"Unh unh," I mumbled. "Then we'd fall asleep out here, and I don't trust the mosquitos that much."

Reese laughed, his chest gently bouncing my head. "Same." Then, with his free hand, he reached across his body

to guide my hair away from my face. “We’re not leaving you, Syl. Even if we aren’t living in your house, making more work for you, and getting in your way. We’re still doing this together.”

“I think I just figured that out,” I promised.

Jackson’s lips found my shoulder, and he kissed it softly. “Good. And so you know, you can’t scare us off. I mean, you already tried the whole witch thing, and that’s not working, so you’d better just get used to us.”

Used to. That was not at all what I’d call this. Nope, it was more like that fairytale I’d mentioned earlier. It was like waking up in a dream that was too good to be true. Hell, for lack of a better word, it was... magical.



# CHAPTER TEN

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**A**fter our date, Jackson and I stayed both Sunday and Monday night with Syl, spoiling her as much as we could, doing our best to make sure she knew this wasn't a breakup. We also wanted to make sure she really was doing as good as we thought.

And we were procrastinating.

It would be so easy to just shove our way in here and stay. We'd been here for nearly three weeks already. It also wasn't fair to any of us. There was a big difference between having a crush on a girl we worked for and moving into her house like this. Never mind the other problems, like how Jackson owned his own place, we couldn't hide in the forest forever, and we had more responsibilities out there in the real world.

If I - er, we - wanted to make this polyamorous relationship into something viable, we needed to stop charging in at full speed and start getting to actually know each other. Jackson and I needed to make sure we didn't lose each other in the excitement of magic, a new relationship, and an evil coven of wixen who had it out for our girlfriend. Most of all, we needed to talk, and not just about the easy things.

I told myself this over and over, because I fucking hated it.

Then, on Tuesday evening, Jackson and I kissed Syl and climbed into the truck to head back home. Yes, we left our TV there, along with enough clothes to have options for our next sleepover. There would definitely be a next. I wasn't sure if it would be both of us, taking turns, or something else, but I still

knew it would happen. I also didn't like the way leaving the forest made me feel.

We pulled up to the gate at the end of the drive and paused. In all the time we'd been coming out here, that wrought iron thing had been standing open. Now, it was closed. There wasn't an automatic opener on it, and none of us had done it, yet the rusted "Maybrook Forest" was clearly visible, welded to the bars that would keep cars from entering the property.

"We need to change that," Jackson said as he shifted the truck into park.

But before he could climb out, a branch shifted to pull the gate open. Vines and shrubs moved to stop blocking it. Before my very eyes, blackberry brambles released, retracted, and left the exit completely free and clear.

All I could do was push the button to lower the window and call out, "Thank you!" to the forest.

Jackson put the truck back in gear and eased his way forward, angling to avoid the plants now growing right at the edge of the gravel. It wasn't much, but I had a feeling the forest noticed. It seemed like this place noticed everything, and after our night at the creek, I had a whole new appreciation for what that meant.

While my girlfriend might be a witch, the trees were what gave her power. They seemed to come with all the other plants that grew in their shade and animals that lived with them. In all honesty, I had no clue how any of this worked, but that was why it was called magic, right? All I needed to know was that Jackson and I were guests, and this forest was a lot more aware than I'd ever imagined.

Once we hit the highway back into town, Jackson glanced over. "I hope they let us back in."

"Gyth says we're her familiars," I reminded him. "I think that means we've been accepted, and I get the impression Gyth has a little say in things too."

"I'm just not sure how that relationship goes," he admitted. "Gyth is the soul of the forest, but he's not its master. The trees

have their own voices, Syl says, but the forest is a bigger thing than just a bunch of trees.”

“Like a community?” I guessed.

He shrugged. “Maybe? I just know it feels more like parts of a whole. The trees make up a bigger organism, what we call the forest. Gyth is tied to the bigger picture somehow. Like the forest’s puppet, almost.”

“And us?” I asked him.

A little smile touched his lips. “We’re Syl’s protectors. So, from the top down, it goes forest, Gyth, Sylvia, then us with the skunks and the cactus.”

I chuckled at that. “Well, I’m good with it so long as it means we’re not being evicted.”

Jackson just nodded, rocking his head slowly. “Hey, about that. I mean, you and her are still doing good, right? I mean, you’re not bored of her or anything?”

“Not at all,” I assured him, knowing he didn’t mean that the way it sounded. “Seems like you’re getting along well with her too.”

His smile grew just a bit. “I am. Reese, I...” The expression vanished, and his eyes stayed locked on the road. “Zane said something that day I took his card back.”

“Shit,” I grumbled, knowing things between Jackson and Zane were complicated. “What?”

“He said a man doesn’t run into a group of chanting wixen because he *likes* a woman.”

Yeah, and the simple fact that Jackson wasn’t elaborating on any of that said more than he knew. He also wasn’t wrong. It was just weird. Not necessarily in a bad way, though. I knew exactly why *I’d* charged out the front door behind Syl that night. I had no doubts about what I’d been willing to risk for her, but Jackson was different.

He’d been burned too many times. If I was honest, I was a few of them, but unintentionally. While growing up, my boyfriend had learned that putting his heart out there was a

great way to get it smashed. First Zane, then me. I'd hoped when I'd pulled my head out of my ass and figured out liking men didn't need to feel the same as liking women to be real and valid, that maybe I'd healed some of those wounds. From the sounds of it, Jackson still had some baggage he was working through, though.

"So do you even know why you ran out there?" I asked, turning my eyes to the darkened landscape by the road.

He murmured something that sounded almost like a chuckle. "I do now."

"For me?" I offered, giving him an easy out.

"Partially," he said, slowing down to find the road that led to our place. "I just have no fucking idea how you feel about any of this. I mean, you're the one that was hot for her."

"And you're the one who told me we should do this," I reminded him. "You like her too. I'm okay with that. We're both dating her. We're dating each other. No guilt, right? That's what you told Syl and me when we started this."

"Well, yeah, but..."

He made another turn, and I could see our house in the middle of the street up ahead. "So you don't want to be with her anymore?" I tried.

He scoffed. "Not really my problem."

"Good."

I got that out just as he pulled into the drive and killed the truck. Pushing open the door, I didn't wait for his reply before I started gathering my things. Sometimes, Jackson needed a second to process. He could be open and easy to talk to. He could also fumble for words and not know what he was trying to say. I loved this man because he still tried, so I was willing to give him the time he needed to figure it all out in his head.

I was halfway across the lawn, almost to the front door, when he caught up with me. Both of us had a bag. Mine had dirty clothes. His had the other accessories and a few clean

things. The one thing I didn't have on me were keys to the house.

Thankfully, Jackson stepped ahead to unlock and push the front door wide open. I went through first. He followed right after, shutting things up behind us. The house felt muffled and sleepy. The air wasn't as fresh as it was at Syl's. My brain was busy tallying up all the little differences when Jackson finally figured out what he wanted to say.

"What if I fall in love with her first?" he asked, heading up the hall like his words weren't a big deal.

I turned my feet for the laundry room, calling back, "First? Got bad news for you."

Then I opened the washer, dumped in our filthy shit, and started rummaging for laundry detergent. I put in what was needed, set the cycle, and pushed the button to start the washer. When I turned, however, Jackson was leaning against the open door.

"You're in love with her?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I think so. Maybe?"

His eyes narrowed. "And you didn't say anything because..."

"Because I tend to jump the gun, dive into the deep end, and forget to think things through," I admitted. "This time, I already have a good thing, I'm a grown-ass man, and I want to make sure I do it right."

"But?" he pressed.

I knew what he was really asking, so decided to just lay it all out there. "But I think I'm in love with that woman. Magic, no magic, and even with the insanity of all this, yeah. I mean, I hate that we're not staying there anymore. I also know it's the right call. I dunno. There's just something about spending so much time with her, seeing her handling the hard stuff - like magic - and those little soft moments where she smiles at a plant like she's..."

“A woman,” he finished for me, nodding to show he understood. “Yeah, she’s amazing. I mean, she’s fucking beautiful and smart. The way she just rolled with learning she’s a witch? I dunno. I just really like this, Reese, and I don’t want to move too fast and push you away because I’m distracted by all the new relationship energy.”

“New relationship energy,” I repeated, committing that term to memory.

It made perfect sense. Things with Syl were new. Everything she did was still adorable, sexy, or exciting. With Jackson, I had the comfort of time to hold us together, but that was a softer feel. A different energy, I supposed. Something stronger, deeper, and good in its own way, but not as brightly burning as my experiences with Syl.

“Yeah,” he muttered, “but I think I’m there too. I think I - “

The sound of the front door opening made him stop in the middle of that sentence. Both of us turned that way, the view of it blocked by the hall. I was sure Jackson had closed everything, but the sound was hard to miss. Without a word, we both headed that way just as a light flicked on in the kitchen.

“Boys?” The voice belonged to Jennifer, Jackson’s mom.

“Jesus Christ!” Jackson snapped. “You scared the shit out of me, Mom!”

She laughed a little too easily. “Well, I saw your truck, and it’s been weeks since you’ve been home. I had to clean out your fridge so neither of you eat expired food. Needless to say, when I realized you were back...” She gestured to a plastic bag on the counter beside her. “A few things to hold you over tonight.”

I made my way in to help her put away the groceries she’d carried over. “We could’ve ordered out, you know.”

Jennifer just gave me a dirty look. “Uh huh, and kill my chances to find out what’s going on? Did she come back with you?”

Jackson groaned. “No, Mom. Syl’s at her place.”

“And the threat?” she pressed.

“Broken windows?” he countered, making it clear he hadn’t told Jennifer everything.

I held up a hand, stopping their banter before it could ping back and forth too many times. “The Grimsons and their coven attacked Syl. It was the middle of the night, made a big mess, but we won. Then she had to recover, so we stayed to take care of her. The wixen in town were all drained and weak too. Don’t know how long that’s going to last, but they sure aren’t giving her a hard time anymore, so we’re giving her some space, doing our own laundry, and trying to get back to normal.”

Jennifer’s head just whipped from me to Jackson. “They attacked?!”

“She’s a witch,” Jackson said, the word coming out so easily.

Easily enough that Jennifer’s eyes went wide. “Honey?” she breathed.

Which made Jackson smile. “Yeah, Zane broke the blood oath. I can talk about it again.”

“It?” I asked.

He nodded. “Yeah. Back in high school, we made a pact. It let him tell me things, but kept me from saying anything that might hurt him. The problem was that what would hurt him felt like it kept changing, so the damned spell would just block me at weird times.”

“Okay...” I breathed, because this was news to me.

“Well, Zane said that someone needs to explain this mess to Syl, and that someone is me,” he went on. “So, I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be telling her, but I have the ability to do it now. No more block on my words. No more talking around things. I’m just not sure what things I’m supposed to say yet.”

“But you’ll figure it out,” Jennifer assured him. “How about you, Reese? Are you okay with all of this?”



I wasn't really sure what "this" covered, but I still nodded. "I'm good with it. I'm also getting pretty good at rolling with the weirdness."

"Okay, but Sylvia..." Jennifer pressed. "She was attacked, so she's not one of them?"

"Oh no," I assured her. "No, Sylvia's her own witch."

"And she has no intention of making anyone disappear," Jackson added. "We're all safe, Mom. More than that, I'm pretty sure the forest just changed its name. It's the Holt Forest now. There's no longer a Maybrook. There's 'the Holt' now, and our girlfriend is the kind of woman who does things the right way, not the easy one."

Then he smiled, and I knew why. If the forest hadn't accepted Syl, the spell on Summerpoint would've faded. The magic that had helped so many in town would have vanished. Jennifer was one of them, but she had no idea her cancer had been cured by Sylvia's late aunt - but we did.

We also knew she was still going to be okay, because Sylvia had found the one way to make everything work out just fine. Jennifer was standing here, interrogating us, because Syl had chosen the right way, not the easy one. She'd been accepted by the trees. Right now, it felt like the woman we were falling in love with had somehow fixed everything.

If that wasn't a reason to smile, I didn't know what was.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

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## JACKSON

**M**y mother had a way of inserting herself into my life, whether I wanted her to or not. The truth was I'd moved beside her because I honestly didn't mind, but I had a bad feeling this thing with Syl wasn't going to go over as easily as I wanted. Instead, Mom surprised me.

"Jackson, is she going to be okay?"

I nodded my head slowly. "Gyth is helping her. He's like a tree, but not," I explained.

"A not-tree," Reese clarified. "Kinda like not-deer, but this one is definitely a tree."

"And a little goat," I said, "some human, and a few other things. I'm not exactly sure how to describe him because he changes size and shape as needed."

"More muscles or less," Reese said, helping me out.

Mom's head was bouncing between us. "Okay, and that's the forest monster?"

"That's exactly what he is," I assured her, unable to remember which part I'd already told her, so just throwing it all out there. "They call themselves wild things and are the cause of magic. He's the last free one, and he's helping to train her. She's also been worn out because she did too much magic for her stage of learning, but she proved she's stronger than the entire coven."

"Because of the trees," Reese added.

Mom just pushed the bag of groceries at him and headed into the living room. There, she dropped down onto the couch, snapped her fingers at me, and pointed to the chair beside her. Giving Reese an apologetic look, I turned to obey, pausing for a split second when I noticed Mom's purse on the counter.

"Hey," I told Reese, finally seeing my chance. Shifting closer, I dug in my pocket for the little vial Zane had given me. "You good with this?" Subtly, I pressed it into his hand and then glanced at Mom's purse.

He smiled at me, then nodded. "I got this, Jackson. You fill her in on everything."

I barely made it out of the kitchen before Reese had moved to Mom's bag. Yeah, we'd talked about what that thing would do, and if it was in her purse, then it would never be too far from her. While hiding it in her house might keep her safe when she was at home, this should work when she went shopping, visited friends, or anything else she might do.

I should've given it to her back when Zane had given it to me. I hadn't, and my excuse was one I didn't want to look at too closely: Syl. She'd needed us. I'd felt this irrational urge to take care of her, protect her, and spoil her as much as she deserved. Since Mom would be fine - she always was - I'd let myself focus on Syl first.

But now we had the chance. The trick would be putting it somewhere Mom wouldn't find it. She knew enough about the old families in town, the disappearances, and the threats those rich fuckers made. She wasn't stupid about magic, but pretended to be - just like the rest of us. That vial was clearly made by a wixen, and Mom wouldn't hesitate before yeeting it as far from herself as possible, completely unaware it was for her own good.

"What the hell are you doing, Jack?" Mom asked the moment I sat down. "Do you know what will happen if the founding families realize you know their secret? And now you're playing with forest monsters?"

"Learning from," I corrected, "not playing with. Mom, he's old, he's full of knowledge, and he's on Syl's side."

“Oh, so there are sides?” she pressed.

“Yeah...” Shit, this wasn’t going like I’d wanted. “So, they - the coven made up of the founding families - need Syl to join them so they can have the maximum power by siphoning hers. See, they don’t want her to have *any* power, and they’re assholes. Syl doesn’t like them, so she won’t join. They want to make her. She’s strong enough to stop them. I mean, with Gyth’s help.”

“You’re making this too complicated,” Reese called over. “Jennifer, the coven wants to control wild things to steal their magic. That will end magic. Syl wants to protect the last wild thing, stay away from anyone who thinks slavery is okay, and protect her new friends in town, including us.”

“She’s a good witch,” I said. “Nothing like the old families.”

Mom just nodded, her eyes locked on me. “I still want to meet her.”

“I know,” I assured her. “And now that everything is safe at her place - “

“But is it?” she broke in. “You know the founding families do *not* like to be told no, and if she’s refusing to join their coven, they’ll - “

“Mom!” I begged, lifting both hands to hold off her verbal assault. “She won. She kicked the shit out of them. They’ve run with their tails tucked between their legs.”

“And the forest won’t let them back in,” Reese added from the kitchen. “Syl made a bond with the entire forest, and the trees acted like...” He paused, thinking about it, then chuckled. “You know that crazy tree in Harry Potter? Yeah, they made it look like nothing. Not one, Jennifer, but all of them. They moved. They hit. They even closed the gate.”

Mom’s breath fell from her lips, and she turned back to look at me. “Jack, are you sure about this?”

“I am,” I promised her. “We only came home so we don’t screw things up with our new girlfriend by moving too fast. We’re going to date her, get to know her, and all those other

things you taught me, okay? I'm listening, Mom. We're both listening to what you've taught us. And so what if she's a witch? She's a good woman, beautiful, and so nice." I almost stopped there, but I just couldn't. "And I'll kick the shit out of anyone, magical or not, who wants to fuck her over."

Those words made a smile find my mother's mouth. "Are you falling for this girl, Jack?"

"We both are," I assured her, deciding to hedge my bets a little. "Just don't rush things, okay? I promise you'll meet her. We're not keeping her away, but we're also not doing the whole family introductions too soon. Reese and I want to get this right with her."

So she pushed to her feet, making her way back to the kitchen. "And he's not pressuring you, is he?" she asked my boyfriend.

"No," Reese promised. "Jackson's been perfect. We've also been talking, so this is a joint decision, okay? We both like her a lot, we want to be on the same page, even if not at the same stage, and we're going to worry about working things out with Syl before you, no offense."

"Then I'll be patient," she told him, stretching up to kiss Reese's cheek. "Just make sure Jack eats something tonight? The two of you have been busy for too long, and I know how easily distracted he is." Then she grabbed her purse, slung it over her shoulder, and headed for the door. "I'm sure you both also want a little alone time. Just remember to eat before falling into bed, boys." And then she was gone.

I groaned, because dragging Reese into bed had been my plan, but my mother had to ruin it. Now it would feel like her idea, and that was wrong on so many levels. Reese, however, was just chuckling. I leaned back, looking through the partially open blinds to make sure Mom really was heading back to her house next door, and then couldn't hold my question back any longer.

"Did you get it into her purse?"

“Yep,” he assured me. “There’s a little hole in the liner, so I slipped it between that and the outside. She’ll never see it, and with as much crap as your mom carries around, I’ll be shocked if she even notices another lump in there.”

“So she’ll be safe,” I breathed, feeling my body relax more than I’d expected.

“Doesn’t mean we are,” Reese reminded me. “I mean, the new moon has already passed.”

“They still haven’t tried anything,” I pointed out.

“But we don’t know when that will change.”

Yeah, there was that. “So, think we should go back?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I think you’re right about dating her. I think we need to do this slower - which means making sure it’s not all about sex. I mean, spending my entire childhood at your side was a good way to get to know you - although I’d rather not take decades to learn everything about Syl before falling in love with her. I think stepping back and talking more is a good way to do both.”

“Are you, though?” I pressed, since our conversation earlier had been interrupted. “In love with her, I mean.”

“I think so,” he said.

“Yeah, me too,” I agreed, pushing to my feet. “If I’m honest, I’m a little scared of it.”

He turned, pulling out a pan with the clear intention of starting dinner for us. “Me too, babe. I have no idea how to be with more than one person at a time. I keep thinking about what will happen if you want one thing and she wants the opposite. How to balance the pair of you, and things like that. I worry about ignoring someone, doting on the other too much, and, well, you know.”

“I do,” I assured him.

Reese tossed me a smile. “Good. Believe it or not, that makes me feel better.” Then he pushed out a breath. “It’s also

really fucking hard to talk about this. I keep wanting to shut up, answer with a joke, deflect, or shit like that.”

Which actually made *me* feel better. He and I had worked so hard to figure out how to actually talk about things, and this? It wasn't easy. For most of my life, Reese had been my one true love. I'd been convinced I didn't need anything but him. A couple of months ago, that had been true. Now?

Well, now there was Syl.

Zane hadn't been wrong when he'd called bullshit on me using the word “like,” but that was a much safer word. Reese and I could play around, have some kink, and still be “faithful” to each other. But this? Trying to decide if I'd crossed that line into love? Talking to my boyfriend of more than three years about it?

Terrifying. He should be pissed, feel ignored, or something else. Every other lover I'd had in my life would've. That was just how it went. People wanted to be the most important one in a relationship, the center of their lover's attention. But with three people, it just didn't work like that.

Yet at the same time, I wasn't feeling that way, so why would he? I was happy for him, thrilled he'd found a second person to like that much, and relieved that I cared about her just as much. This was working, so why did it feel so strange to talk about it?

No matter that I knew this was okay, there was still that little worry lingering in the back of my mind. Considering the way I'd grown up, I knew polyamory could be good. I'd seen it work, and yet I still had these doubts and fears. I could only imagine how much harder this must be for Reese. What we both needed was the chance to just stop and think about it - alone.

So I took a step back. “Hey, while you're cooking, do you mind if I get some supplies ready for tomorrow? Load up the truck and shit?”

“Running away from this?” he asked.



I opened my mouth to answer, then just laughed. “Maybe a little. Mostly, I wanted to get it done so I can have your complete attention later. I also need the chance to think.”

“Go,” he told me with a smile. “We’ve talked all the way around it, and a little time to think might help *both* of us.”

So I slipped in behind him to kiss his neck. “I’m not avoiding it.”

“I know,” he assured me. “I’m not either. Go, we don’t need the answers to everything right now.”

“I love you,” I whispered into his ear.

He pressed back into me gently. “I love you too, Jackson. I’m just glad this is all working. Now go, or you’ll be distracted until you’ve remembered everything you want.”

I stole one more kiss, this time against the side of his head, and turned for the back door. Outside, I crossed our paltry yard and aimed for the garage. Inside there, I had all of our tools, and while we’d made a lot of progress on Syl’s place, the things left were the detail work, so screwdrivers wouldn’t cut it.

But when I flicked on the lights, my eyes landed on a large piece of sheet metal. My mind immediately jumped back to the gate at Syl’s place, and how it said Maybrook, but that was no longer her aunt’s place. It was Syl’s in more than just name, and she deserved to be proud of it.

I could help with that. Hell, Reese and I could make this something special for her. It could also be our chance. I was pretty sure that was what was really bothering me - having the right chance - and seeing that metal made it all fall into place in my mind.

I wanted a declaration. Reese and I should do this together. In order to make that happen, we needed an excuse, and Syl’s gate was about to become it. A gift for her, a chance for us, and a promise to the forest. This would be perfect!

So, while Reese fixed us something to eat, I heaved the sheet metal onto my work table and started planning out what I was going to do with this. Maybrook was a long word, so it

hadn't needed to be large. Holt? Nice, short, and with a bold font, it would look great with the "Forest" that was still there.

Half-an-hour later, when Reese came in to let me know supper was done, I had the letters drawn out and waiting to be cut. Four of them, nice and big so no one would miss what it said. The grinder, cutting discs, and welder were all set up so I could make sure this was perfect.

Because if I was in love with this woman and not just making it up, then the least I could do was fix her gate. She deserved to have *her* name on not just her property, but the forest she'd set free, and I was going to make Reese help me. And hopefully, when we finished, we could use that as an excuse to tell her exactly how we felt about all of this.

Mostly, how we felt about her.

# CHAPTER TWELVE

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Three days later, the letters were finally done. Jackson had a few things to do that morning, so he told Sylvia he'd be running late. I decided to snag the work truck and head over to her place anyway. While Jackson purchased a sink and track lighting for the cellar, I intended to change the gate.

I pulled up out front without telling Syl I was even here. The trees leaned to open the gate, but I hung out the window to call them off. Then I parked the truck to the side, angling it so I could use the equipment in the bed, and got to work.

First, "Maybrook" had to be cut off the main bars. Thankfully, the welds holding it on were small enough to make this easy. While I worked on that, I couldn't help but wonder if Syl would hear anything up at her house. My goal was to make this a nice surprise for her.

Still, the metal clanked and clattered. The grinder let out a horrible whine. It was hard work, but I enjoyed this part. Jackson had taught me, so every time I worked with metal, it reminded me of those days back when we'd been kids, figuring out how to be men in our own ways.

And that made me remember the night we'd started on these. Talking about our feelings for Syl had been awkward as fuck. I was pretty sure my boyfriend was as close to being in love as it was possible to get. He liked her, respected her, and was turned on by her. He enjoyed her company a lot more than I'd expected, and something about that woman made him just

a little softer in a way I really liked. He just stumbled over using the actual word.

As for me, I was an idiot. This woman was everything that got me going. Yes, she was sexy, but it was more than that. Being around her as she discovered she was a witch? Watching her smile when she talked to her cactus - or the skunks? I liked it too much.

She made me feel like I could help. When I stopped to think about it, I wasn't exactly sure how, but she still made me feel like I could. I wanted to be her protector in some ways and her partner in others. I liked listening to her talk, I could fall into her mossy green eyes so easily, and I was a little obsessed with the spiral curls in her hair.

She was beautiful. She was also very feminine, and I had a weakness for that. I was pretty sure I'd ignored my attraction to men because I'd always thought of masculinity as being too hard to get close to. Jackson was different, though. He might be all man, but he'd been raised by a single mom and had grown up with this acceptance of his place in things that made him easy to talk to.

He never tried to be tough just for the sake of being tough. Was he a strong man? Yes, in more than just the physical sense. He was my rock, and my need for him had grown without me even knowing it. My desire for his body? That had taken me by surprise, mostly because it had been easy to ignore when I'd had a wife. Considering that I'd been married for so long, well, I was just going to use that as my excuse.

Because the real reason was that I'd been scared. All the times I'd leaned my head on Jackson's shoulder, thinking it was just a trust thing between friends? All the hours I'd spilled my guts to him, talked to him on the phone, and other things lovers did? Yeah, "friends" made those things easy to explain away, even to myself.

And now I was doing it all over again with Syl. Not thinking about it was simply too easy. We had to be careful about the coven, so I didn't have to think about how much I liked being with her. Jackson was encouraging me, so I didn't

have to stop and wonder what he thought about these feelings pouring through me. I was enjoying myself, flirting with a woman who was probably too good for me, and everyone thought it was okay.

Even me.

Because I *really* liked this woman. I wanted to touch her, steal kisses, and lose myself in her body. I wanted to ask her a million questions about magic, trees, and the impossibilities that had just become real. I also wanted to watch her kiss Jackson so hard she made his knees turn weak, and then do the same.

I just wanted the three of us to work, and that meant falling in love with her as much as I was with Jackson. We shouldn't have a first lover and a second. No one should be more important than another. That wasn't how to make a real relationship. Now, maybe I didn't have a clue how to do this with more than one person, but to me, it all just made sense.

If we cared, we needed to care completely, and I was pretty sure I did. Jackson acted the same way, and listening to him stumble as he tried to explain his feelings, I knew he was ready to spill those three little words. Hopefully, this would be our excuse to do it together. A declaration, Jackson called it.

The only problem with that was going to be if she didn't feel the same way.

Which meant I really needed to nudge a skunk or plant to ask for me. I laughed, thinking about how that might work. I was pretty sure Gyth wouldn't care about human emotions like that. The skunks seemed to call everything mating. Lupe, however, had been Syl's houseplant for years. I had a feeling that prickly pear knew her a lot better than she realized.

Deciding I'd at least talk to him the next time I was inside, I finished pulling the last of the old letters from the gate. Once that was done, I sanded down the bars, prepped everything, and started adding Syl's last name to the fence. This was her home, and the forest had renamed itself, so she deserved to have something to let her know we understood this was a big deal to her.

When I lifted the first letter up to choose the placing, I realized Jackson had done a good job on these. Holt was much larger than Maybrook had ever been, and with the script style of “Forest” below it, the eye naturally saw this as a statement of some kind. I actually really liked it.

A few times, I had to ask the vines to move so I wouldn’t accidentally burn them while I welded. I was pretty sure plants didn’t have eyes, so the light from the arc shouldn’t hurt them, but I still warned them all before I got into it.

I’d just tacked the H onto the gate, however, when my phone went off.

“Reese here,” I answered without looking.

“Where the fuck is here?” The responding voice belonged to Nora and made me laugh.

“Syl’s front gate, why?” I asked her.

“Because Jennifer came in yesterday and told me you’re all caught up in shit with the founding families. Never mind that you and Jackson have been MIA for the last few weeks and *he* isn’t answering his phone! I was hoping one of you would call to say you’re okay, but *no*! You and Jackson have all but cut the rest of us out, and how the fuck was I supposed to know you hadn’t disappeared?!”

“By calling me,” I taunted. “You know, just like you are now. No, Nora, we’re all fine. It’s good.”

“Good. I’m coming over,” she announced.

And then the line went dead. I removed the phone from my ear to check the screen, then put the thing back in my pocket. Nora was coming over? Here? Hopefully she wasn’t heading to our place, because she’d be sadly disappointed to find the house empty.

I wasn’t too worried about it, though. Instead, I focused on lining the letters up and finishing Syl’s front gate. I’d just gotten everything tacked up and ready for the last step when a little sedan pulled in behind me.

Flipping up my welding helmet, I glanced back to see Nora sitting behind the wheel. “Cover your eyes,” I told her. “I’m almost done, and this gate isn’t opening until I’m finished.”

“Okay,” she called back before slapping both hands over her eyes.

I pushed the face screen back down, then got to work. It didn’t take long, thankfully, and then I started putting away my welding equipment. No, I wasn’t done yet – because I wanted to paint the fence before calling it complete – but at least Nora could come talk to me while I did that.

“It’s safe,” I yelled at her.

The door to her little red Honda opened, and she climbed out, making her way straight to the fence. “So the Holt Forest, huh?”

“Yep,” I said, realizing just how much we had to tell her.

But should we? Was this one of those things that was Sylvia’s secret and not mine to share? I didn’t honestly know, because Jackson was usually the one who made those decisions. He’d lived here his entire life. I’d moved away for ten years, so I’d missed a lot of the drama that came with the founding families, magic, and all the other open secrets the locals seemed to simply take for granted.

“What do you think?” I asked.

Nora just crossed her arms and stared at the gate, looking at it intently. “Is Syl trying to separate her property from the rest of the forest?” She looked over at me. “I mean, I like the letters. It looks a lot better than that rusted old shit Margie used to have here.”

“Kinda what I thought,” I agreed. “And this is no longer Margie’s land. Syl has her own name, and she’s been really adamant about making sure people know she’s not a Maybrook.”

That just made Nora’s eyes narrow. “But is she?”

I blew out a heavy breath, because that wasn’t an easy question to answer. “What do you mean?” I asked.



Hopefully, that would shift the topic of this discussion just a bit. Sadly, Nora knew me too well. A little laugh fell from her lips, she shook her head, then simply flicked a finger back to the gate.

“Sylvia’s last name might be Holt, but we all know the Maybrooks were one of the founding families. The last time I saw Jackson, he told me there was some drama going on with all those rich fuckers. So, is it because Sylvia’s descended from the Maybrooks? Please tell me it doesn’t have anything to do with her being Black?”

“I can promise that it has nothing to do with her being Black,” I assured her. “As for the rest, I think you should probably talk to Syl about that.”

“Which means I was right to worry,” Nora huffed. “You and Jackson start asking questions about the founding families, disappear for weeks at a time, and then Jennifer starts talking all weird about the old families in town. Something happened, didn’t it?”

I grabbed the line for the paint gun, then moved to repair the damage I’d made to the gate. What I didn’t do was answer. I needed a moment to think about this, and turning this entire gate black again was as good of an excuse as anything else I could come up with.

Nora moved back, giving me room. I apologized to the plants, letting them know there might be a little overspray, and then started the equipment. The hum of the air compressor made conversation almost impossible, but painting a gate made out of wrought iron bars wasn’t something that took very long. I gave the entire front of it a whole new coat, and the whole time my mind was spinning.

How was I supposed to answer Nora’s question? Should I tell her Syl was a witch? Would she still be friends with her? I certainly didn’t want to be the reason why my girlfriend lost one of the few women in town she knew, but I also didn’t want to lie to Nora. She’d stood by me through the divorce, and I was pretty sure I owed her a little honesty.

So when I finally finished, I focused on putting my gear away even as I asked Nora, “Do you believe in magic?”

She made a little sound like she was unimpressed. “Reese, I grew up in Summerpoint. I have lived here my entire life. I know exactly how many people have disappeared, how many weird things have happened, and have heard just about every rumor about the founding families you can imagine. Of course I believe in magic.”

I just nodded my head slowly. “Hey, trees?” I called out. “Can you open the gate and let both of us in? Try not to smudge the new paint, if at all possible?”

A vine worked the latch, moving around it like a snake. Once that was released, the massive oak bent a limb to swing the metal gate open. Beside me, Nora’s mouth was hanging open in shock. She looked at me quickly, then back to the plants that were moving like animals, then back to me.

“Whoa,” she breathed.

I just pulled my keys out of my pocket. “I suggest you say something nice to the forest before you drive through, otherwise the driveway will be hell. Don’t worry, it ends at Sylvia’s cottage. I’ll meet you there.”

Nora just bobbed her head a few times, finally remembered to close her mouth, and then hurried back to get in her car. Well, she’d said she believed in magic. Now, she could even say she’d seen it.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

---

I was sitting at the kitchen table, trying to get as much work done as possible before the guys got here, when a little red Honda pulled up in front of my house. Oddly, no trees had announced this visitor, which had me curious. The car stopped, and a moment later the guys' work truck parked beside it. Closing my laptop, I got up and headed to the door just as the people decided to pile out.

I didn't get to see who it was until I was outside – and my eyes landed on Nora. She saw me at the same moment and lifted a hand in a wave, but the ivy around my front porch had already started to react. Branches were shifting and vines were moving to block the staircase. They tangled, making a complete barricade.

“It's okay,” I told the plants. “That's Nora. She's one of my friends. She's welcome here.”

In the back of my head, I heard that beautiful chorus of voices murmur in agreement. The vines pulled back, wrapping around the banister and stair rail just like normal plants. Nora saw the whole thing. Her eyes widened, her feet paused, and she pointed at the plants even as they retracted to give her access. Thankfully, she didn't look scared.

“Does everything out here move?” she asked.

Behind her, Reese chuckled. “Yeah, pretty much.”

So I just nodded, waving her and Reese up the stairs and towards the house. “Come in, come in. Please ignore the state of the house. The guys just finished a lot of remodeling.”

Nora smiled at me just before she stepped inside the cottage. Once in my living room, her feet slowed as she paused to look around. I got the impression it wasn't my decorating taste that surprised her. And yet, since we'd mostly cleaned up everything, I wasn't sure quite what it was.

Then Reese hissed, making me look over to the potted plant beside the door. "Lupe!" I snapped when I saw my cactus reaching one of his little pears out. "That's Nora. She's a friend."

*Oh. Sorry. I just woke up to a stranger in the house, and since I'm beside the door, I'm now the guard cactus.*

I snorted as I tried to hold back my laugh. "Well, check before you start going off all guard-cactus-like."

*Where's the fun in that?* he asked.

I rolled my eyes, but Nora was giving me a strange look. "Guard cactus?" she asked.

"Yeah," fell from my mouth. "Right. Look, it's a long story. I mean, I don't even know where to start..."

My friend just smiled at me. "I hear from the beginning is a good place." Then she dropped down to sit on the closest sofa. "Unless I'm not supposed to know?"

Reese hooked his arm around my waist, then leaned in to kiss the side of my head. "I was down working on the front gate, and she called me. Evidently Jackson's mom told her about the fight out here. Nora's been worried about the two of us disappearing since we didn't call her. So, I'm in shit, and I thought I would share the wealth."

"Thanks," I teased before poking him in the ribs. "Wait. What did you do to the gate? Was it broken?"

"No, but it's closed." He grinned, turned, and headed for the kitchen.

Evidently, that was the only answer I was going to get. Then again, closing the front gate was a pretty good idea to keep the other wixen out. After what had happened to the

trees, I would much prefer to rely on a simple piece of metal. At least if that got damaged, it wasn't going to die.

Then there was the fact that my only real friend in town had just come to visit. She'd never been here before, and I wasn't sure quite what I was supposed to show her. Or tell her. Would admitting any of this cause her problems?

"So..." I said, dragging the word out.

"Before you start," she broke in, "you should know that I saw the trees moving. I mean, then there was the ivy. I also know about the founding families. Syl, we know your aunt was one of them."

"And she believes in magic," Reese added from the kitchen.

I just nodded, taking all that in. It was a lot. It also kinda made sense. From what Jackson and Reese had told me, most people in town knew that pissing off the founding families could make them disappear. It wasn't a stretch to go from that to magic. My problem was how easily these people just accepted the supernatural, occult, or whatever I was supposed to call it.

Saying I was a witch should put me squarely in the "crazy" category. It was the sort of thing that made most people roll their eyes and cut contact forever. Never mind the problem with the actual founding families and the things I'd heard about them.

"Is it even safe for me to say anything?" I asked Reese.

But it was Nora who answered. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"Because the founding families might make you disappear if you know!" I shot back. "I don't want that to happen to you, and the truth is that I don't really have a clue what I am and am not supposed to be doing. I mean, I don't mind you knowing, but the last thing I want to do is make being my friend something that causes you problems."

"Just tell her," Reese said. "She knows how to play stupid, and that's how Jennifer and Jackson have handled it for most

of their lives. No change, except that she'll finally have some actual answers."

"So long as you actually want to answer," Nora said.

I just nodded. "Okay. That means you know about wixen?" I asked.

"Like witches?" she asked.

Reese tackled that before I could even open my mouth. "Witches are women. Wix are the men. Wixen are all of them – both plural and gender-neutral."

Nora nodded. "Well, I know about wixen now."

And the way she said that was so lighthearted, like it wasn't a big deal at all. That, more than anything else, made me feel like it was actually okay to tell her this. I also really wanted to. After all, if there was a chance she could believe me, then that meant there was a chance I would have someone to talk to about this who I wasn't sleeping with.

"Okay," I started, "so when I moved here, I didn't have a clue. I didn't know about any of this. However, it didn't take long for the forest to start being weird."

"You mean like with the forest monsters?"

I shook my head. "I mean the trees. I kept thinking the rustling of the leaves was saying my name, or that it would help direct me places. Just little phrases like 'over here' and such. And yes, I saw the forest monster, but I convinced myself it was a figment of my imagination."

"He's a wild thing," Reese clarified. "His name is Gyth."

"Gotcha," Nora said.

And so I filled her in. While we sat there, talking about everything that had happened from the first day I'd entered this cottage, she listened, nodding as if soaking it all up. I told her about the trees, the skunks, and even the spices. I explained how little I knew, how far behind the curve I felt, and how I couldn't help but wonder if this was why Margie had become a hermit.

Then I told her about the battle. How Gyth was the last wild thing, the coven was hunting him, wanted me to join, but I had given him sanctuary. I told her all about the consequences of Gyth being taken, and how I wasn't sure I had the power to stop that. Basically, I unloaded on the poor girl.

Yet her only question was not one I expected. "So if the skunks are your familiars," she asked, "then what's the cactus?"

I glanced back to where Lupe was standing tall in his new pot. "He's my friend."

"Dude, I'd offer you a fist bump, cactus, but that might be bad for me," she said.

And Lupe bent one of his little pears forward, almost like a long-distance fist bump. On the couch across from me, Nora laughed so hard I thought she was going to snort! Pointing that way, she nodded, then made a similar gesture back.

Had all of this broken her brain? Thankfully, before I could ask, Reese came over with a pair of cups for both of us. Mine had tea. Nora's was coffee. Setting them on the table between us, he gently rubbed his ex-sister-in-law's shoulder.

"Breathe, it wasn't that funny," he told her.

"That's a hip cactus," she countered. "I mean..." With both hands, she gestured to the prickly pear. "He's cool!"

*I like her already, Lupe told me. I'm going to tell the forest that she makes you happy.*

"Aww, thanks, Lupe," I told him, before telling Reese and Nora what he'd said.

"Nice," Reese mumbled. "Nora, having the forest approve of you makes a lot of things easier. Just don't ever forget to thank it. Sounds like the place was enslaved by the coven for centuries. Syl set it free, it bonded to her, and I'm getting the impression that we basically have two covens in town now."

"Syl's and the Grimsons'?" Nora asked.

"Wait, what?" Because I hadn't even thought of that.



“Well,” Reese said, “Gyth made it clear you’re not in their coven. He’s also referred to your coven a few times.”

“But I don’t have any witches on my side,” I reminded him.

He just shrugged. “I’m not sure that matters. You have a forest instead. You also won, Syl.”

“Yeah...” Nora said, leaning forward to grab her coffee. “And speaking of the founding families, I’ve heard some interesting things over the last few weeks.” She paused to shoot Reese a dirty look. “Things I would’ve told you, but you weren’t around.”

“They were taking care of me,” I admitted. “Doing that much magic drained me until the new moon.”

Which made Nora smile. “Hm. Well, it seems that none of the founders have been seen doing their normal things. Same problem?”

“And Syl’s spell might still be draining them,” Reese told her.

Which made Nora’s eyes narrow. “Okay? And does being drained make a witch - er, wix - feel bad?”

“Worn out,” I admitted. “Anemia was the example I used.”

“Sick,” she said as if that somehow made sense. “Funny, because Zane Harkness came in wearing a face mask the other day. Told me he and his friends were still sick and he didn’t want me to get it.”

“That’s what he called it to Jackson,” Reese clarified. “Said calling it ‘sick’ hurt his pride less.”

And a grin began to grow on Nora’s face. “Well, fucking well. Wasn’t that nice of him?”

“What?” I asked, not knowing those people well enough to intuit their motivations the way these two were.

So Reese gestured for Nora to keep going, then made his way over to Lupe. That was all my friend needed. Curling her legs under her and cradling her cup against her chest, she

settled in for what was clearly about to be a good gossip session.

“Zane comes to get coffee all the time,” she explained. “He’s one of the few founders I don’t run from, if you know what I mean. Granted, he and Jackson used to date, so there’s that.”

“She knows,” Reese promised. “We told her that part.”

Nora just nodded. “But Zane’s still cool to Jackson’s friends and family. So when he said that, I had a feeling there was more to it, but I didn’t have enough to add it up. Syl, I think he’s trying to say that they’re still being drained. I have a feeling that draining might actually make them weak - like immune-wise. The guy was wearing a mask, you know?”

“So the coven is still down?” I asked.

She just nodded her head a little bigger. “Oh yeah. Beth hasn’t seen either of the Spellmans. The Grimsons have been mysteriously absent from most town bullshit. Family emergencies and such. Not that anyone gives a shit about ribbon cuttings or whatever they do, but people have noticed them hiding away from the rest of town.”

“Nice,” I breathed, because that sure felt like a win to me.

“And,” Nora went on, “I want to help.”

“No!” Reese snapped from his place beside Lupe.

I turned just in time to see my cactus smack his knee, most likely leaving a few spines behind. Reese yelped, jumping back, but Lupe wasn’t done.

*The forest gave the power to the women. The witches are the ones who make the decisions. Men cause violence, and the coven has done nothing but prove this, so don’t think you can tell Sylvia what to do!*

“Uh...” I mumbled, knowing I was the only one who could hear that. “Lupe says women have power and you should respect that. Kinda.”

“Very kinda,” Reese grumbled as he plucked the little cactus hairs from his knee. “I’m just trying to keep them safe,

Lupe.”

*Then you are doing it wrong, Lupe told him. Sylvia needs friends. She needs help. She needs a community, so help her make one. If you do that, then the answer is yes.*

“What answer?” I asked.

*Reese knows, Lupe said.*

Letting out a sigh, I translated all of that for Reese. “What question?” I asked as I finished.

“Um, I was thinking we could do a Fourth of July party,” Reese said, sounding like he was making it up on the spot. “You said you wanted to have some friends, meet some people, and not be stuck here.”

“But here is a perfect place for a party!” Nora gasped. “Syl, let’s do it?”

“It’s kinda late,” I pointed out. “I mean, tomorrow’s July first!”

“So?” she asked. “Beth will come. Reese and Jackson can cook. I’ll bring drinks. I dunno, maybe Beth can bring her girlfriend.”

“And Jennifer,” Reese suggested. “She’s been wanting to meet our girlfriend.”

“Yes!” Nora breathed. “And don’t worry, Syl. I’ll handle all of it. You just need a place for us to cook out, have some silly but safe fireworks, like sparklers, and maybe convince your skunks to make an appearance?”

That last bit made me sputter. “You mean tell everyone?” I asked.

Nora just leaned back, smirking like a pleased cat. “Syl, I don’t know how to break this to you, but the entire town knows you’re Margie’s great-niece. That means you’re one of the founding families. You’re either a weird bitch or a witch, and I dunno about you, but I think witch is a lot more fun.”

“Yeah, but won’t they think I’m crazy?” I asked. “Or, I dunno, evil?”

“Not if you tell them,” she pointed out. “Syl, we’re already guessing. If you really want to make friends, I think you need to make it clear that while you are a Maybrook, you are not with the Grimsons. You are *not* going to become one of the founders who make our lives hell. Make it clear that yes, you’re a witch - and then become *our* witch.”

She meant the town’s. The strange thing was that I liked that idea, so I nodded, trying to think it over quickly. I couldn’t find a reason why I shouldn’t. They knew. I knew. The founding coven even knew, so what reason did I have to hide?

Besides, I really did want some friends. If this was going to be my home, I didn’t want it to become a lonely one.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

---

Nora was thrilled with the idea of a party for the Fourth of July. Grabbing onto that idea, she began to make plans, growing it bigger and bigger until I had to wave her off. A few new friends would be enough. I wasn't exactly the most social person in the world, and while I didn't want to be a hermit, I was looking for some middle ground here.

As she was paring it back, Jackson arrived. He had an armload of lights in boxes and said there was also a sink in the back of his truck. Together, he and Reese went to handle that, carrying the supplies down to the cellar and leaving us girls to giggle a little more.

"Jennifer is going to embarrass you," she warned. "That woman has no filter, but she's more amazing because of it."

"She sounds wonderful," I admitted.

"And does the forest mind if we have some sparklers?"

This girl had adapted to the reality of magic so easily. It almost made my head spin. She had no problem asking me to translate for plants, accepting that magic was real, or any of it. In truth, hearing her ask that made me sputter a bit, not sure of the answer.

Then the oak outside replied, *We do not mind so long as we do not burn.*

"The forest says it's worried about fire," I told her.

Nora just nodded. "Okay, so I'll bring a fire extinguisher to go with that. I mean, it's the Fourth. We have to have at least a

little fun. Now, what will the skunks eat?”

“Anything.”

She continued peppering me with questions about dietary restrictions for me, my magical friends, and more. All of it got noted down on her phone, which made me think this was actually going to be a lot more fun than I expected.

But eventually, Nora had to go. She was only here this early because she'd traded shifts with someone for the evening, and she needed to get ready for work still. Yet before she left, I caught her and gave her the biggest hug, thanking her repeatedly so she'd know just how much this all meant to me.

I might not have the words to explain that paranoia in the back of my mind, but it was still there. Margie had died alone. She'd been a hermit out here in the forest. From the sounds of it, she hadn't even had a familiar of her own, and the wild things hadn't talked to her. In the end, that had made her vulnerable enough that the Grimsons had all but abducted her.

I wanted to have someone miss me if I ever disappeared. I liked the idea of having friends I could count on if I couldn't get off the property for some reason. I also really sucked at meeting new people. Sure, I'd done well here in Summerpoint so far, but that had all been luck. I'd met Nora when I ordered coffee. She'd introduced me to the guys because I needed a contractor.

I was sitting on the couch, thinking about that, when Jackson and Reese came up from the cellar. Jackson caught me staring into nothing. Reese probably did too, but it was Jackson who made his way over to me.

“Syl?” he asked. “You ok? You don't have to have this party if you don't want to, you know.”

“No,” I assured him. “I do. I was actually thinking that I love the idea. It's just...”

“What?” Reese asked.

I groaned, leaning back against the soft cushions. “Okay, this is stupid, but I suck at making friends. I don't think I

remember how.”

“And yet you seem to be doing a good job of it so far,” Jackson teased.

Which made me huff out a laugh. “Yeah, I kinda was thinking about that too,” I admitted. “Like, I’ve gotten really lucky here with a lot of things, especially the two of you.”

“Well,” Reese said, “speaking of the two of us, would you like to take a walk down to the front gate to see what we did?”

“You did,” Jackson corrected.

“You started it,” Reese reminded him.

And now they had me curious. So, pushing to my feet, I found a pair of shoes and gestured for them to lead the way. It was warm outside as summer took over, but the breeze made it nice. The trees overhead were rustling, their leaves sounding like giggles in my head. That, more than anything else, made me realize something was up.

“What did you do to the gate?” I asked.

“Nope,” Jackson said. “Gotta wait until we’re there.”

So we kept walking. I saw the maple I’d healed. The rope holding her to the tree beside her had vanished at some point. I wasn’t sure if Gyth had done that or the guys. Either way, she looked good again. Not quite as healthy as the rest of the trees, but she no longer looked as if she was dying.

Then we walked a little more. There, at the end of my drive, the wrought iron gate was closed. Bushes and vines crowded around the edges of it, making it appear as if the thing hadn’t been opened in years. One tree leaned much too far over, its branches obscuring the top half almost ominously.

“Okay, we’re going to slip out the front,” Reese said, guiding me to the opening side.

Confused, I looked at him for some hint, but that tree was moving its branches, once again blocking my view of the gate. Yeah, I could see where this was going. The forest was very clearly helping the guys to make this one hell of a reveal.



And when we were outside my property, Jackson turned and gestured proudly to the gate. “Taa-daa!”

The tree lifted its limb and the words were revealed. Holt Forest was welded proudly to the front, painted in the same black as the rest of the gate, and the whole thing was incredibly shiny and new looking.

But that was my name.

Not Margie’s name. Not my wixen bloodline name. The words on the gate made this mine - and the forest seemed to approve. Lifting both hands to cover my mouth, I felt tears stinging my eyes. Mine. Home. Where I belonged.

And the guys had done this for me.

“Oh my god,” I breathed, looking from Jackson to Reese and back a few times. “It’s perfect!”

“Yeah?” Reese asked.

I nodded, my emotions choking me up just a bit because this was so thoughtful. The gate hadn’t been broken. It hadn’t been on my list of projects. It hadn’t needed to be done, and yet these two men had clearly put a lot of work into this for me. The letters for my name were beautiful, beveled, and big enough to stand out.

“Reese welded it on this morning,” Jackson explained.

“And Jackson designed the letters,” Reese told me.

“It’s perfect...” I mumbled, turning to Jackson first, simply because he was a bit closer.

I hugged him hard, making it clear how much I loved this. It was stupid. It was frivolous and meant nothing in the scheme of things, but it had been so damned thoughtful! Then I let him go and hugged Reese the same way.

“And now it’s yours,” Reese said softly as his arms wrapped around my back. “No more questions about if you’re really a Maybrook.”

“Because you are *the* Holt,” Jackson said.

“Yeah,” I breathed, letting go of Reese so I could see the gate again. “Guys, I love it. I mean, I absolutely *love it*.”

Which made Reese clear his throat. He glanced pointedly at Jackson who flashed a smile before shoving a hand over his hair, pushing the few strands that had broken free away from his face. Right before my eyes, these two men had turned awkward again.

“So,” Jackson said.

“All you,” Reese told him.

Jackson just nodded, then turned his attention on me. “Syl...” He pulled in a breath. “Fuck, I should’ve thought about how to say this. Um...” His eyes flicked over to Reese.

“You said you were worried about us leaving,” Reese said, taking over. “You’ve mentioned that you don’t want to be a hermit. Well, this is our way of showing that’s not going to happen. You are not your great-aunt. This is not her forest. Most importantly, we’re not going anywhere unless you make us.”

“Yeah?” I asked, liking how this sounded.

“Because we’re in love with you,” Jackson mumbled. “Reese and I have talked about it. Fuck, we’ve talked *all* about it, and we’re sure.”

My heart stalled. My tummy exploded into a million pieces fluttering in all directions. My skin prickled and my lungs? They forgot how to work for a moment.

This was not what I’d expected! I’d braced myself for them to get tired of me. I’d thought all of this was too good to be true. Slowly but surely, I’d been growing closer and closer to them, so sure this was too easy, too improbable, and too much for me to ever deserve.

But they were in love with me? Not just each other, but also me? This was real? It was working? It wasn’t some rebound for me or a kink for them? It... This... It was real?

And I felt my entire soul tilting, sliding, and wobbling precariously on that edge.

“We love you,” Reese said, nudging me even further, “and we want this to be forever. We want to be your familiars, help keep you safe, and be involved in *everything* that comes with your magic, your cottage, and your forest.”

“This is why you do the talking,” Jackson told him.

Reese just laughed, but it sounded a little nervous. “I’m literally just telling her the truth.”

“Truth?” Jackson said, smiling down at the ground. “Syl, you make me stupid. I think about you all the time, and I love coming out here. I’ve never felt like this for a woman before, but it’s exactly how I feel about Reese, and maybe I don’t know you as well, and we still have a lot of learning to do between all of us, but I want to do it. I want this to be real.”

My head was whipping between them. My mind was braced for the “but” that always came next. So many times, I’d thought something was good, just to have it implode around me. Andrew was the perfect example. But these two? They loved me? They *really* loved me?

“All three of us,” Reese said. “A perfect little trio, right? And I want to whisper that word to you when I wake up in the morning, then say it to him. I want it to be okay for us to be in love with you.”

My heart suddenly decided to take off at light speed. My mouth hung partly open in surprise, but I was nodding. A smile was trying to claim my lips, but my shock prevented it. All this time, I hadn’t dared think about how much I cared about them. I’d assumed I was the extra, the excitement, or even the temporary fun, but *this*?

This was everything I wanted.

So, standing there in front of the gate with my name on it, between the two men who’d been here for me with every bit of the insanity that had happened since I moved here, I nodded a little harder, struggling to find my voice - and the right words to go with it.

“I don’t deserve this,” I breathed.

No, that wasn't what I meant! That wasn't at all what I was supposed to say, but it made both men step into me, wrapping their arms around me and each other.

"You do!" Reese insisted.

"Doesn't stop us from loving you," Jackson told me.

I just huffed, the weakest attempt at a laugh I could make as all of this overwhelmed me. "I want it, though," I said, looking between them. "I just don't want to mess up what you two have."

"Can't," Jackson promised. "Trust me, we've talked about that too."

"Jackson and I have known each other since we were kids," Reese reminded me. "We know how to adjust. We understand that things change."

"I mean, he decided he was bisexual at thirty," Jackson joked.

And that allowed a real laugh to slip out. "So it's okay for this to be real?" I asked. "It's okay for me to be falling in love with you both?"

"Yes!" Jackson promised.

But Reese merely relaxed, almost as if some weight had been removed from his shoulders. "But are you?" he pressed.

I jiggled my head in a nervous little nod. "I think so. I've been trying not to, always reminding myself that this would probably end when the house is done, you know? But I don't want to lose you two. I..."

"What?" Jackson begged.

I had to lick my lips to buy time so I could find the right words. "I miss having you two here every night. I miss the extra coffee cups in the sink. I find myself turning to ask one of you a question or to show the other something I just learned. The two of you have just slipped into my life so easily, and I like it." I paused, my brow creasing. "No. I love it. I love both of you, and if you walk away, I know - and have known - that you'd break my heart, so that means this has to

be love. It has to be real, and if I'm a fool for daring to think I could have two men as amazing as either one of you? Then I want to be a fool."

"Our fool," Jackson said, a smile taking over his face that was quickly turning into a grin.

"Our witch," Reese corrected before cupping the side of my face.

Then he kissed me. Softly, slowly, with Jackson still wrapped around my other side, Reese explored my mouth. Every brush of his lips was filled with emotion. The bumps and nudges of his tongue against mine weren't claiming. They were asking, looking for a promise - and I gave it.

I kissed him with every daydream and hope that had been growing in me since they first walked into my house. I kissed him like time could stand still. I kissed him like a woman in love, and my soul leaned into the fall.

Then he pulled back, tilting his head slightly towards Jackson. I barely shifted my focus before he was kissing me, and Jackson didn't really do gentle. His mouth was a declaration, making it clear he was mine, but I was also his. He took. He gave. He reminded me of all the passion between the three of us, and held it against my lips like a promise.

But when I finally pulled away to catch my breath, the guys didn't hesitate. There, next to the highway, in full view of anyone and everyone who might pass by, they kissed each other. It was beautiful, sensual, and sexy. It also made me realize the most important thing about the new stage our relationship had just entered.

This was really going to work. I might feel my soul falling for them, but these two men? They'd found a way to make it feel more like flying.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

---

The new moon had come and gone. My magic hadn't recovered. The full moon was quickly approaching, falling on July third, which should've made our next ritual incredibly convenient. Instead, I'd heard nothing. So, on impulse, I decided to invite myself over to the Grimsons.

My magic was still being slowly and consistently drained. Ever since that battle in the forest, I hadn't been able to access the power at all. Even more confusing, I had no clue how long this would last. Most spells waxed and waned with the cycle of the moon. This one hadn't.

It was a sign of the sort of power Sylvia could wield. The bigger question was how. The woman had no training in witchcraft. She seemed to know basically nothing, and yet her first major spell was one that was already breaking the limits of the magic I'd been taught. I was curious to hear what either one of the Grimsons had to say about this.

When I pulled onto the property, I aimed for the big house. That was Kingsley's place, and it was really more of a mansion than a "house." Lucien had his own home on the other side of the property. While still large, it wasn't as ostentatious as his father's home. That was probably why the pair tended to spend most of their time here.

I parked my car to the side and stepped out. Oddly, I made it all the way to the door and ended up knocking before anyone bothered answering. When the wood cracked open, it was a butler on the other side.

“Can I help you, sir?” the man asked.

“I’m here to see either Kingsley or Lucien – or both,” I told him.

With a single bob of his head, the butler opened the door wider and allowed me in. “If you’ll wait here.”

That was all he said before walking off. So, shoving my hands deep into my pockets, I waited. The walls around me were covered in expensive paintings, and nooks were filled with tasteful sculptures. It was all meant to impress, looking more like what one would expect to find in a palace instead of a house.

Wealth. That was what these bastards loved. Granted, being wealthy was nice, but all of this shit impressed no one. Most of the coven members didn’t even understand who the artists were. They had no idea of the value these pieces represented. To them, it was just an outdated and antiquated style of decor.

But to the Grimsons, it was yet another form of power. They wanted everyone in Summerpoint to know they were the kings of the hill. Power. Everything was about power. Money was a form of power. Magic was a form of power. Respect was a form of power. Those were the first things I’d learned when I was inducted into this coven – and I planned to use it against them every chance I could.

Thankfully, I didn’t have to wait too long before the butler returned. “If you’ll follow me, sir?” he asked, gesturing further in the house.

I followed as we passed by the main dining area, the sitting room, the drawing room, and whatever else the other room was called. Taking a meandering path, the butler led me into the north wing of the mansion. Eventually, he reached a set of double doors and tapped softly before opening one and gesturing for me to enter. On the other side was Kingsley Grimson’s office, and sitting before him was Lucien.

“Zane,” Lucien greeted me. “We weren’t expecting a visit from you. Is there a problem?”



While his son talked, the elder Grimson gestured to the empty chair in front of him. I took it, doing my best to act casual. I wanted to look neither too happy nor too frustrated. Calm. That was the impression I wanted to give.

“The full moon is in two days,” I pointed out. “I haven’t heard anything about the plans for our ritual, and I’m concerned about my ability to participate.”

“Mm...” Kingsley mumbled. “I suppose you’re going to tell me you also have problems reaching the source of your magic?”

I folded my arms over my chest and gave both of them a look that dared them to keep bullshitting me. “Ever since I was coated in that powder, my power has been slowly and consistently drained away.” Lifting an eyebrow, I turned my focus on Kingsley. “I also know that you got hit with more of it than I did. So, if that hedge witch’s spell is making me this powerless, then what is it doing to you?”

“The other coven members have also mentioned a drain on their power,” Lucien said, completely ignoring my question. “Because of this, we’re not planning to have a ritual this month. Besides, it’s only the buck moon. Nothing overly powerful and it isn’t necessary for our cause.”

“And what is our cause?” I pressed. “Are we still trying to recruit the Maybrook witch? Are we trying to destroy the Maybrook witch? Something else?”

“So far as I care,” Kingsley told me, “that woman can rot away on her property.”

“After we get her spellbook,” Lucien insisted.

“The spellbook would be nice,” Kingsley agreed, “but it’s not necessary. You’ll figure things out without it.”

Yeah, which meant that they were still planning on making Lucien the next hedge witch. Fuck. That would bring our coven back to full strength, with all six lines represented. Then again, that meant a spell to make that possible – and without our magic, we couldn’t perform one.

“So this ritual to replace her,” I asked, “will it require two separate rituals? One to remove her in some manner, and another to name a new Maybrook?”

“That woman is entirely unimportant,” Kingsley explained. “She may as well not exist. Because she refused to join the coven, her bloodline is already lost to us. No, Zane, it will only require one ritual. Lucien will be named the next nature wix, which will immediately grant him that power.”

“Power he won’t know how to use,” I reminded them.

“Power that would be based on the strength he already has,” Kingsley countered.

“And there are other nature witches out there with spellbooks,” Lucien assured me. “Trust me, it won’t take long before the coven is back to full strength.”

“And once again the most powerful in North America?” I asked. “Because we can’t claim that title if we were so easily defeated by a single witch in the woods.”

“She got lucky,” Lucien insisted.

I merely lifted a brow.

“The girl has no clue what she’s doing. It was sheer chance that she crafted a spell capable of draining us. No, Zane, that won’t happen again.” Lucien actually looked like he believed every word falling from his mouth.

The best I could do was nod slowly, pretending to agree even if I was still skeptical. “So when will the drain on our power stop?”

“Soon,” Kingsley insisted.

“How soon?” I asked.

It was Lucien who answered. “We don’t know, okay? All of the minor members of the coven are completely powerless. The more family members each of us has, the more we can draw from, but it’s only good for seconds. This level of drain can’t keep up. It has to be going somewhere and there’s no way that foolish little girl could hold all of it.”

I murmured at that thoughtfully. “So does this mean you are one of the minor members of the coven, Lucien?”

“You’re pushing your luck,” Kingsley warned.

“At this point,” I countered, “he’s merely your son and heir. One of those family members he was just talking about. That means his magic should be granted to you, Kingsley, to keep you as powerful as possible. As our leader, we need to make sure you are not powerless.”

And the old man smiled. “I’m not powerless,” he assured me. “Yes, that witch’s spell is having an effect on me, but I have ways to work around it. That is why I lead this coven, boy. Don’t ever forget it.”

“No, sir,” I agreed. “You just have to forgive me for being nervous. I don’t like this feeling. The more I work to build up my power, it feels like the faster the drain pulls it from me. Currently, my abilities are limited to the items that I’d already charged with magic. In other words, I’m useless for doing anything but flipping cards and telling fortunes.”

“That is the basis of divination magic,” Lucien taunted.

“Which is exactly why I have worked so hard to prove myself,” I reminded him. “I was born into a line with limited power. I want more. I would think that by now I’d have convinced you that I’m willing to do anything it takes to get it.”

“And that’s the sort of enthusiasm I like to see in our coven,” Kingsley praised. “Come back in two weeks. We’ll talk then. Until then, consider cleaning up your own problems.”

“And which problems would those be?” I asked.

“I’m well aware that you have been purchasing property. I know you are making investments. You’re building wealth, Zane, when you should be building a family. Your father is dead. Your mother has disowned you. You don’t have a wife or children – which means that you have no power to draw from. *That* is your main problem. You think that because you’re young, you should be sowing your oats. The reality is that you

should be growing your clan, forming a web of power to protect yourself, and proving that you're willing to do whatever this coven needs – even getting married.”

“And yet if something happens to me, then you could simply use another of your children to fill my bloodline's place,” I told him. “The coven will be fine. Besides, as a wealthy man I'm more likely to have much better marriage prospects.”

“He does have a point, father,” Lucien said. “Finding a wife isn't as easy as it was back in your day.”

“No,” I agreed. “Women have their own lives. In every other coven I've been to, the women hold the power and the men tend to be subservient. Trying to convince those ladies to change that for the chance of living in Summerpoint? It's not nearly as easy as you seem to think, Kingsley.”

“Then lie,” Kingsley told me. “Once the vows are said, your problems are over.”

“And divorce is much too easy to get.” I laughed once. “Or did your wife leaving you not prove that?”

“My mother left after she had seven children,” Lucien pointed out.

“She still left,” I said. “Never mind that most women my age are on birth control. ‘Accidentally’ getting her pregnant is much less likely to happen. And if she's a witch? That would pretty much be impossible. This isn't the 70's anymore, Kingsley. It's not as easy to find a wife as it was back in your day.”

“Then look harder,” Kingsley told me. “We're already lacking one bloodline. If anything happened to you, then this coven would be destroyed. With four bloodlines, we wouldn't have the power to perform the ritual to replace one.”

And that was exactly what I wanted to hear. Yet I let none of my enthusiasm show on my face. Instead, I nodded sagely, as if taking that completely to heart.

“Two weeks,” I said as I eased myself back to my feet. “Although you might want to let the coven know that this

month's ritual has been canceled. If you don't, rumors might start to spread – and we wouldn't want that.”

“Is that a threat?” Lucien asked.

I laughed once. “It means that not every wixen in this coven is happy about what happened in the forest. There are people who want to follow the strongest wixen in the area. Those same people also know we lost. That means the Maybrook witch currently gets to claim that title.”

“And I will kill that fucking bitch if I have to,” Kingsley snarled.

“Or merely let them know that you have bigger and better plans,” I suggested. “Make it clear you were caught by surprise because she lied to you. It's not your fault you trusted the girl. After all, she was supposed to have been one of us. She should have been on our side, and then she betrayed us. Let them know that you're not going to let that happen again.”

The old man leaned back in his chair with a devious little smile. “Yes, I think that's a good idea. Zane, this is why you're quickly gaining rank in our coven. And let me know if you hear any complaints?”

“Yes, sir,” I promised. “After all, I know who can make me a stronger wix.”

And with that, I turned and made my way out of his office. I refused to grovel in front of that man. Sure, maybe I'd make it look like I was some brown-nosing dipshit, but that only fueled his ego. Both of those men were so sure everyone wanted a slice of what they had that they were blind to what was really happening.

The thing that would destroy their coven wasn't a beautiful young woman who lived in the woods. No, it was me. It had always been me. And I was here for the long game.

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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The Fourth of July came a lot faster than I expected. One minute I was shopping for patio furniture, and then the next thing I knew, Reese and Jackson were making their way up the drive with a set of boxes in the bed of their truck that looked like my package had finally arrived.

Talk about just in time.

So instead of working on the house that day, the guys turned their attention to assembling one large table and eight outdoor chairs. It was cute. They worked together so well, passing pieces across without a word. They also reminded me of little boys making something to impress the grownups. Or maybe puppies offering their person a favorite toy.

The men looked proud. They looked settled. They looked like they fit right into my life in a way that just made me want to watch them too long and smile whimsically. They looked like two people I loved.

And it was easy to get my fill of this view from the kitchen where I was getting things ready. Nora had said she would handle everything, but since this was my party, I wanted to at least contribute. That was why I'd been assigned to the potato salad.

I also wasn't going to make the typical potato salad. I added spices. Okay, and maybe there was little magic that went along with it. My intention was for health and happiness for everyone who came to my house. As I mixed, I whispered the words that would set the spell into motion.

“So let it be.”

*Are you trying to bribe these people to be your friends?*  
Lupe asked.

“Maybe a little,” I admitted. “Mostly I just want to know some people. Come on, Lupe. How long has it just been the two of us?”

*Well, there was Andrew...*

“Yeah, which is pretty much what I mean,” I told him. “My life with Andrew was boring. Let’s not even talk about the lack of sex. It was as if, after the first six months, all the new and excitement wore off. From there it was just downhill. I don’t even know why I stayed with him as long as I did.”

*Because you didn’t want to be alone,* Lupe pointed out. *You say you don’t like being around people, that you are an introvert, and you enjoy your privacy, but have you ever considered that you’re lying to yourself?*

“Yeah, pretty much all the time.” I turned to smile back at my cactus just as the French doors creaked open.

“The table’s done,” Reese announced. “Jackson has two of the chairs done, so I’m supposed to get the charcoal and grill to take back there.”

“Can you drive the truck back that way?” I asked.

Reese gave me a funny look. “Maybe. There’s a couple of branches that are hanging in the way, but I bet the forest would be willing to move. I’ll ask.”

And with that, he was out the front door. I couldn’t help but laugh. Yes, it was incredibly useful to be able to ask the trees to just bend out of the way, but it was also strange. Even I wasn’t used to it. But, if those guys could get everything on the deck set up before my first guest got here, I would be ready for this.

Although I barely managed to think that before the trees began to whisper to me, *Nora is here.*

“Lupe, I don’t suppose you can open the door, can you?” I asked.



*I need to grow a little more for that,* he admitted.

And yet, the overly-helpful front door of mine clicked and then slowly began to swing inward. I couldn't count the number of times the lock would be stuck when I needed it to open. Now, it was opening for no reason at all?

Wait.

“House? Did you open the door?”

There was no response, yet I still remembered Flower telling me that the front door had opinions of its own. Well, if this was the way it was going to work, then I would just roll with it. I still needed to get a bucket full of ice, gather up the paper plates and napkins, and make sure the desserts I had made were chilled properly for everyone to enjoy later.

It was beautiful chaos, but with the door open, I got to see Nora's car park right in front of my stairs. She climbed out and waved in my direction.

“Come on in!” I yelled at her.

“Are the plants okay with that?” She asked back.

“They already told me you were on the way,” I admitted, deciding not to go into detail about which plants had said that.

Nora still paused for a moment to gather something out of her back seat. Then, with her arms full, she jogged up the stairs the way a friend would, pausing to hook the door with her heel and gently guide it closed. When the thing latched – and stayed closed – I just ducked my head and began to chuckle.

“What?” she asked, making her way into my kitchen.

“I think my house has a personality too,” I explained. “Magic thing. Or crazy thing. I'm not really sure which.”

Nora then set down her haul beside me. “Probably magical. I'm just not sure if I'm supposed to thank every single thing out here. I did ask the trees to leave the front gate open when I came on the property, though. I figured having trees open it would probably scare the hell out of Beth and Erika. Oh, and they're both coming by the way.”

“Good call on the gate,” I agreed. “And Jennifer’s coming, right?”

“Without a doubt,” Nora assured me. “I also heard a rumor that Jackson’s little brother might be showing up.”

“What’s his name again?”

“Jayden,” she said. “I haven’t seen him in a couple of years, but he was in my grade in school. Pretty cool guy.”

So I looked over at the supplies she just set on the counter. “But do I have enough food? Or is this too much?”

Nora just laughed. “It’ll be fine, Syl. I also have a fire extinguisher, a few boxes of sparklers, and some of those other fireworks that don’t actually explode. You know, like the snake ones.”

“Okay, so I guess we should start taking all of this outside?” I asked. “Do we need to tell everybody how to get around the back? I mean, this is the cursed forest, and I don’t want anyone to be freaking out or anything.”

“Relax,” Nora told me. “If you want, we can just leave the front door open so everyone can make their way out there, or we can just send someone around front whenever a new car shows up. Everyone should be here in the next ten to fifteen minutes – if they’re on time.”

Yep, I was definitely nervous. I so badly wanted to make a good impression, but I also knew what people thought about this place. I was a witch. This was a place where people went to disappear. The founding families were all evil and horrible – and my great-aunt had been one. What if I completely fucked this up and pissed off Reese’s or Jackson’s friends and family?

But Nora had this. Pointing at my bucket of potato salad, she grabbed her own things and then headed towards the French doors. Just as she was angling to use her elbow on the latch, the door swung open - in other words, saving her the hassle.

“Thank you, house,” Nora called as she kept going.

I gaped at the doors more than she did. They were brand-new. It was what Jackson had just installed like a week ago. It wasn't part of the original house, but the house seemed to have control of it? Never mind that the house was opening doors for people. Then again, that seemed pretty par for the course around here.

“Thank you, house,” I said, parroting Nora as I followed her.

Through the screened-in porch and down the back stairs, we made our way to the deck. The space was large, with more than enough room for everyone. Even better, right in the very center of it was a table that could host a large family. Six of the chairs were now finished and set before it. The last two were upside down and my men were screwing their legs on.

“What am I forgetting?” I asked the guys.

Reese just looked up. “Skunk jars.”

Letting out a little gasp, I quickly set my potato salad on the corner of the table and then hurried back inside to grab those. They were still in the cellar, but if Flower decided the kids could come visit my friends, the last thing we needed was them to ruin everyone's appetite.

Jogging down the stairs, I grabbed the four little jars – one for each corner – and looked around to see if there was anything else we might possibly be able to use. I wanted tonight to be perfect. I wanted to impress these people and prove to them that I was a good witch. As sad as it might seem, I really, really wanted to make friends with them.

Once my arms were loaded down with spice-filled Mason jars, I hurried back up the stairs. In my head, I was running through a list of things we would need. We had all of them. I was as ready as I could ever be, and tonight was going to be fun. Hopefully. Maybe.

Oh fuck, was I nervous.

So nervous that when I reached the deck, I didn't realize that we were no longer alone. Nope, I was focused on setting one of the jars on each corner. It wasn't until I put the last one

down that Reese caught my arm, making me pause for a second.

“Jennifer, this is Sylvia,” he said.

I followed his gaze to see a beautiful older woman. Her hair was as white as snow, and yet her face wasn't leathery or overly wrinkled. Her eyes were the exact same gray color as Jackson's, and at the sound of my name, she smiled – proving that was the same too.

“I have been waiting so long to meet you,” she said, hurrying over to give me a bone-crushing hug.

I was so stunned that for a second I didn't know what to do. Then my brain kicked in and I remembered to hug her back.

“I've heard so much about you,” I told her. “Most of it has even been good.”

That made her laugh and also pull back. Then Jennifer turned and gestured to one more person that I hadn't seen. “And this is my youngest child, Jayden.”

Jackson's younger sibling walked over with a hand held out. “I was told we were having a cookout and my brother would be cooking. That's something I definitely couldn't miss.”

“Admit it,” Jackson joked, “You really wanted to stop by to see my girlfriend.”

“Busted,” Jayden said around a smile. “Although you look nothing at all like Marjorie Maybrook.”

Reese groaned and dropped his head. “She's biracial, Jayden.”

“Yep, and now she gets to misgender me at least twice. I mean, that's my excuse and I'm sticking to it. But seriously, you look nothing like her. Marjorie was this short, dumpy little woman who reminded me of a mouse.”

“And what do I remind you of?” I asked.

Jayden smiled. “A sunflower, I think.”

I just pressed out my lower lip and nodded. “Yeah, I can live with that. Although I have to ask about the misgendering thing. What pronouns do you want me to use?”

“I alternate between they, them, and he. I mean, I’m only just kind of realizing that I might be nonbinary, so I’ve used masculine pronouns my whole life. It’s a new thing for me, so I figure if I don’t know, I can’t expect anyone else to know.”

“Wait!” Nora yelled, hurrying over. “So you’re officially nonbinary now?”

They nodded. “Yeah, I think so. Asexual and nonbinary. It just feels like I’m telling a lie when I say that, though. I mean, I went as male for so long, and now I’m changing my mind?”

Jennifer merely reached over to rub their shoulder. “Honey, I told you. The things we’re so sure of when we’re younger aren’t always true as we gain a little insight and wisdom. It’s okay to redefine yourself. The people who love you will roll with it.”

“Well, I’m cool with it!” a woman yelled as she made her way around the side of the house. “Jayden! You’re here! Now tell me what I’m being cool with.”

All of us turned to see Beth, the waitress from the little diner the Spellmans owned, and another woman walking over. Both of their arms were full of even more food. Beth was pretty average-looking: average height, average weight, average brown hair. She wasn’t an ugly girl by any stretch of the imagination, but all of her descriptions would fall in the stereotype for most women our age. And a half step behind her was the woman who must be her girlfriend, Erika.

She had orangey-red hair, straight, with blunt cut bangs across her brow. She was also tall, probably somewhere close to six feet. Or maybe a bit less, I decided when she got closer to Jackson and Reese. And while Beth was curvaceous, Erika was willowy and lean. Physically, they were opposites in so many ways, and yet they looked like they matched perfectly.

“Hi,” I said, offering my hand to Erika as soon as she put her stuff down. “My name’s Sylvia. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Erika,” she said, proving me right. “I’m so excited to finally meet a witch.”

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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The men fired up the grill, the women sat down to organize the table, and Jayden made it their job to hand out drinks. Then we ate. There was so much food, and so many selections of everything. It reminded me of the feasts I had at family gatherings as a kid. And as the sun sank lower in the sky, everyone caught up with everyone else.

Yes, Jayden explained one more time that they were identifying as nonbinary and asexual. Then Beth and Erika made it clear they were definitely a couple. Evidently Beth was bisexual and Erika was a lesbian. Beth had grown up in town, and Erika had moved here in her twenties for a job. Not surprisingly, the two had met at the diner where Beth worked.

Jennifer then added that she was simply old. She said she'd given up men around the time her boys had entered middle school. Jackson called bullshit on that, but Reese told her she could keep believing in her fantasies if she wanted to.

The whole thing was fun, lighthearted, and made it even easier to admit that I was dating both Jackson and Reese. Granted, that wasn't news to any of these people. Evidently, rumors really did travel quickly in Summerpoint.

But just as the sky began to shift towards purple, Nora turned to me and brought up the thing that seemed to be the proverbial elephant in the room. "So, are you gonna tell the rest of us what it's like to be a witch, or not?"

"So it's true?" Jayden asked.



Jackson reached over to rub my shoulder in support. “It’s true, and unlike most of us, Sylvia did not grow up in Summerpoint. She had no clue about the founding families or the rumors of the forest being cursed. This is all new to her.”

“But what do you think of this?” Jennifer asked me. “It’s okay not to know, Sylvia. I just know that my boys say that you’re not a Maybrook.”

“According to the front gate,” Beth pointed out, “she’s a Holt.”

I took a sip of my drink, hoping the alcohol would give me a little courage, then answered. “Growing up, I used to come here to play with Aunt Margie. I was little when it happened, so I always thought my memories of all of this were just childhood fantasies. Things like catching lightning in jars.”

“Do you mean lightning bugs?” Jayden asked.

“No, I mean lightning,” I told them. “Little sparks of electricity from the air that we would use like lanterns. Margie showed me how to make moonstones, fairy jars, and other whimsical things. I had no idea that any of it could possibly be real. It was no different than pretending to be a princess, I suppose. And for a little Black girl, that was the type of playing nobody else wanted to do with me, so I loved it.”

“Hell, I would’ve loved it,” Nora admitted.

I pulled in a long breath and nodded. “But we stopped coming out here when I was like eight years old. My family thought Aunt Margie had mental health issues, and they didn’t want to risk having me and my little brother around a woman who might not be stable. So, when I got the notice that I had inherited the property, I was stunned. More when I realized I was the sole inheritor.”

“And you still moved here?” Beth asked.

Slowly, I nodded my head. “Yeah, because while I was making plans to sell the house and keep the money, I happened to catch my at-the-time boyfriend cheating on me. Yeah. So, uh, I packed my shit and moved before he got off work. This house was mine, free and clear, so this is where I landed.”

Erika leaned forward, both of her hands wrapped around the bottle of beer she was drinking. “So when did you figure out there was magic?”

“It was kind of a slow thing,” I admitted. “The trees would rustle, and I would swear they were saying my name. Then I saw stuff that didn’t make sense, and little things kept happening, but I thought it had to be like chemicals in the house or maybe whatever was wrong with Aunt Margie had been passed down to me.”

“You thought you were going insane,” Jennifer rephrased.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “And then Jackson went outside and got freaked out. I kinda lost my temper, so I went onto the front porch and told the forest to knock it off. Evidently, in my anger, I caused all of that ivy across the front of the house to grow.”

*You’re forgetting the best part.*

The voice was soft, feminine, and one I knew very well. Twisting in my seat, I tried to find where Flower was hiding, but that one little nudge reminded me of the best part of the story.

“Right. Somewhere before the ivy happened, I saved a family of skunks from the water runoff during a storm. I’d been trying to convince myself I wasn’t hearing the mother talk to me – even though I clearly was – but when it came to the babies needing help, I couldn’t ignore that.”

“Oh!” Nora said. “Your familiars, right?”

Which was when the skunks all decided to come out of the woods. Of course, Flower was leading the group, but seeing them like this, I realized how used to them I’d gotten. Beth, Jayden, and Erika clearly didn’t feel the same. They all gasped and pulled into themselves, clearly not expecting stinky little animals to join the party.

“The biggest one is Flower,” I told them, hoping to reassure them. “The three kids are Sprig, Twig, and Fern. Fern’s the little girl with the dots in front of her ears. Twig is

the bigger of the boys. They're also really smart, and not like normal wild animals."

"And they don't stink," Reese added.

"Well, they do if Syl doesn't put out her jars," Jackson clarified. "Sprig is also my main man, aren't you, bud?"

Making his little chirping and squeaking noises, the little runt of the litter headed straight over to Jackson. Laughing, he picked the skunklet up and put him in his lap, petting down those white stripes on his back. Not to be outdone, Reese leaned down and stretched out a hand. Fern quickly hurried over to get the same treatment.

*Your mates are spoiling my children, Flower told me. And I think your friends want to do the same.*

"So this is my familiar and her babies," I told my new friends. "And they won't bite or spray you. They also eat pretty much anything, since they're scavengers."

"Oh, I have leftovers," Jayden announced, bending over to make kissing noises towards Twig.

And that was all it took. Even Jennifer reached down to give Flower a pet. And if she lifted her hand to her nose and sniffed it afterwards, no one commented on it. I happened to know the smell wouldn't appear when she left the circle. That was the benefit of magic. Their musk was completely gone so long as those jars were around.

For a little too long, everyone was distracted with feeding the three skunklets whatever they would eat. Flower accepted a little, but she wasn't going to gorge herself like the kids were trying to. Eventually, the mother had to take charge, so she began squeaking and chirping, clearly telling her babies to mind their manners.

*If they eat too much more, they will be sick, she warned me.*

So I waved off my friends, explaining that Flower said that they'd had enough. That made Jennifer smile down at the mother skunk.

“Not easy keeping them in line, is it?” she asked.

Flower just shook her head in a humanlike gesture – and everyone at the table saw it.

“Whoa,” Jayden breathed.

But the whole thing had Erika’s complete attention. “This is absolutely amazing,” she said. “Beth, when you told me I might get to see magic, I was expecting like illusions. Not skunks acting like people. This is so cool!”

“I think the lack of smell is the best part,” Nora said.

Beth just looked over at me, saying nothing for a little too long. I could feel her gaze, almost like it was measuring me. If I was honest, it made me feel like I was being judged, and was pretty sure I was going to fail.

Then she finally asked, “So you’re a witch. You’re directly related to Marjorie Maybrook. Doesn’t that mean you’re one of the founding families?”

“My last name is Holt,” I told her. “I inherited that name from my father, a Black man who got it from his father, who got it from his father, who got it from a book. Holt is the name my ancestors picked for their chance at freedom. I honestly don’t care how many generations of rich and spoiled white ancestors I have. So you know, most Black people will say the same thing. Somewhere along the way, one of their great-great-grandmothers was raped by a wealthy white man. That doesn’t mean we owe them any loyalty.”

“Well said,” Jennifer told me. “But it also doesn’t answer the question.”

“I told you,” Jackson insisted.

Jennifer just held up her hand, begging him to wait. “Sylvia, regardless of who you’re descended from, you are being offered a lot of power in this town. The founding families will make it very comfortable for you if you play their game. But if you don’t...” She gestured back towards the house. “I saw those broken windows. The way the boys tell it, there was a rather impressive battle here. Do you honestly think that will be the last one?”

Pushing my plate away, I licked my lips as my thoughts swirled quickly. This was the thing that I'd been worried about. This moment, right here, was the make or break. All of these people had suffered in one way or another because of the founding families. They had grievances, and good ones.

They were still giving me a chance.

So I opened my mouth and just let the truth fall out. "I actually hope there will be another battle," I told them. "The forest monsters everyone talks about? They're called wild things. The forest used to be full of them, and now there's only one free one left. Free. That means there are more that are captive, and guess who's holding them prisoner? Yeah, the founding families."

"Okay?" Nora asked.

"The wild things are the source of magic," I explained. "They are the soul of this forest. If you think intelligent skunks and moving trees are amazing, then just think about all the other things magic can do. I mean, look at Jennifer. She doesn't have cancer because my aunt baked a pie." And I shut my mouth quickly, realizing I'd said too much.

"What?" Jennifer asked, quickly looking at Jackson.

He just groaned and dropped his head.

"Crap, I'm sorry Jackson," I mumbled quickly.

He waved me off. "No, I think she needs to know."

"Remember when you had that spot on your mammogram?" Reese asked. "Well, Jackson was worried enough that he talked to Zane. He hadn't talked to Zane in years, but that was the thing that made him do it. And you know how Zane reacted? He went straight to Margie and asked her if she could do anything about it. The pie was cherry. Your favorite."

"I really had breast cancer?" Jennifer asked, sounding stunned.

"Yeah," Jackson grumbled, "and the part Syl didn't say is that she refused to join the coven. She doesn't like them. She

wanted no part of what they're doing. But when they told her she could either join or break the spell on Summerpoint? The spell that protects this town magically? She almost did it. Do you know why, Mom? Because if that spell broke, your cancer would come back."

"But we found a workaround," Reese explained to everyone. "Syl was willing to do the work to protect everyone without giving more power to the Grimsons, the Spellmans, the Redmoons, the Harknesses, or the Undergroves. She worked hard, doing everything in her power – and paying for it by being worn out for a week, because she is not like the other wixen."

"Why?" Erika asked, her eyes meeting mine calmly.

"Because I remembered catching lightning in jars," I told her. "I remembered magic as a miracle, a good thing. Being around the founding families just felt evil, and that isn't how this is supposed to work. I like when the trees talk to me. I love the fact that my cactus tells jokes and tries to guard my house. I think it's amazing that as of today, my doors are opening to make life easier for me. That is what magic is supposed to be, but the founding families think of it only as power. All they see is one more way for them to control people weaker than them. And since I've always been one of those weaker ones, I know there's no way that ends well."

Erika nodded her head once as if accepting that. "So how do we help?"

"Because it would be nice to finally have a witch on our side for once," Beth added. "Never mind the idea of a cancer cure!"

"I just want to see the founding families get put on their asses for once," Nora said.

Jayden chuckled. "Personally, I think it's pretty magical that my big brother is dating a woman. More than that, but he somehow didn't fuck things up with Reese in the process. So, to my way of thinking, that means Sylvia is a pretty good witch."

And yet the whole time, Jennifer had been silent. Too silent. When I looked over, I found her looking at me. Something in her eyes seemed haunted.

“What would you have done if my cancer came back?” she asked. “Because my mother died of breast cancer. My aunt too. When they first saw that shadow on the x-ray, I was sure I only had a little time left. What if it had come back? Sylvia, you don’t know me, so why would you have helped me?”

So I gave her the most honest answer I could. “But I know Jackson. I know he loves you, and I know you’re important to him. I also know what it’s like to be in a really shitty situation and just wish someone could help. If I have magic, then shouldn’t I be that someone? Isn’t that why the forest gave this power to me?”

From deep in the shadows of the night, the answer came from a very deep masculine voice. “Yes. That is exactly why it chose you.”

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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Where the appearance of the skunks had startled my friends, the sound of Gyth's voice was even worse. Jayden jumped to their feet. Beth, Erika, and Nora squealed. Jennifer gasped, shoving her chair back as if she was about to bolt.

"It's okay," Jackson promised, lifting both hands to calm everyone. "He's our friend. He was invited."

"Where is he?" Nora demanded.

I pushed to my feet, holding both hands out, palms down, in what I hoped like hell was a soothing gesture. "He lives in the forest," I explained. "When all of you talk about the forest monsters, you call them not-somethings. It doesn't matter if that's not-deer, not-bear, or anything else. I think Gyth is a not-tree."

"I also will not hurt the witch's friends," Gyth said as he stepped to the edge of our lighting.

It wasn't much, just a few candles to keep away the bugs, but the warm and flickering glow was enough. Right at the tree line, and in exactly the same place I'd first seen him, the wild thing waited beside one of the smaller trees.

Like this, it was easy to think my eyes were playing tricks on me. He was tall, lean, and both his arms and legs ended in what had always reminded me of sticks. Talons, I called his fingers, yet they weren't exactly sharp. But overall, he didn't really look like a tree.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could see his goat-like face. There were small horns on top of his head that looked like they were mostly useless. The best description I could think of for him in this form was if the Beast from *Beauty and the Beast* had created some bastard love child with Groot.

“It might help if you came closer, Gyth,” I told him.

“I do not want to destroy your party,” he told me. “You have been excited about friends. You would not be happy with me if they leave.”

“Holy shit,” Jayden breathed. “It talks.”

“Yeah, dumbass,” Nora told them. “That’s kinda what freaked you out in the first place.”

“It’s the deep voice for me,” Jennifer admitted, even as she gestured for Gyth to come closer. “He – it? – sounds like some kind of a demon.”

“The coven has accused us of being such before,” Gyth admitted as he took another step towards us.

When no one ran, the strange creature I was starting to think of as a friend began to relax. His body softened, changing shape slightly. He went from lean and willowy to something slightly more humanlike. In this form, he definitely looked more like the cartoon version of the Beast.

“Is it...” Erika looked over at me. “...fuzzy?”

The question made Gyth laugh. It was a soft sound, but the honest kind. “It is fur. And while I am technically an it, I’m used to being called he.”

Which made Jayden relax. “While I’m technically a he,” he replied, “I think I prefer to be called they.”

“Not it?” Gyth asked. “But you are one. They is many. It is singular. Why do you want to be many?”

And that question was the one that set everyone at ease. The honest curiosity of this strange creature made him seem more approachable somehow. Granted, at least three different

people picked up their drink to take a long gulp. I understood that feeling, but in my opinion, we were doing pretty good.

So far, we'd tackled me being a witch, the skunks being my familiars, and now we'd moved on to wild things? The simple fact that no one had tried to throw rocks at me, set me on fire, or run out of here screaming had to be some kind of victory.

"The problem is that 'it' is typically used for a thing," Jayden explained. "Since I am a person and not a thing, I would rather be called they or them."

Gyth bobbed his head once in the affirmative. "Then I shall call you they. Thank you for explaining."

For a long moment, no one said anything. They simply stared at Gyth, and the silence lasted long enough for it to start feeling awkward. Unfortunately, I didn't know how to break it. This was supposed to be my party, and I was doing a very shitty job as a host.

Thankfully, Reese decided to speak up. "So, I think we just gave everyone Magic 101. Any questions from the class today?"

The resulting laughter was a bit nervous, but it definitely helped.

"Yeah, I've got a question," Nora said. "Syl told me you're the last wild thing. What happened to the others?"

"The coven captured them in order to take power from them," Gyth explained as he moved even closer.

His eyes bounced from person to person, almost as if waiting for rejection. When no one ran, screamed, or anything else, he dared to step up onto the deck beside us. Then, in the most graceful movement I'd ever seen him make, the wild thing folded his legs and sank down to the deck, sitting cross-legged.

"It has been three generations now since they began capturing us," he explained. "The power of the wixen was meant to be that of women. We gave the male children magic as well, but to a lesser extent. Just enough so that their line

might produce witches as well. Enough to help when it was needed. And yet the purpose of magic from this forest was meant to protect women, so that women could protect us.”

“Us who?” Jennifer asked.

“The entire forest,” Gyth explained.

Which made Erika lift her arm with one finger pointing skywards like a child waiting to be called on. “Question. Do you mean the trees, all the plants, or what exactly defines the forest?”

“Everything in the forest defines the forest,” Gyth said. “That is what makes it a forest. Otherwise, it is simply a lot of trees. The fungus, the insects, the flowers, the vines, the animals, and everything else you see here. All of it is us. We are the forest.”

“And you can talk to it all?” Beth asked.

That earned her one of Gyth’s strange goat-like smiles. “Yes.”

“And he’s skipping over the whole part about how his brothers were captured and are still alive,” I explained. “Never mind the fact that when the last wild thing dies, so does magic. I don’t know if that’s just the magic here, everywhere, or how that works.”

“Just here,” Gyth said. “Most witches come from somewhere else. They were given magic by other wild things in other places. Creatures I cannot even imagine. Their power connects to the promise they made many generations back. Yours, little witch, comes from this forest. From me.”

Which caught Jackson’s attention. “Okay, let me see if I’ve got this straight, Gyth.” He waited until the creature nodded before continuing. “If all wild things die in the Maybrook Forest, then there will still be witches in the world. But Syl will suddenly lose all of her magic?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“And how do we stop that from happening?” Nora asked, glancing over at Jennifer. “Because I don’t know about

anybody else at this table, but we know at least one person whose cancer was cured because of magic. What else has magic done for us?”

“I may have put a health and happiness spell into the potato salad,” I admitted sheepishly.

“Going to need me some more of that,” Jayden said as they reached for the bowl without shame. “I’m definitely in need of the happiness part.”

“I can probably make something for you before you go if you want,” I offered without even thinking about it.

Reese ducked his head and laughed. “You’re not a very good evil witch,” he told me.

“Mostly because I never wanted to be an *evil* witch,” I told him. “I mean, if I can do things that other people need, then why shouldn’t I? And if those things are as useful as Margie’s pie curing Jennifer’s cancer, then don’t I have to make sure we get to keep magic here?”

“So what do we need to do to protect the magic?” Beth asked.

“We need to find the other wild things,” I said.

“Which requires...?” Erika asked.

I flipped my hands up, not having any better answer for her. “I mean, we know the founding families captured them, but that’s about it.”

“Unless there’s something you’re not telling us?” Jackson asked Gyth.

The wild thing merely shook his head. “There is a magical trap. It is very painful. After that, they are gone. Wherever they are kept, it cannot be near nature, otherwise I would hear. It must be someplace very secure, because their trees are dying. Those are the circles Sylvia was healing in the forest. Only two still have living trees, even if those trees are not well. That means all but two of my brothers are now gone.”

“And probably not well,” Reese pointed out.

“Okay, wait,” Nora said. “Not only did the founding families capture wild, magical creatures - who are as smart as people - and imprison them. They’re also killing part of the forest in the process?”

“Well, yes,” Gyth said. “We are the soul of the forest. Wild things are the link between what is living and the power it creates.”

“Which means they’re probably in a building somewhere,” Jayden said in between bites of potato salad.

“A building the founding families own,” Jennifer pointed out.

“Well, I can look for those to narrow it down,” Erika offered. “I mean, the library has an entire basement full of all the historical city records. We have the only city building with the storage to keep them.”

“Did you say historical records?” I asked.

Erika just nodded. “Yeah, we’ve got the whole gamut. Anything from microfiche to archives of newspapers. There’s even some of those old leather-bound books that are handwritten. It’s cool, but nobody except us librarians seem to give a damn about them.”

“Wait, you’re a librarian?” I asked.

“Uh, yeah,” she replied around a laugh. “Can you think of a more gay job for a lesbian to have?”

Which made everyone laugh a little bit. I wasn’t sure if that was nerves, confusion, or just people trying to be polite. It also didn’t matter, because this might actually be useful.

“And you actually want to help me do this?” I asked, pressing the issue.

Around the table, everyone was nodding. “Sylvia,” Jennifer said, reaching over to press her hand over mine. “Haven’t you figured it out yet? For the first time, the normal people in Summerpoint have our own witch. You. Of course we want to help you keep magic, because you’re on our side. Our witch.”

“And I really like the whole idea of magic,” Nora said. “I also won’t say no to a unicorn. I mean, just so that’s out there.”

“Unicorns are a myth,” Gyth told her.

She looked at him and stuck her tongue out. “Don’t kill my dreams, big guy. If Sylvia can catch lightning in a jar, then I can wish for a unicorn.”

“Just one problem with that,” Jackson teased, “you’re not a virgin. That means you’d never see one.”

“Nor would you,” his mother shot back. “Talk about the pot calling the kettle black.”

“Hey, at least I’m dating,” Jackson insisted. “Nora can’t say the same.”

“Is that what you call sticking your dick in everything until Reese finally settled you down?” Jayden taunted.

The strange thing was that I wasn’t the only one laughing. From his place on the deck, Gyth was chuckling at the jokes as well. Then again, there was something about Jackson’s family dynamic that was absolutely adorable.

“You know what we need?” I mused.

“What?” Reese asked, his attention completely on me.

“Sparklers. I know someone brought some, and I want to see what Gyth thinks of them.”

With a gasp, Nora immediately jumped up. “I brought tons. I even got the colored ones.” And she hurried over to where the cooler was to rummage in a plastic bag beside it. “Sylvia? Can you ask your skunk if the babies are allowed to play with these too?”

*I do not know what those are,* Flower admitted, having heard the question.

So I decided to answer for her. “No, the baby skunks do not need sparklers. If they tried to carry them around in their mouth that would probably burn their eyes out. I think we can just let them chase the little sparks.”

“I am so down for that,” Beth agreed. “Because those skunks are so damn cute.” And her words ended in the highest pitched baby voice I’d ever heard.

Then Nora opened one of the boxes, pulled out a lighter, and lit the first one.

As soon as the little sparks began to shoot out from the stick, Gyth lurched to his feet. He also grew, quickly becoming both taller and broader as if he perceived a threat. Under the table, Sprig squeaked and pounced in his best defense, slamming his front feet onto the wooden boards. Flower and the other children huddled together.

But Nora simply waved the sparkler in the air before her. “See? It’s just for fun. It’s a firework, Gyth.” Then she held the thing out towards him, with the handle easily reachable. “Want to try?”

Slowly, Gyth began to deflate – literally shrinking in size – as he took the “terrifying” device. His long fingers closed on the tiny little wire handle and dozens of sparks dropped down onto him. When none of them hurt, he shrank a little more.

And then the last free wild thing began to wave the sparkler before him the same way Nora had. In the darkness of night, the afterglow left a trail that was beautiful. Slowly, Gyth’s strange face shifted into a smile. He turned, moving almost as if dancing, and was completely entranced with the childlike firework.

And then the sparkler reached the end and sputtered out.

“No!” Gyth snapped, shaking what was left as if he could restart the fireworks. “It’s broken. Make it go again.”

Nora just laughed. “They only last for a little bit,” she explained. “But you know what? I brought a lot. I mean a *whole* lot. If you ask nicely, I’ll light you another one.”

Gyth immediately thrust out the spent sparkler stick at her and ducked his head almost sheepishly. “Please? I like the little fireflies. Although it would be more fun if my new...” He turned to glance at the rest of us. “... friends would play with me.”



“And that is my cue to play with sparklers,” Jackson said as he pushed his chair back. “Nora, light ‘em up. I have a feeling tonight is the first Fourth of July our wild thing has ever had.”

“Yeah,” Jennifer said, “but I think we might be celebrating witch independence instead of our country’s.”

“I’m actually good with that,” I assured her. “Or both.”

“Seems to me,” Jayden said, “they might actually go hand-in-hand.”

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

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Nora hadn't been exaggerating when she said she brought a lot of sparklers. There were at least ten boxes, and I had no clue how many sparklers were in each box. They also turned the group of us into children.

Jackson ran around the outside edge of the deck with the skunk babies chasing the glowing lights. Jayden claimed a sparkler for each hand, and swirled them around each other. Beth and Erika were even cuter. Hugging each other side-by-side, they held a sparkler in their other hands and then tried to make up an impromptu version of the Star-Spangled Banner – but for witches. Needless to say, it was bad.

Somehow, Nora even convinced me to play a little. Although the best part was having Reese wrap his arms around me and kiss my neck, telling me this looked good on me. He meant the party. Having friends. Just a group of us finally being able to relax and enjoy life for a little bit without worrying about what was supposed to come next.

Which was great, until I woke up the next morning and realized that something did have to come next. Sleeping between Reese and Jackson was nice, but what were the chances I'd get to keep doing this if I didn't find the missing wild things? How long would my magic really stay if I assumed winning one battle was enough to convince the Grimsons to leave me alone?

So, after the guys were up and working, I sent a text to Nora, asking her if she was serious about helping me with all of this. Her reply came back almost immediately.

**Nora:**

Yep. Of course, although I'm at work until 2pm today.

**Sylvia:**

That's fine. I'm not moving fast. Someone convinced me to drink too much last night!

**Nora:**

LOL! Blame Jayden. It's always his fault.

**Sylvia:**

\*their

**Nora:**

Fuck. Right. Their. But what are you wanting help with?

**Sylvia:**

I was thinking we should figure out the most likely place to keep a few forest monsters where no one would see them. I don't even know where to start looking, but I'm guessing it's in town if they're using them.

**Nora:**

And now I have even more questions. But if you want places, we should start at the library. I'll tell Erika. I don't think Beth is working today either, so she'll want to come.

**Sylvia:**

The more the merrier. Honestly. I just don't know why all of you want to help.

**Nora:**

Duh. Magic! See you at the library at 2?

**Sylvia:**

it's a date.

The plan in place, I started getting ready. Today, Jackson was supposed to be working on the cracked mortar around the outside of my house. Reese said he would be busy in the cellar for a little while. So, once I was ready, I opened the door and called down to him.

“Hey, Reese?”

“Don't you dare come down here,” he warned, hurrying to come to the stairs so he could see me.

Well, now that had me confused. “Did you break something?”

“I most certainly did not,” he assured me. “But I would prefer to show off the finished product, not the mess I've currently made. Why? Did you need some spices?”

I shook my head. “No, I'm headed to the library to meet up with the girls. Nora thinks it's the best place for me to figure out what building in town might be able to hold the wild things.”

He just nodded his head slowly. “Yeah, that's actually a pretty good idea. If we can narrow down the buildings, then maybe you can do a spell like the one Kingsley Grimson had to track Gyth.”

I sucked in a little breath, surprised I hadn't thought of that myself. “Okay, yeah. It's a great idea. Don't let me forget it?”

“Promise,” he assured me. “Now, go have fun with your friends, and I love you.”

That last little bit made a smile immediately take over my face. “I love you too,” I told him. “But I probably won't be back before you and Jackson are gone for the night. I'll try, though.”

He just waved me off. “The whole point of this relationship is that you shouldn't have to babysit us, Syl. Go have fun with your friends. You deserve a little girl time.”

With that, I turned and headed towards the front door. I did deserve a little girl time. I simply wasn't used to being with a guy who didn't think it was an excuse to get myself in trouble. It was like all of my reactions were primed for the worst possible scenario, not the best – and these guys kept pointing it out.

My boyfriends supported me. My boyfriends took care of me. My boyfriends also trusted me, and that was why this entire relationship was working so well. It was enough to put a little skip in my step as I snagged my keys and pulled open the front door, but I paused before I left.

“Lupe, take care of the guys while I'm gone, okay?”

*I will definitely not hit them unless they deserve it, he promised. Now go. The house and I have this.*

So I left, closing the front door behind me. “See you later, ivy,” I called as I jogged down the steps. “I'm going out for a bit, Jackson,” I yelled, hoping he would hear me around the corner of the house.

“Be careful!” he yelled, quickly appearing around the corner. “We don't know if the coven is still being drained or not.”

“I figure that if they aren't, they should still be very low on magic, kinda like I was right after the new moon,” I assured him. “That's actually why I want to do this now.”

“What's this?” he asked.

“I'm going to the library to see if we can find anything about where the wild things might be,” I explained. “It probably won't amount to much, but if the coven's weak like I was, then now is the best time to at least try.”

Jackson just nodded even as he closed the distance between us so he could kiss the side of my face. “Then have fun, but still be careful.”

“Promise,” I told him. “Oh! You still haven't billed me for the work on my gate.”

He groaned and bent his head until our brows were touching. “Syl, that was a gift. We’re not going to bill you for it.”

“Yeah, but all the supplies had to cost a lot.”

“A gift,” he repeated. “Besides, it got you to use that four-letter word I wanted to hear.”

“That I love you?” I asked, tilting my head up to his slightly without breaking our contact. “I do. I also want to make sure I’m a very good witch, so I have to go because Nora is expecting me.”

“Then go,” he told me before stealing a quick little peck on my lips and stepping back. “But seriously, Syl. Be careful. I just need to say that, so let me have this?”

“I will be very careful,” I swore.

Then I climbed in my car and headed down the drive. This time, there wasn’t a single rut or bump on my journey. As I wove my way between the massive trees that lined the gravel path, I rolled down the window.

“I’ll be back in a few hours, forest. Be nice to the guys while I’m away?” I asked.

*We will treat your familiars well,* the forest replied even as the gate began to slowly swing open.

I pulled onto the highway feeling very much like a Disney princess. I couldn’t even get off the property without acknowledging all these living things that had started to feel like friends. Never in a million years would I have imagined that I would be *friends* with trees, plants, or my cactus! Just a few months ago, the entire idea would’ve been much too fantastical for my mind to have accepted.

Now this was my reality.

It was also a reality I had to fight for. And I didn’t just mean the magic with that. No, it was my perfect little cottage that had become everything I had always wanted. It was the skunks who were so much better than having a pet around.

They were people I could talk to – and they talked back. And it was the guys.

When I was a little girl, I had imagined love being like this thing I had now. Granted, I'd also assumed it would be with only one man, not two, but I certainly wasn't complaining. Still, my childish fantasies had included a partner who cared about what I thought. Someone who was excited to see me each and every time. A man that would put me at least equal with everything else he cared about – not below it.

I had everything. Margie had given me this, and I'd barely known my great-aunt. However, I couldn't help but wonder if I'd actually inherited this ability or been granted it somehow. Looking back, I got the impression my great-aunt had been testing my brother and me when we'd come to visit. I was also pretty sure he'd failed, but did that mean I hadn't?

Had I been born a witch? Had I transformed into one? I didn't even know enough about magic to understand how this entire process worked, yet here I was. So, the way I saw it, the first step had to be rescuing the wild things. If I wanted to continue to enjoy this magical experience, then we needed to save magic. That meant saving them.

Following my GPS, I found the public library easily enough. The building was surprisingly beautiful. All of the windows were made with arches, and one entire side of the building was glass – which faced the parking lot. As I got out of my car, I realized I could see two floors inside, and Erika had mentioned there was also a basement.

But before I could make it more than halfway to the door, someone called my name. Pausing in my tracks, I turned to see Beth waving as she hurried over.

“Hey, you made it,” she said, not stopping until she reached my side so she could guide us both towards the main doors. “Nora and Erika are already here. Well, Erika's working, but you know what I mean.”

“I also have no clue what we're doing,” I admitted.



Beth just flashed me a smile. “Don’t worry, that’s why we have a librarian. Don’t you know, they’re the smartest people in the world.”

“And you sound like a woman in love,” I teased.

Beth ducked her face, but I saw the edges of her cheeks begin to turn brighter. “We’re at the talking about moving in together stage,” she admitted. “We just haven’t decided who’s place to move into.”

“Are both of your families okay with this?” I asked, just because I had a funny feeling the answer would be yes.

“Of course!” Beth assured me. “Why wouldn’t they be?”

I murmured under my breath, thinking about how nice the lack of bigotry in Summerpoint was, but didn’t answer as we stepped into the chilled air of the library’s interior. Then I paused to look at the majesty of this building. I’d never been a big book nerd. Sure, I enjoyed reading a romance novel here and there, but there were so many people who daydreamed about living in a library, and I wasn’t one.

Yet this building might change my mind. The wall of glass brought in so much natural light. There were little plants growing everywhere, adding greenery and a relaxed feeling to the decor. Naturally, there were also stacks upon stacks of books set up with little signs directing people to which section they needed.

“Sylvia!”

I turned to see Nora hurrying over. Behind her, Erika was patting the air in that universal signal to keep our voices down. After all, we were in a library.

“Shh,” I told Nora before whispering, “the last thing we need is to be kicked out of here for being too loud.”

Nora rolled her eyes at me. “I think we’re the only people in here. I’m also pretty sure the books won’t care.”

But Erika had reached us by then. “Yes, but Teresa will. She’s my co-worker, and she is definitely a stickler for the rules. So, the easiest way for us to do this is for you to

‘request’ a few books from the historical section, and I can bring them up to you.”

“I have a better idea,” Beth said.

We all turned to look at her, only to find Beth smiling from ear to ear.

After her dramatic pause, Beth continued, “You should tell Teresa that the new Maybrook is doing research. Make it clear she’s a member of the founding families, and she expects to have full access to all of the town records because of that.”

“But that’s breaking the rules,” I whispered.

Both Beth and Nora looked at me like I was a complete idiot. “Sylvia,” Nora said, “you don’t understand. We have to do what the founding families say or we disappear. If you threaten Erika, she won’t have to haul all these books up and down the stairs –”

“It’s actually an elevator,” Erika told us.

Nora just waived that off. “That doesn’t matter. This is easier. Plus, if you point out that she’s one of the founding families, then we’ll get all the privacy we need. Teresa won’t ask you to come up and help her with anything, because you are currently at the beck and call of one of the six most powerful people in Summerpoint.”

Which made Erika smile slyly. “Okay, Sylvia. Threaten me.”

“Uh...” I muttered. “I politely request your services to help me with this project, otherwise I will definitely speak too loud in your library.”

Beth just slapped her palm over her face and dropped her head. “Yep, it’s official. You’d definitely suck at being an evil witch – but we’ll keep you.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY

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It worked.

In less than fifteen minutes, Erika had convinced her co-worker that the group of us were not to be disturbed under any circumstances. Then, struggling not to smile, she led us towards one of those antique brass-looking elevators. Oh, I was pretty sure it wasn't actually antique, but it had been made to look that way.

Then we traveled down.

When the doors finally opened, the room before us was everything I had expected. It was dark, lit by fluorescent lights, and made up of dusty and what looked like untouched selections of books. Sure, they were lined up just like in the library above, but these weren't made to look inviting or approachable.

"Okay, so what's the plan?" Erika asked as she gestured for us all to take a seat at a long multi-chair table.

Nora pointed to the chair at the end – or the head of the table – as she looked at me. "Syl, I think it'll be easier if you sit there. That way we can all pass things back and forth to you if we find something you might need."

"Okay?" I took the chair, but I felt like these girls had a much better plan than I did.

Beth moved to the place on my left. "Okay, so Nora's text said we're looking for properties, right?"

“But why?” Erika asked. “Don’t get me wrong, I remember the whole wild thing talk. What I need to know is what exactly we’re looking for in the buildings? Why are we looking at specific buildings and not others?”

Nora claimed the chair to my right, propped her elbows on the table and cradled her chin in her hands. “So, sounds like we need a little more background, Syl.”

I just blew out a heavy breath. “Gyth says it’s been three generations. Over and over, he keeps repeating that. Now, I know there have been witches in Summerpoint for centuries, and that is a lot longer than three generations. That makes me think hunting the wild things has only been happening for three generations.”

“Makes sense,” Beth agreed.

“And while Gyth knows a ton of stuff, he’s not very good at relating it in a way that’s easy to understand. It’s as if time - to him - is mutable. In one breath, he can be talking about when the first witches were granted their power, and with the next the trees are dying in the forest.”

“Tell me more about the trees,” Erika said, focusing my thoughts.

“On my property alone, there have to be at least a dozen of these circles where the trees are dying,” I explained. “Probably more, but Margie left me 300 acres, and I certainly haven’t walked all of it yet. From the sounds of it, there’s more in the state park land. I can’t help but wonder if there were hundreds of these things at one point in time. And if so, where did they all go? Have they really all died out in three generations?”

“Although, three generations?” Nora asked. “Syl, that’s right around a hundred years. I mean, give or take a bit, but at least seventy-five. If they killed off one wild thing a year, then that’s a lot of wild things.”

“Except that Gyth also said his brothers – and it sounds like there are two of them – are still alive and have been held for many years.”

Erika pulled out the chair on the other side of Beth, then lowered herself down into it. “That actually makes some sense,” she said. “Just look at generational trends. When the baby boomers were young, they thought resources were unlimited. Today, hardwood forests are gone, oil reserves are low, and a lot of things that were supposed to be limitless are basically gone. Why would it be any different if they were looking at the wild things as a resource for their magic?”

“But not all baby boomers are that way,” Beth insisted. “My grandparents aren’t.”

“I’m not saying they did anything wrong,” Erika insisted. “They simply didn’t know. The resources seemed limitless, so they used them as if they were. As supplies began to dwindle, changes were made. Why wouldn’t that be the same with the wild things? If there were hundreds of them in the forest, then sacrifice them as needed. Would be no different than going deer hunting on the weekend. But when there are no more deer around, the hunters start to worry about conservation issues.”

“No, that actually makes sense,” I said. “So they hunted the wild things to near extinction, and as they got to the last few, they began holding on to them longer and longer. But how long is that? A year? Ten? Like I said, Gyth doesn’t seem to have the same concept of time that we do.”

Nora furrowed her brow and began to tap her finger on the heavy wood table. “I’m thinking Kingsley did it.”

“Just because you hate him –” Beth tried.

“Actually, it’s not that,” Nora insisted. “And see, this is why Sylvia needs our help. We know the town. We know the history. We were here growing up, so we know what happened. And who doesn’t remember when Kingsley buried his father?”

“Yeah,” Beth mumbled. “The whole power structure of the founding families shifted after that. They started doing more things in town to make money rather than hiding away in their mansions.”

“And the lesser members of the founding families also started to get richer,” Nora said. “Suddenly family ties were the big deal, not just being the head of that bloodline, or however they refer to it. I mean, when Kingsley took over for his father, he changed how things were being done with his kids, making them almost as powerful as he is – so why wouldn’t he change how things were being done with the wild things as well?”

“Okay, but I have a question,” Erika said. “Dare Spellman and Zane Harkness both lost their fathers.”

“And Finn Undergrove’s mom passed away,” Beth added.

“And?” I asked, pointing out that she hadn’t exactly asked a question.

“It seems weird that some of the families live a very long and very healthy life. Most people think magic has something to do with it. I mean, just look at the mayor. Kingsley is in great shape for his age,” Erika said.

“I know Zane’s father died suddenly,” Nora admitted. “I also know he wasn’t torn up about it. Then, right after graduation, his mother packed up and moved, leaving him here alone.”

“That sounds nefarious,” I pointed out.

“Zane probably killed off his dad and his mom knew,” Beth said. “Anything for power, right? Although, I think Mari Spellman is the one who killed her husband. I remember her having bruises when she picked up Dare from elementary school.”

“Never mind the rumors about her first child,” Nora added.

“What rumors?” I asked.

Beth made a face, so Nora sighed and answered. “Supposedly, Dare is her second child. Her first wasn’t acceptable to the founding families, so it disappeared. Poof. Gone. Just like so many other people who get in their way.”

“But why?” Erika asked. “Couldn’t it have simply been that her husband was so abusive, he killed the kid, and the

founding families are powerful enough that the police won't ask?"

"Could be," Nora admitted, "but is that really any better?"

"What about the Undergroves?" I pressed.

"Car accident," Nora said. "Finn's mom got hit by a drunk driver the next town over, but he was in his thirties when it happened. I dunno, like a decade ago?"

"Sounds so mundane," Beth mumbled.

"To me," I said, "it makes it sound like the coven is a lot more dangerous than we realize. If they're whacking each other? Or even if it's possible they are? That's... bad."

"Maybe it sounds worse than *you* realized," Nora shot back. "For the rest of us, we've known they do this. Anyone who pisses them off vanishes. Sometimes, people get hurt in ways they can never recover from. Mental, physical, emotional – it doesn't matter. The founding families are evil, Sylvia."

"Okay!" Erika said, doing her best to get us back on track. "So we know things changed around the time Kingsley took his place in the coven. We know wild things have been vanishing for about three generations. What exactly are we looking for?"

"Some kind of building where they could put these creatures so they can't be in contact with anything natural," I said. "Because Gyth made a point of saying that he would have heard where they were otherwise. That makes me think of a basement like this."

"Well, I can guarantee that there aren't any forest monsters in this basement," Erika assured me. "I have been through every nook and cranny down here for one reason or another, and there's nothing but dust, books, and other literary things."

"Which rules out one building in town," Beth pointed out.

"It would have to be big," Nora said. "The sort of place where a truck could come and go and no one would think anything of it."



“A moving truck could come to my house and no one would think anything of it,” I countered. “I think it matters more that the building is solid. A place with no windows, no doors, thick concrete, and that sort of thing. Something like a warehouse, maybe?”

Which made Erika push to her feet. “Large buildings, secure walls, and I think it would need to have limited traffic. The more people who move around, the more chances someone would hear a thing like that making noise, right?”

“Abandoned buildings,” Beth suggested.

“And how many buildings could’ve been abandoned for three generations?” I asked. “I think that should pare it down nicely.”

Erika quickly disappeared into the stacks of historical documents. We saw her as she moved between the aisles, her arms growing full with various things. Eventually, she came back and began placing books and papers in front of us.

“Please be careful with these. They are priceless and not replaceable,” she warned.

And then she was gone again. For the next few hours – time seemed hard to track down here, yet my phone told me it had been a while – we scoured the pages. Needless to say, there wasn’t much. Most of the buildings that were abandoned were quickly purchased, renovated, and reopened with a new business. Sure, some were demolished and rebuilt, but that also proved the wild things weren’t there.

But then Erika brought us property records for the founding families. Summerpoint had a very long history. The town had been here for centuries. Needless to say, the records of properties the founding families had owned wasn’t a short list.

When someone found something, they set it aside. When things were ruled out, Erika took them back to refile the book or paper where it had come from. And yet, bit by bit, it felt like we were making progress. Quite a few of the neighborhoods in town were new. Not brand-new, but newer

than the timeframe we were looking at. That ruled them out immediately.

In the end, I had only a handful of options. Erika made copies of everything for me so I could take it home – since the restricted historical documents weren't allowed out of the building – and then we all leaned in to look at them one more time.

“Okay,” Nora said. “Both the Grimsons and the Redmoons still own their original farms. That means those two pieces of property have been in their family for as long as Summerpoint has been a town.”

“Could they be storing it in a barn or outbuilding?” Beth asked.

“I know the Grimsons have a mansion,” I told them.

“So do the Redmoons,” Erika said. “Granted, nothing is as big as Kingsley’s mansion –”

That caught my attention. “What? Kingsley owns that place? I thought it was Lucien’s.”

“No,” Nora said. “The palatial-looking mansion belongs to Kingsley. Lucien lives on the same property, but at the back. His house is really nice, but it’s still just a house. Like an eight-bedroom sort of house.”

I nodded, taking that in. “And Nancy Redmoon? What does she have?”

“A house like Lucien’s,” Erika said. “I drive by her place on my way to work. She’s got like seventy-five acres of land, the big house, and like four or five outbuildings. You know, the usual: a shop, a barn, and things like that.”

“Which also makes it possible,” I said. “What about the abandoned youth center on the east side of town? The records show it’s been empty since the 1940s.”

“Empty, but not unused,” Beth explained. “There’s an old pool the city has turned into a skate park. What used to be the youth center is now more like a pavilion where the kids can go and sit in the shade. There’s nothing there.”

“Never mind that none of the founding families own it,” Erika pointed out. “And if we go by that, that also rules out the old bomb shelter. I don’t even know if that place would be safe to walk into, but it was made back in the Cold War, and the city owns it. That means there’s going to be police and other city officials going there to check on it every time someone goes missing.”

I grumbled under my breath. “So we’ve basically narrowed it down to either the Grimsons’ property or the Redmoons’.”

Which was when Nora leaned back in her chair with a thoughtful expression on her face. “Yeah, but I’m leaning towards the Grimsons. I mean, if these things are resources to fuel their magic, then why would Kingsley Grimson let anyone else have control of them?”

“Maybe because it’s safer?” I suggested.

“But it’s not,” Erika insisted. “Nancy Redmoon lives right off one of the main through streets. The Grimson property is pretty isolated. It backs right up to the state park.” She pulled out a map from the stack and gestured to show what she met. “See? No one’s going to drive out there unless they were specifically invited. Considering how the founding families like to keep to themselves, getting invited is pretty rare, which makes that incredibly isolated.”

I just sighed and dropped my head into my hands. “Okay, that sounds like I’m going to need all the information we have on the Grimsons’ property. What they used to own, what they do own, how many buildings are on it, what permits have been pulled, and everything you can come up with.”

“Yeah,” Erika muttered. “That’s probably going to take me a few days. “

“I know,” I assured her. “But we’re still going to need it. I mean, all signs point to the Grimsons, so we might as well start getting the intel on their place now, right?”

“And then?” Nora asked.

All I could do was shake my head. “I honestly have no idea. I know we need to do something, but I have no clue what

that is. I'm hoping that if I can learn a little more, then I can come up with a good idea."

"And we're all here to help you," Erika assured me. "I mean, it was the skunks that won me over."

"Me too," I told her. "They're kind of hard to resist, after all."

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

---

When I got home, it was late. However, my house was not dark. Judging by the truck parked over by the old oak tree, it seemed the guys were still here. Then, as I jogged my way up the stairs and headed for the front door, the house decided to let me in. The front door swung open just before I could reach for it.

*Welcome back*, the ivy whispered in its multifaceted voice.

*You're home!* Lupe declared, sounding honestly excited.

“Hey, guys,” I replied to everyone. “Sorry I was out so late.”

The words were barely out of my mouth before my eyes landed on the two men in my kitchen. Reese was at the stove. Jackson was standing at the counter to his left. I was pretty sure the pair of them were working on something, but the sound of my voice made them both turn.

“How did your library day go?” Jackson asked.

A wave of guilt hit me as I saw the food they were preparing. Had these two been here the whole time? Fuck. I'd stayed at the library later, taking advantage of Erika's help, because I'd assumed they'd head home as soon as they finished their work for the day.

“Um...” I muttered as I made my way closer. “It was productive, I think, but what are you two doing?”

“Well,” Reese said, “we figured we could go home, cook dinner, and pass out like normal people. Or, we could stay

here, cook dinner, and make sure you were taken care of after busting your ass all day. So now do we get to hear what you found?”

Well, that was not helping my guilt at all. Not only had they stayed, but they were cooking dinner for me? I really shouldn't have stayed out as late. Damn it. I'd only just told them I loved them, and then I went off and did this?

If only I'd bothered to ask about their plans before I'd left. But no, I'd been so worried about figuring out where the wild things were that it hadn't even crossed my mind. And yet here they were, being absolutely amazing for me, even when I didn't deserve it.

“I'm sorry,” I started. “I thought you both would head home, and if I'd known you'd been here - “

“Then what?” Jackson asked, heading my way so he could steer me towards the table.

I just gestured at the stove, resisting Jackson only slightly. “You two worked all day. At least tell me what you're making so I can finish it and let you both rest?”

“No,” Reese said, flashing me an adorable smile.

Jackson just kept steering me until I was right beside the chair I usually used at the table. “Syl, sit. You worked all day too. We're just wanting to hear about it.”

“Yeah, but I didn't expect you two to work on the house and *then* cook!” I insisted.

The look Jackson gave me snapped my mouth shut. “Syl,” he said gently, his tone making it clear I was making too much out of this. “You've been struggling to get ahead with your job, keep up with cleaning the house, and everything else. From magic to recovery to battles with the founding families, I think you win when it comes to being 'busy.' All we have to do is work on this cool house with this amazing client that doesn't bitch about our schedule. So, when we started cleaning up after our work today and realized you were a couple of loads behind on laundry - and a few other things - we decided to give you a hand.”

“And now I know what’s in your underwear drawer,” Reese bragged.

“Yeah, I only did the jeans and T-shirts,” Jackson said. “But it’s all folded and put away, which means one less thing for you to worry about. We were hoping this would make your time at the library a little easier on you.”

Okay, that was sweet. Amazingly sweet. Maybe too sweet? I wasn’t sure if there was such a thing, but somehow these guys were managing to come close. Perfect wasn’t a word I wanted to use, and yet it was the best I had for this. I just didn’t understand why they’d do such a thing. After all, they’d moved back home so it wasn’t like my mess was their problem.

“Well, thank you,” I said, finally lowering myself down into the chair. “I just don’t want you to think I expected any of this. I mean, you do so much for me already and - “

“None of that,” Reese said, catching Jackson’s eye and pointing at the fridge. “And she might need a drink.”

“Right!” Jackson said as he turned to find a glass. “So, do we get to know about your research yet?”

So I started telling them about the buildings we’d looked at. But what Jackson pulled down from the cabinet wasn’t a normal glass. It was one of my wine glasses. Confused, I kept talking, but watched as he pulled a bottle of wine from my fridge and then poured a red - not white or pale - liquid into the glass.

“Where did the wine come from?” I asked, pausing my recitation of what had happened at the library.

“The store,” Jackson said as he placed it before me. “This is one I like, and while Reese has no taste, he doesn’t need to drink it.”

“Supposedly,” Reese said, “it also goes well with Chicken Parmesan - which is what I’m making.”

So not a simple dinner. Not something quick and easy. This was a fancy meal, and from the looks of it, these men had put their all into it. My eyes jumped between the pair of them



again, wishing I knew what I was missing here. It wasn't our anniversary. It wasn't the weekend. So why were they going all out?

"Okay, what happened?" I finally asked, unable to take it any longer.

That made Reese turn again. "Huh?" he asked.

I thrust both hands at the stove. "That's an apology dinner. And wine too? Did I mess up? Did one of you? Both? What's going on?"

"I got this," Jackson told Reese as he pulled out the chair across from me. "Syl, there's no apology. Not that we know of, at least. We're just helping."

"But why?" I asked. "I mean, I figured you'd both head home, but instead you did my laundry? Now you're cooking me dinner? I mean, if I'd known you'd planned to stay, I would've gone to the library with the girls another night." I dropped my head and sighed. "I didn't mean to put you two out."

"No," Reese said, abandoning the stove to turn all the way around and face me. "This isn't putting us out. This is us trying to show we're supportive. We're helping you, Sylvia. We're pitching in so you don't have things to do after looking up information all day."

"Oh."

"And us doing nice things isn't a cover for something else being broken," Jackson added. "We don't give you attention simply because shit goes down. We're not trying to butter you up when we show you we like you."

"We do this because it makes us happy," Reese pointed out.

Jackson simply reached over to trace the edge of my hand. "Syl, just because your ex was a self-serving dick doesn't mean we have to be. We still get it, but we did this because we're in love with you and we want to see you smile."

But I still felt bad. It was hard to explain why, especially since they were saying they'd done this on purpose. Still, since they'd gone back to live at their place, I felt like every free moment they spent on me should be appreciated even more. Like I needed to earn it.

We were trying to make this relationship into something real. We wanted it to work. Didn't that mean I should be putting in as much effort as they were? Yet they were the ones cooking while I'd been out with other friends, worrying about other issues.

"I was just trying to figure out where the wild things are while the other wixen are still weak," I said, hoping they'd understand. "I mean, if they're out of power, then they should be weak until the new moon, if I understand things right, so this is the best time to do it, and -"

"Did you figure it out?" Jackson asked, jerking his chin at the papers I'd brought in.

So I laid those out on the table. "All signs point to Kingsley Grimson's place," I said, and then began telling him why.

Not that our evidence was strong, but it was all we had. It also just made sense. For Kingsley to keep the things anywhere else meant someone else might have control of them. Since it sounded like the man was the head of the coven, and power was what he wanted most, then he'd likely be the kind of person to keep the wild things close.

While I explained our reasons, the facts we'd found, and the dozens of other options we'd ruled out, both men listened. They nodded, offered murmurs of agreement, but basically let me get it all out. A normal conversation, if I was honest, but as I filled them in, I realized my problem.

So once I was done, I had to ask, "Where did I mess up?"

That made Jackson's head twitch slightly. "Why do you think you messed up?"

I just gestured at both of them. "I thought you wanted to make sure I got this right?"

“We wanted to hear what you found out,” Reese corrected.

Yet Jackson was still looking at me with suspicion clear on his face. “Syl? Did your ex always make you feel like he had to double check your work, say you were doing it wrong, or things like that?”

“Uh...” Had he?

Jackson just mumbled like he’d hit on something. “And he probably also had plenty of business meetings or evenings with the guys, but when you went out, he missed you, or needed you, or made it clear your timing was bad?”

“Because it’s easy to get used to being spoiled,” Reese said. “Charlotte was like that when she had exams. She always got pissed if I was busy when she needed to study since she didn’t really cook.”

And then both men looked at me.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I mean, I work from home, so I’ve always had to do it.”

“What about on the nights when you went out with your friends?” Jackson pressed. “Did what’s-his-name finish the laundry or cook dinner?”

“Andrew?” I scoffed at the idea. “No, he couldn’t cook!”

“Think you nailed her problem,” Reese said.

“Yeah,” Jackson agreed. “She’s got the same guilty look on her face you used to have.”

“You did?” I asked Reese, trying to keep up.

He nodded, his eyes on the stove. “Yep. I was so used to doing everything for two people that when I moved in with Jackson, I got confused about him doing the laundry, cleaning the house, and sharing chores evenly.”

“Which is kinda why we decided to stay here tonight,” Jackson told me. “Because we saw you were getting behind and we wanted to help.” He leaned closer. “Wanted, Syl. See, Reese and I are your partners, and that means we want to make things easier on you, even if that’s just helping with chores.”

All I could do was nod my head to show I'd heard them. "I appreciate it. I honestly do. I simply don't want either of you to think I expect it."

"And that," Reese said, "is all I need. There's a big difference between taking care of someone because I want to and doing it because I'm just a replacement for a maid."

"Wouldn't know," Jackson admitted. "That's also why I'm trying so hard not to overstep. Syl, this is your house. I can only assume you have ways of doing things that you're comfortable with. If you just tell us what - "

"Nope," Reese said. "Don't make her manage us. That's just another job."

And now my mouth was hanging open. "That's why I always did it myself!"

"Because it's easier, right?" Reese asked. "I mean, if you have to stop, make a list of chores, then train someone to do all the things, then it's three more jobs while doing it would simply be one!"

"Yes!" I breathed.

"So," Reese told Jackson, "the best way to help is to just help. You keep your house clean enough, so treat hers the same. I promise she'll be thankful."

"I did the laundry!" Jackson insisted.

"Thank you," I told him as I reached over for his hand. "I do appreciate that. I mean, I would've gotten it - "

"Nope," he told me. "Let me be the laundry hero for the day. Who knows, maybe tomorrow I'll vacuum."

"You don't have to!"

He just grinned. "I know. I'm also starting to realize that you, my beautiful girlfriend, are a lot more like Reese than I realized. You think you have to do it all. You've convinced yourself there's no other option." He turned to look at Reese, smiled, then back at me. "And while I might not be the domestic type, I do like taking care of the people I love. I don't hate it, and I certainly don't feel put out because of it

since I lived on my own for most of my life. Just take this as my replacement for buying flowers?”

And that was enough to make me smile. “I mean, I like flowers...”

“She likes having dinner made and laundry done just as much, I bet,” Reese said.

All I could do was nod. “Busted.”

Jackson shifted our hands, lacing our fingers together. “And we know you’re busy, Syl. We can see you trying to do it all. But here’s the thing. You don’t have to anymore. We really do want to be a part of your life, and that includes the chores and ugly bits, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed just as Reese cleared his throat.

“How about plates, lazy-pants?”

“On it,” Jackson said as he hopped up. “Beer should be cold by now too.”

“Good, because dinner’s ready,” Reese said. “And I still want to hear all about the other stuff she and the girls did today.”

As my guilt faded, I leaned back in my chair and decided that it really was okay to simply enjoy this. “Oh, not much,” I said. “I just pulled a little of the ‘founding family’ shit and got escorted down into a restricted section of the library. I even threatened Erika, doing my best evil witch impersonation.”

“You threatened her?” Jackson asked, sounding shocked.

“Mhm,” I said, fighting my smile. “I said that if she didn’t help, I’d be loud in the library. I was a little proud of that one.”

The men both laughed, yet when Jackson glanced back at me, there was something soft in his eyes. “You,” he said, “are the perfect witch, Syl. Our perfect witch.”

I just wasn’t sure if he meant his and Reese’s or the town’s. I also wasn’t sure it made any difference, because the way he was smiling at me made something warm and amazing bloom

in my belly. Something I liked. Something I had a feeling I was going to get used to - but that I'd *never* take for granted.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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Jackson and I were starting to get into a comfortable rhythm with Sylvia. Since we'd moved back into our own place, we'd made a habit of spending every other or every third day with her. So far, it had always been both of us, but we made sure the other knew that wasn't necessary.

It was the days we didn't spend with her which felt sort of weird. Granted, coming home to spend time alone with Jackson was nice, but in the end, we always ended up talking about her. Somehow, that woman had just become an inherent part of our lives, and we both actually liked it.

But giving Sylvia a few days without us crawling all over her cottage seemed to be helping her as well. Every day I went downstairs to work on the cellar, I saw subtle little changes in the way her spices and jars were arranged. It didn't matter if that was new labels, restocking the half-full jars, or other little things that proved she'd been down there.

It was the weekend that sucked the most. Saturday morning, I woke up and cooked breakfast for myself and Jackson. After that, the pair of us ended up in the living room, lounging on the sofas. Sure, it was nice to take a lazy day, but my mind kept jumping back to our girlfriend, wondering what she was doing.

Man, I was so in love with her, and it felt good. It felt warm and happy and like I was a young man again. My feelings for Jackson were stronger, or maybe deeper was a better word? More solid and less new. But they combined so



well with this silly and foolish crush I was letting myself have on Syl.

Then Jackson's phone rang.

Confused, I glanced over at him just as he picked it up from the table beside him. From the look on his face, he recognized the caller, but he punted it to voicemail. I didn't even have the chance to ask who it was before the thing began ringing again. This time he answered it.

"What do you want?" he snapped. There was a long pause. Then, "No." And Jackson hung up the phone.

"That didn't sound good," I pointed out.

Jackson just sighed. "Yeah, it was –"

The ringing of my phone cut him off. The number on the screen wasn't one of my contacts, so I held up a finger and swiped to answer.

"Two Guys Construction, how can I help you?"

The voice on the other end was not one I was expecting to hear. It was Zane. "I have a funny feeling you're going to hang up on me too," he said.

"Not necessarily," I replied, not sure where this was going.

"I would like to hire the pair of you," Zane explained. "I'm going to look at a property, and I would like a professional's opinion on whether or not it will be suitable. I have a thousand dollars in cash. It's simple. Take a look at it and give your opinion on whether or not I should buy it."

"Well, currently we're booked with another client," I said, because across from me, Jackson was shaking his head. Clearly, he knew who I was talking to.

Zane just kept going. "Make it two thousand," he offered. "I also know you're not working today. How? Because I saw your truck parked in front of your house. Reese, you know this is a good deal."

"And I also know Jackson doesn't seem to want to take this job," I pointed out.

“What job?” Jackson asked, proving Zane hadn’t gotten that far when talking with him.

So I told the phone, “Give me five minutes to think about it,” then I ended the call. Setting my phone in my lap, I turned to Jackson. “Zane wants to pay us two thousand dollars to look at a property and tell him if it’s worth buying.”

“What’s the catch?” Jackson asked.

All I could do was shrug. “I didn’t let him finish explaining. Still, it’s two thousand dollars. Cash.”

“And we both know the founding families have their own contractors. They have a list of approved everything that only they use. We are not on it.”

Yeah, that was the problem. Zane clearly wanted something more than just our “professional” opinion. Then again, how many tarot cards had he left with Syl? Twice now, he’d gone out of his way to protect her. Once, he’d supposedly done magic to protect Gyth. Did that mean helping him was necessarily a bad idea?

“What if he’s trying to help us? Or maybe warn us?” I asked.

Jackson leaned forward so he could scrub at his face with both hands. “What if he has his power back?”

“But will that necessarily be a problem?”

Jackson just grimaced. “The *problem* is that I simply don’t know. He’s a part of their coven. The more he does to help the Grimsons, the higher he gets in their little hierarchy. At the same time, he’s gone out of his way to help us. When I took the last card back, it almost sounded like he might be on our side, but he flat out told me he wasn’t.” Lifting his head, he met my eyes. “So I don’t know what the right call is here. I don’t want to do anything that would hurt Syl.”

Nodding my head slowly, I woke up my phone and scrolled to the last number that had called me then pressed redial. Zane answered immediately.

“So, what’s the verdict?” he asked.

“What are you doing?” I asked back, refusing to answer his question.

The man sighed heavily. “I am looking at purchasing a property. I would like to get both of your opinions on whether it would be a good decision. That’s it, Reese. That is the extent of my nefarious plans.”

“And we both know the founding families have a list of approved businesses they work with.”

“Mhm,” he agreed. “Which is exactly why I don’t want to use them. I want your opinion because you will tell me what is in *my* best interest. Not what is in the Grimsons’ best interest.”

I glanced over at Jackson, then made my decision. “We’ll do it. Two thousand dollars, and we’ll meet you wherever you want. When?”

“Fifteen minutes,” Zane said. “I’m texting you the address. You also don’t have to wear those fancy shirts. This isn’t a pretty sort of thing – although you both qualify regardless.”

And then the bastard ended the call.

Tossing my phone on the couch beside me, I leaned back and shoved both hands into my hair. “So, Zane’s about to text us an address and we’re going to meet him. It sounds like he wants our opinion because he wants to keep this from the coven or doesn’t trust the coven to be working in his best interest.”

“Or both,” Jackson said. “And just so you know, it’s kinda hot hearing you strong arm my ex.”

I scoffed at that, then pushed to my feet. “Shoes, Jackson. As soon as I get the –” My phone beeped with the notification. “Okay, now that we have the address, we need to get going.”



The GPS directed us out towards the edge of town. While we were currently still inside city limits, we were quickly heading in Syl’s direction. Not exactly, but

close enough that it made me even more curious about what Zane was doing.

And then the automated voice announced, “Your destination is on the left.”

Jackson hit the brakes and we both turned to see little more than an overgrown gravel driveway. There was a fence made out of rusted and partially-broken barbed wire. Beyond that was nothing. Absolutely nothing. In truth, this looked like some kind of abandoned cattle pasture. There wasn’t even a rickety barn on it to count as “property,” only a few trees dotting the grassy and weed-covered acreage.

“This feels like a setup,” I mumbled.

Jackson made a deep, grumbling noise that sounded almost like a growl, but before he could reply, a cute little sports car whipped around our truck to park at the edge of the road, hanging halfway into the grass. Naturally, it was Zane who got out of it.

“Just put the truck wherever it will fit,” he yelled at us.

Jackson tossed me a confused look, but moved the truck over to the side of the road. Together, the pair of us got out and headed back toward Zane.

“Where’s the property?” I asked the wix.

Proudly, Zane gestured to the land before us. “It’s one hundred acres and backs right up to the state forest. The southernmost fence line is only half a mile north of Sylvia’s northernmost fence line. The best part, though, is that the owners have moved out of state and no one has done anything with this property in almost forty years.”

Jackson hung his head and huffed out a dry laugh. “It’s wild.”

“The wildest thing I could find for sale,” Zane agreed, moving closer to reach up and pat Jackson’s shoulder.

That gesture guided Jackson forward as the pair headed towards the gate. I followed along behind them, but I couldn’t miss how easily those two interacted. They stood just a little

too close. They moved like they understood each other. The only thing ruining that impression was the way Jackson refused to look at anything but the ground.

The property was closed off with what looked like a livestock panel on hinges. Zane fidgeted with a chain, releasing it, and then swung the whole thing open. Then he and Jackson kept walking, right into the grass and weeds before them.

I didn't have anything to say, but I could make quite a few guesses. Wild land. That was what made magic. The bonds to her land were what allowed Syl to continue to practice her magic. Evidently Jackson had leaked that bit of information to Zane, and Zane was acting on it. The only thing confusing me was how he'd gone out of his way to find land close to the actual Maybrook Forest.

"So what are you planning on doing with this place?" I asked, finally speaking up.

Zane looked back and flashed me a smile. I had to admit it, the man was incredibly handsome. He had those sharp and angular features that made women go crazy. His dark hair with those blue eyes was striking. Never mind that the asshole looked good in nothing more than a t-shirt and jeans. Then again, that could have been because his shirt was tight enough to show off every muscle he had – and he had a few.

"Camping," he told me. "I don't know, maybe I can work on reintroducing butterflies or something."

That was what made Jackson finally step back and turn to face him. "What the fuck are you doing, Zane?"

"I'm trying to listen to what you told me, Jack," he snapped back. "The entire coven is currently powerless. We skipped the ritual on this full moon because no one had enough magic to make anything happen. Your girlfriend's little spell fucked us over - is *still* fucking us over - and I'm the only one who stopped to think about the fact that she's not having a goddamn problem. Why? Because she lives in the damn forest."

“That’s not why she’s okay,” Jackson told him.

“And we don’t need to tell the enemy everything,” I pointed out.

Zane just sighed. “I’m not the enemy. I know that isn’t going to make you believe me, but I’m really not.”

“Then why are you trying to get more power?” I asked.

A look of confusion swept across Zane’s face. “More? No. Fuck, no. That’s not at all what I’m doing.” His eyes naturally jumped over to Jackson. “I’m trying to do it right. I’m trying to do something that doesn’t require hunting wild things to extinction.”

“Why?” Jackson asked.

Zane threw up one hand and turned to storm away for a few paces. Then he stopped. “I don’t have an heir to my bloodline. I have no intention of finding a wife. If I ever produce children, it will be a complete accident. In other words, my bloodline is going to die with me.”

“Why?” Jackson asked again, but something in his face had turned softer.

Zane pulled in a deep breath, and I got the impression the guy wanted to rant and flail. Instead, he grew more calm. The expression on his face vanished, leaving him looking stoic – and beautiful.

“Do you know how my father died?” he finally asked.

“In high school, you said it was an accident,” I replied.

Jackson took a half step closer to him, then paused. “You told me it was a bad spell.”

“A bad spell.” Zane huffed out a dry laugh. “That’s putting it mildly. Granted, that was probably all I knew back then. Well, so you know, things have come out in the last decade or so. Even worse, the fucking assholes have no clue I might actually be pissed about it.”

“The Grimsons?” Jackson asked.

“Yes, the Grimsons!” Zane growled under his breath, then stormed back towards us. “It’s always the Grimsons. All of this fucking mess is because of *the Grimsons*. The entire reason I’m in the coven is because of the Grimsons. They didn’t ask me. They inducted me. I was chained into their magic, powering them up, and I was barely eighteen years old. But oh, that spell gave them enough control to make sure I stayed in line. So I figured out how to stay *right the fuck* in line. Malicious compliance, right? If they want me to be a good wix, then I will be the best fucking wix they have ever seen. The sort of perfect wix who will destroy them from the fucking inside!”

The air slid out of my lungs as I listened to his rant, but Jackson’s response was different. Without hesitation, he stepped in and wrapped Zane up in a smothering hug. For a moment, it looked like Zane was going to resist, then the man softened. His arms moved around Jackson’s back almost cautiously. And when he hugged back, it looked like a starving man who’d finally been given food.

It looked like salvation.

“They were hunting a wild thing,” Zane mumbled into Jackson’s shoulder. “Lucien told my father to deal with it. The trap hadn’t worked perfectly and the thing was going to get free. They sent my father right to it.”

Yeah, he didn’t even need to finish that. I could only imagine what had happened. Gyth said the traps hurt. The creature had been terrified and in pain. Of course it had lashed out at the closest person to it. In order to free itself, the wild thing had killed Zane’s father. Because of that, Zane had become the Harkness, filling his bloodline’s place in the coven.

“So what do you want to do?” Jackson asked him.

Sniffing hard, almost like he was trying to regain his composure, Zane pulled back so he could stand on his own again. “I want to buy some wild land, make a bond with it, and learn how to control my magic in the right way. Then, I want

to use that magic to make sure the Grimsons can never fuck over any more wixen.”

Jackson just nodded. “Then I think this land will do, but I’ll ask to make sure. That’s all I can offer.”

Zane slowly nodded, accepting that. Then he shoved a hand deep into his pocket. “The asking is more than I expected. I was just wanting both of your opinions.” And he pulled out a roll of cash, holding it out towards me. “Reese, I’m not Sylvia’s enemy.”

“But are you her ally?” I asked.

“Not exactly,” he admitted.

“Why not?” I pressed.

Those strikingly blue eyes of his jumped back to Jackson, then returned to me. “Because so long as I am bound to the coven, I can make no promises.” Then he bounced the hand with the money in it. “Two thousand dollars, just like you requested.”

I waved him off. “Help us keep Sylvia safe instead.”

Zane closed the distance between us, the money in his hand still outstretched. “Take the cash. I have it, and I know the two of you need it. Hell, use it to help her. I agreed to two thousand dollars, so I’m paying you two thousand dollars.”

“And,” Jackson said as he snatched the money out of Zane’s hand, “it helps to explain away this little visit if the Grimsons find out, right?”

“You know me too well,” Zane told him.

For a moment, those two shared a look. The soft kind. The meaningful kind. I saw it, but I sure as hell wasn’t about to say anything.

Because Zane was Jackson’s type. Even after all these years, that hadn’t changed. Zane Harkness was a beautiful man, and I knew my boyfriend had once been in love with him. But while those two held each other’s eyes, there was only one thing that confused me.



I wasn't jealous.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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## JACKSON

Standing before Zane with Reese beside me was awkward as fuck. I couldn't help but wonder if my boyfriend noticed how my eyes dropped to appreciate the look of my ex. And if he did? How the fuck was I going to explain that?

Not that I was going to do anything with Zane. I loved Reese. I had just fallen in love with Sylvia. They were my partners. Zane was just old history – who'd been turning up right in front of me repeatedly lately. Sadly, I didn't hate him. Then again, this all probably would've been a lot easier if I had.

But with two thousand dollars in my pocket, Reese and I headed back home. Along the way, we discussed whether or not that land actually counted as being a part of the forest. Sure, it had been cleared at one point, but trees had already started to return. If Zane wanted to, there was no reason he couldn't plant more, but would that count?

Only Gyth would know. Well, the trees would too, but neither of us could talk to them. That was Syl's area of expertise. I asked Reese if he thought we should call her, but he said it would wait for Monday. If Zane was going to buy the land, it wouldn't be a quick thing. He'd have to get a mortgage, a deed, go through closing, and all that other official crap, so Monday would be just fine.

And yet the feel of that man in my arms was still burning in the back of my mind. Hugging him had been so easy. Feeling him relax against me had been almost natural. It was

as if the moment I stopped thinking about Reese being there, dealing with Zane had become almost an unconscious action.

I'd loved that man once. Granted, he'd been a boy back then. So had I. As teenagers, our emotions had burned so brightly, making everything feel like it was bigger and better. It hadn't been. In truth, it had just been new.

Zane had been my first lover. He'd been my second confidante, and I'd been his first. So many nights, we'd laid under the stars talking about magic and the impossibilities in the world. For that brief moment in time, our lives had been nearly perfect. We'd been living a dream, and one that could never continue. One filled with magic.

I tried to push my reaction to the man away as I pulled into the drive and got out of the truck. Silently, Reese followed me into the house, then flopped down onto the recliner with a knowing little curl to his lips.

"So, do you think Zane is actually one of the bad guys?" he asked.

I headed for the kitchen, pulling open the fridge to grab a couple of beers for us. "I honestly don't know."

"Why?" Reese pressed.

I opened both bottles, threw the caps in the trash, then made my way back to pass one to the love of my life. "Because he is Zane Harkness. He's always been good at telling a lie with a straight face. I am well aware that he will use anyone and everyone he has to in order to get his way."

"Yet he has never used you like that," Reese countered.

That made me stop in the middle of my thought with my mouth half open. "What?"

"Jackson, I've known you since elementary school. I knew you before you had a crush on Zane. I remember when you first found out he was also bi. I remember when you were worried that you only liked him because he was the only available guy in town. I also remember all those years the two of you were together."

“Off and on,” I reminded him. “We broke up a few times to date some girls.”

“Technically broke up,” Reese corrected. “But even when you weren’t dating each other because you had a girl, you still hung out with him. Wouldn’t surprise me at all to hear that you and he made out a few times without either of your girlfriends knowing.”

I just shook my head. “No, we didn’t do that. We came close, but we both have strong opinions about cheating.”

Which made Reese’s smile grow even more. “And what counts as cheating?”

I huffed, giving Reese a dirty look. “You know very well what does.”

“I also know our relationship has changed quite a bit now that we’re both dating Sylvia.” He lifted his bottle and took a sip while his eyes held me. “What counts as cheating, Jackson?”

“Lying to someone. Going behind their back. Being intimate with someone else without my partners’ understanding, approval, or permission.” I took the spot on the sofa closest to him. “It isn’t about what is done with someone else. It’s about what my partners are okay with. Just look at Sylvia. If you had a problem with me kissing her, and I snuck around behind your back to kiss her anyway, then that’s cheating.”

“But since I don’t have a problem with it, then it isn’t cheating,” Reese said.

My eyes narrowed as I watched him. He was clearly trying to point something out, but I wasn’t quite sure where he was going with it yet. This whole thing was basically a repeat of the conversations we’d had when I first told him to ask Syl out on a date. He knew this. That meant he had an ulterior motive.

So I decided to change the subject. “Isn’t the bigger question why he wants to have land?”

“Not really, no,” Reese told me. “Clearly, you told him magic comes from wild land and he’s going to need to bond to

it. That means you also trusted him enough to tell him that. Since I trust you, I have a feeling there was a good reason you shared that.”

“Because I’m a dumbass?” I offered.

Reese huffed out a laugh and shook his head. “We both know that’s not true. We also know Zane has protected Syl twice. At least twice. That means he’s not walking in lockstep with everything the Grimsons want. Maybe he’s magically bound to be part of the coven, but he’s not mentally aligned with them.”

“Okay, I can agree with that,” I said.

Reese just nodded as if he’d made his point. “And if that’s the case, then having a backup source for his magic is the smart thing to do. Zane isn’t an idiot. He knows Sylvia still has power. He also said the coven is still being drained. I don’t know if you caught that, but he put it out there. That means he and every other founding member of this town is currently magicless, right?”

“Yeah, it sounds that way.”

Reese murmured before taking another long drink of his beer. “So Zane wants to have magic that isn’t dependent on the coven. Syl has magic that isn’t dependent on the coven. Syl has already fought back against the coven. Zane got his idea after she did that – which makes me think he wants to fight back against the coven.”

“Which is also jumping to a lot of conclusions,” I pointed out. “We both know Zane does a lot of things for his own benefit. For all I know, his goal is to take over the coven and replace the Grimsons. If that’s the case, then Syl is in his way.”

“So why is he protecting her?” Reese shot back.

Yeah, I didn’t have a good answer for that. “Maybe to keep her from interfering?” I guessed.

“Jackson, what did he say when you took the card back?”

I delayed my answer with a big gulp of beer. “He said the Ten of Swords was to protect something inside.”

Reese nodded slowly. “And what was inside?”

“All of us!” I huffed. “You fucking know this. It was me, you, Syl, Gyth, the skunks, and even Lupe. Literally all of us were inside when he put that card on the window.”

Reese simply lifted a brow. “You.”

All I could do was sigh. I knew exactly what he was getting at. I was also pretty sure the hug I’d given Zane had started this. Fuck, I should’ve just kept my hands off that man. I needed to keep space between us. Zane was old news. Reese and Sylvia were my life.

“He also said he doesn’t want to take power from wild things,” I mumbled, which was a pathetic deflection. “Gyth was there.”

Yeah, except my argument fell apart just as fast. Zane had admitted to me that he didn’t know Gyth was there. The coven had thought Syl was fighting back because they were trying to force her to join. The Grimsons had assumed the monster had been somewhere else. When I’d given him back his card, Zane had been surprised to hear that we still had access to the wild thing.

“And he didn’t know Gyth was there,” I admitted, refusing to lie to Reese.

My boyfriend merely nodded his head again. “Which means all of this is pointing back in the same direction. You realize that, right?”

“What direction?”

“You,” he said. “Sure, Zane has his own motivations. I’m sure he has his own ambitions too. He also keeps dragging you into it, because I don’t think either of us is foolish enough to believe he wanted my opinion on that land. He wanted yours. He probably wanted to see you, Jackson. I’m even willing to bet that man misses you.”

“I think Zane’s love life is doing just fine,” I told him.

Reese actually chuckled at that. “That has nothing to do with him missing you. It also doesn’t mean you don’t miss

him.”

My eyes jumped up to find Reese’s waiting. My damned heart was hanging in my chest. Had I given my boyfriend the wrong impression? No, I didn’t hate Zane. That wasn’t the same as still loving him. I just knew him.

“He’s my ex,” I said, pointing out the blatantly obvious. “We broke up for a reason.”

“Mhm,” Reese murmured. “You broke up because he was inducted into the coven and having normal people know about magic tends to make them disappear. You two broke up because he was protecting you. You broke up because he still cared about you. Am I wrong?”

“No,” I mumbled, feeling like a kid getting chewed out by his mother.

“And you still look at him the way you used to.”

“Reese...” I tried.

He just held up a hand, begging me to wait. “All I’m saying is that he’s your type. Zane has always been your type. The only thing I don’t understand is why me looking at Syl that way was fine, but you looking at Zane that way isn’t.”

“Zane is old news,” I insisted.

Reese simply shrugged. “And people do get second chances.” Then he smiled. “Jackson, I love you enough that I want you to be happy. Seeing you and Zane look at each other that way? I think he makes you happy. Why would I want to get in the way of that?”

I scoffed. “That’s what I told you when you met Syl, and now you’re throwing it back in my face?”

“Pretty much, yeah,” he agreed. “Because I think you had a point. I also don’t understand why it’s okay for me to chase a pretty girl when it’s not okay for you to chase a pretty boy – and Zane *is* pretty.”

“He’s also our enemy,” I reminded him.



“He’s not our ally,” Reese countered. “That’s not the same as being our enemy.”

“And Syl probably would not be okay with me flirting with some guy,” I tried next.

“You won’t know until you ask.”

The little smirk on Reese’s lips made it clear he knew he was right. All of his calm, sensible arguments were valid. Politely and lovingly, he was backing me into a corner, knowing I wouldn’t lie to him.

“I am perfectly happy with the two lovers I currently have,” I declared. “I don’t have time for more. Yes, Zane is sexy. Yes, I still get along with him. No, I’m not looking to replace you or Sylvia with him.”

“Who said replace?”

I just lifted my beer and took another drink, knowing I’d lost. Reese was right. Fuck, Reese was usually right. The difference was that encouraging him to be with Sylvia was nothing like encouraging me to be with Zane. The man was part of the coven. He was literally bound to the people trying to hurt our girlfriend. While I might trust him, I also knew he could be forced to do things that would betray me.

He wasn’t safe. He was not on Syl’s side. Zane was a divination wix with powers I could barely comprehend. The man could warp the future, alter events, and make the entire world bend to his will. While he might not flaunt his magic, he had told me about it. I knew exactly how powerful he was, which meant we needed to walk a fine line with him.

And dating him was out of the question. There was no way I could do that and keep my barriers up with the man. No, it was much safer to keep Zane at arm’s length.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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The guys came back to work bright and early Monday morning. The best part was that they no longer bothered to knock when they got here. They both had become comfortable enough to simply walk in and get started. The downside was that I couldn't sleep through the sounds of people wandering around my house at that hour of the morning. So, crawling out of bed, I decided to get up and be productive myself.

Right now, most of their focus was on the cellar. Bit by bit, what had started out as little more than a roughly finished room with some shelves was becoming what might be my favorite place in the cottage. And yet, the last thing I wanted to do was get in their way. So, since I was no longer behind on my day job, I headed outside.

The heat of summer was upon us. Unfortunately, I'd missed my chance to plant the flowers I'd hoped to have this year, but that was okay. There would always be next year. Still, my flowerbeds did need to be cleaned out and tended. Little weeds were starting to poke up, fallen leaves had a tendency to blow up next to the house anytime the wind picked up, and if I was honest, I wasn't a huge fan of the narrow and confining little spaces Margie had made around the house.

No, flowerbeds should be big. They should be sprawling. They should have room for herbs and flowers and everything else I wanted to have. My first step needed to be figuring out what I wanted, and then I could probably ask the guys to build it.

I had no interest in them planting the flowers for me, but raised beds would be nice. That would give me a few more options for what I could put here. So, walking around my place, I allowed myself to daydream.

“Syl?” Reese called as he stepped out from the back porch.

“I’m on the bedroom side,” I called back.

I heard his feet as he made his way toward me, then he rounded the corner with a little smile. “Since Jackson is working on the sink downstairs, we thought we would tie it into the first floor’s bathroom plumbing. That means we might as well get to work on that at the same time. Is that going to cause you a problem?”

“I never use the first-floor bathroom,” I admitted. “So, yeah. Do what you want.”

Reese nodded and shifted like he was about to turn away, then paused. “Okay, one more question,” he said.

I nodded to show I was listening.

“Okay, a few more questions,” he corrected. “See, Jackson and I got a call this weekend. Zane wanted us to look at some land he’s thinking about buying...”

“Okay?” I had no clue where this was going.

“It’s just north of your property,” he went on. “It also backs up to the state park. It’s just raw land that hasn’t been used in a few decades, but it’s wild. Well, as wild as anything can be that isn’t the forest. He wants it so he has his own power source. Do you think that would work?”

A million thoughts ran through my head faster than I could even sort them out. “Why does he want his own power source?” was the one that came out of my mouth.

Reese chuckled nervously. “Um, it sounds like he doesn’t want to get his power from the wild things the coven has. He says he wants to do it right – and Jackson believes him.”

“Okay,” I said. “But would that help the coven? I mean, the truth is I don’t know what counts when it comes to magic.”

Reese made a face that was almost a grimace but not quite. “I just thought you might be able to ask the trees.”

So I turned to the trunk closest to me. “Well? Will that land count?”

Yes.

“Do I get more of an explanation than that?” I teased the tree.

*The town known as Summerpoint was all once part of our forest. It can all be returned to the forest. Magic comes from wilderness, but wilderness can reclaim what humans have taken. Wilderness also does not require trees – although we trees believe it should. The grasses would disagree.*

“So,” I told Reese, “it sounds like it would count. Wilderness is what matters.”

*But while wilderness makes magic, being granted access to that magic is a gift, the tree reminded me. Simply owning land that makes magic is easy. Being offered access to that magic is not.*

“And owning the land doesn’t mean he’ll get the magic,” I added, paraphrasing what the tree was saying.

“And what if Zane was actually a good guy?” he asked next.

“Zane?” I scoffed in disbelief.

“I said what if,” Reese pointed out. “Because he’s helped you at least twice.”

This time I was the one scoffing. “The first time, he was a rude and entitled asshole about it. The second time, he left a fucking tarot card on the window while he continued to help the Grimsons chant their little ritual. Does that really count as helping?”

“Sorta?” Reese offered. “Look, the real reason I’m bringing this up is because I know Jackson still has feelings for the guy.”

And those words hit me like a slap across the face. “I thought they broke up back in high school.”

“They did, but it wasn’t an ugly breakup.”

“But Zane is part of the coven!”

“I know,” Reese admitted. “I also know he never wanted to be. And if I’m honest, I truly believe he would never do anything to hurt Jackson.” He groaned under his breath. “Fuck, I honestly think he’s still in love with Jackson. I kinda think Jackson’s still in love with him too.”

“With... Zane.” Because my brain simply could not process that.

“Oh, come on, Syl. The guy is gorgeous,” Reese said. “I’m sure you can see that.”

“And I have known a whole lot of gorgeous assholes,” I shot back. “One of the first ones that comes to mind is Zane. His smugness does nothing to impress me. Did you know that when he gave me that first tarot card, he didn’t even ask if I wanted help? He just handed it to me and told me I’d need it. Like I was some idiot who couldn’t take care of myself.”

“But could you?”

Okay, Reese had a point. I didn’t really want to admit it, but he did. That didn’t change the fact that Zane Harkness was an arrogant and egotistical motherfucker. A beautiful, well-dressed, rich one. In my experience, those tended to be the most dangerous type.

“Okay, so I couldn’t,” I relented. “But that doesn’t change the fact that Zane was here the night the coven attacked us. Zane was the one who threatened you specifically. He helped get Kingsley into the car so they could retreat. To me, none of that sounds like the sort of person I want to be helping.”

“But what about what Jackson wants?” he asked.

Those words felt like someone dumped ice down my body. “Why? Does Jackson want to break up with me?”

“No!” Reese hurried to assure me. “It’s just that I saw them together. Syl, you don’t understand. There is a whole lot

between those two that is visible. And when I saw it, all I could think was that this isn't fair. Jackson encouraged me to ask you out because I felt that same pull. So why shouldn't he have the same thing? If he is still in love with Zane, then is it honestly fair for you and me to keep them apart?"

"That's not how an open relationship works," I said.

"It kinda is," he countered.

I just waved him off. "No, Reese, it's not. Sure, that might count for the open part, but it doesn't count for the relationship part. If you and I are not okay with him dating someone, then that's a problem."

"But I am okay with him dating Zane."

And now I felt like I couldn't breathe. "What?"

"When Zane is with Jackson, he's a completely different person," Reese insisted. "He's open, he's honest, and he stops putting on that arrogant mask he always wears. He stops acting like a member of the founding families and starts acting like the guy we went to school with. Syl, he's different with Jackson."

"And he tried to enslave me."

"Did he?"

Unfortunately, I didn't actually have an answer to that. Pausing to look at the ground, I tried to remember everything that had happened with this guy. Even on the night of the battle, Zane hadn't actively been in the middle of it. I also knew he'd broken his blood oath with Jackson, making it so Jackson could now talk about magic freely.

In other words, Zane was sort of working like a double agent. The only problem with that was it didn't mean he was on my side. From the way Reese was talking, it sounded like he was definitely on Jackson's. But would this pull Jackson and me apart? Was it pulling Jackson and Reese apart?

"Are things still okay with you two?" I asked.

Reese moved closer to grasp my arm. "Perfect," he promised. "And Jackson didn't ask for this. If I'm honest,

Jackson is resisting it. It's just that I saw them."

"And?"

"And there was this moment where they just looked at each other," he explained. "It was as if time had rewound and all of our problems had vanished. I was actually waiting for them to kiss like they used to. They didn't, but it was that sort of look. It was the kind of moment where you know two people are so right for each other, and I don't know. It's just not fair. Jackson's the one who encouraged me to ask you out. He could've been jealous. He could've said we were a couple and that was that. But he didn't."

"And now you feel guilty about it," I realized.

"No, I feel like I've learned from it," Reese said. "See, when I saw them like that, I wasn't jealous. I thought I would be. I should've been. But in that moment, I realized that if I can feel this way about you and Jackson, then why can't Jackson feel that way about Zane and both of us?"

"But it's Zane," I said, because that was the part where I got stuck. "He's one of *them*."

"Against his will. He never wanted to be a part of the coven. They inducted him against his will the same way they were going to do with you."

Yeah, that sort of changed everything. Still, I had my reservations – and a lot of them.

"I dunno..." I mumbled.

"Well, just think about it," Reese said as he took a step back. "Right now, Jackson keeps saying there's nothing there. It's just that I want to encourage him, but that's not fair unless you're on board too."

"But I thought you said Jackson had feelings for him?"

Reese held up his hand and rocked back and forth. "He does have feelings. He's trying to ignore those feelings. Or maybe it's more true to say that he's blind to those feelings. I think he's trying to convince himself it's over, it should stay



over, and so he's not allowed to feel anything. That doesn't necessarily make it true."

"So he's lying to himself," I realized, nodding to show I understood. "Yeah. Been there, done that."

"Same," Reese admitted. "I think maybe that's why I want to encourage him." Then he took another step back. "Anyway, I'm going to go start on that bathroom. Hopefully, we'll have your entire house finished by the end of the month."

"And then what?" I asked.

Reese simply smiled. "Then we can stop having a client relationship and just have wonderful threesomes."

With that, he turned and all but skipped back towards the house, leaving me laughing softly behind him. Yeah, "normal" threesomes would be nice. There was just one little hiccup in his plan. If Jackson got together with Zane, then three was not the number he would be looking for.

I also had no clue what that would do to the good thing we'd just found.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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I spent the rest of the day thinking about what Reese had said. If Jackson had feelings for Zane, then I had to figure out how I felt about that. About all of it. Was I okay with Jackson having feelings for someone else? Would I be okay with this if it was some other guy? Girl? Was my only resistance the fact that Zane was in the coven?

Well, there was an easy way to figure that out. I needed to talk to Zane. But in order to do that, I had to find a way to get a face-to-face with him. This was not the sort of conversation someone had over the phone. It certainly wasn't going to be done via text messages. No, in order to judge Zane, I needed to see his face to know if he was lying to me.

So I decided to ask the one person who would know: Nora. I sent her a text with a brief explanation of why I wanted to see Zane. Her response? His address. Well, it didn't get much easier than that. Granted, I had no clue what the guy did for a living, but I was pretty sure he had one of those jobs where he would be off in the evening.

With that said, he was still a member of the coven. Going to visit him on his turf was as stupid as him coming to visit me on mine. I could still remember the way the trees had reacted the night the coven had attacked. Most likely, Zane would have his own defenses – which meant I needed a few spells.

So when Jackson headed upstairs to help Reese with the bathroom, I “snuck” down to the cellar. Over the last few weeks, I'd been making up various test tubes and tiny bottles

filled with spice-spells that could be used in an emergency. I had everything from silencing spells to healing spells.

The only thing I still needed was a magic deflection spell for myself. So, while the guys tried to figure out where the plumbing would connect between the first floor and down here, I found one of the smallest vials I'd purchased and began making myself a necklace.

I picked the spices for it on a whim, grabbing whatever called to me. The small circular bottle was so tiny that only a few grains of each would fit, but that should be enough. The whole time, I focused on my intention: to bounce magic away from me. And then, once I had it finished, I sealed the cork on the top with solid black wax.

“So let it be,” I breathed before tying a simple black cord around it.

Over the course of the afternoon, I formed my plan. No, nothing nefarious. I just didn't want to be stupid about this. I had my protections, my weapons, and my defenses. When I left, I would make sure to tell Nora, and then let her know when I was headed home. Reese and Jackson didn't need to be involved in any of this. This was my problem.

And yet, I had every intention of talking to Zane. If that man was stringing one of my boyfriends along, I wanted to know if he was serious. I needed to see the look in his eyes when I said Jackson's name. I was *going* to figure out if Zane was using Jackson – because I'd had enough shitty-ass boyfriends in my lifetime to know how bad that could hurt.

I also didn't say anything to either of my boyfriends.

Okay, so maybe that was a little underhanded. Still, the way Reese had described it made me think Jackson wasn't the one asking about this. It was Reese trying to give me a heads-up. He told me to think about it. This was nothing more than me thinking – and seeing – on my own terms. So, if I didn't tell the guys, then they wouldn't feel like any of this was their fault - I hoped.

Eventually, the work was done. The spells were made. The kisses were given and the sweet things were said. Then I kicked the guys out and told them to spend the evening rolling around in bed together. The wicked look I got from both of them made it clear that that had been their intention all along.

And then I waited. The guys were going home, but would there be a stop to get food somewhere first? Did they need to make a trip past the bank? I wanted to wait long enough to be sure they were actually at home before I headed into Summerpoint, because explaining why I was driving around town would be pretty fucking awkward.

An hour later, I loaded up my pockets with my spells and headed out. I also decided I was a big fan of cargo style capri pants. They worked with my running shoes – chosen so I could get away if I had to – and had more than enough space for any magic I could possibly want to put on my body.

Even better, the trip there was nice and easy. I wasn't sure why Nora had given me his address so willingly, but I wasn't about to complain. Either she'd picked my side, or Zane had told her he didn't care. Regardless, right about now it was working out for me. And when I found the apartment complex, I drove around the edge until I found the sign that had the right number options on it.

The visitor space was right there. Parking my car, I climbed out and aimed for what I was hoping would be apartment number one. Surprisingly, it wasn't on the first floor. No, it took up most of the second floor – judging from the lack of other doors on this hall.

Planting myself before it, I reached into my pocket and wrapped my fingers around my best defensive spell, then used the other hand to knock. Hard.

It took a while. Long enough that I decided to use the side of my fist to pound on the damn thing. That seemed to get me a reaction. On the other side, I heard Zane's locks begin to release, and the door slowly swung open.

His white button-down shirt was partially untucked. The buttons at his throat were open. His hair was mussed like he'd

run his hands through it a few times too many. The slacks he was wearing hugged his thighs and traveled down to shiny shoes that were still on his feet. However, it was his blue eyes that surprised me the most.

They widened in surprise.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he snapped.

“We need to talk.” I lifted my chin, hoping like hell I looked strong and confident.

Zane just pulled his door open wider. “Get the fuck in here.”

I scoffed. “Really? You think I’m that stupid?”

The man didn’t bother asking me again. Instead, he simply reached across the threshold, grabbed my arm, and all but flung me inside. I staggered, but thankfully didn’t come close to tripping. The force of his movement pushed me far away from him, but not deeper into the apartment. No, he’d slung me towards the side.

“How dare you fucking leave your forest!” Zane roared, storming towards me.

No matter how brave I wanted to be, the look on his face made me retreat before him. This guy was big. He wasn’t quite as tall as Reese, nor as broad as Jackson, but he was plenty big enough to fuck me up with just his bare fists.

“Do you have any idea what would happen if Kingsley or Lucien caught you in town?” he ranted, refusing to slow his feet.

I could feel myself shrinking smaller, huddling my arms closer to my body. My hand was still in my pocket, my fingers gripping that one vial desperately, but I was scared. I’d known men like this before. I was pretty sure every woman had. I’d also seen the damage they left on my friends.

But one more step was all I had. My back hit the wall, halting my escape. Zane grabbed both of my upper arms and then shook lightly – gently? And yet the expression on his face was more pissed off than anything I’d ever seen before.

“Do you have any *fucking* idea how bad the rest of the coven wants to kill you? Are you fucking *stupid*? Just because we don’t have magic doesn’t mean we’re fucking helpless. These people have power. Real fucking power and –”

I pressed a finger between our bodies and over his lips, halting his words. Then I lifted my other hand so he could see the fragile little glass jar I held.

“You seem to have a ‘fucking’ problem,” I pointed out. He opened his mouth to reply, but I just pressed my finger harder. “And so you know, I didn’t come unprepared. This harmless little charm made of spices? If it breaks, you won’t be able to say a single word.”

He laughed once against my hand. “And you assume that’s how my magic works?”

I just smiled, aware I finally had the upper hand. “I assume you have to seal your magic the same way I do. Four little words. Without those, nothing gets activated. And if you can’t speak them, you can’t do a damn thing.”

And yet on the inside, I was trembling. Okay, that may have been on the outside too. Confrontation was not something I was good at, and I felt like I was about to pee myself with panic. My heart was racing ten million miles a minute, but I was a witch. I was *the Holt*. That meant I wasn’t weak- and I needed to actually act like it.

Zane simply released my arm on that side and then carefully wrapped his fingers around my fist. He didn’t try to squeeze, because that may have broken the jar I was holding. He also didn’t try to wrestle it away. He simply cradled my hand and took a long, deep breath.

“Now this,” he said, a devious little smile toying at the corner of his mouth, “is a very good spell.”

I jiggled my head, that nervousness making my movements sudden and jerky. “Thank you, I think.”

“And you still shouldn’t be here,” he told me even as he leaned back slightly. “I also cannot hurt you.”

“And how am I supposed to know that?” I shot back. “How many times have you threatened me, Zane?”

That made him sigh and drop both arms. This time, he took a whole step back, giving me more space. Finally, I got the chance to look around his place – and damn, was it nice. This wasn’t exactly what I thought of when someone said an apartment. This was more like a penthouse, but not quite as high in the building.

After two more steps, Zane gestured to the seating area that made up his living room. “Truce?” he asked.

“I’m not putting down this jar,” I warned him.

The man simply ran his eyes down my body. The expression on his face was naughty and filled with lust, but his eyes? They were calm. Curious. They made it clear he was putting on an act, and I was starting to think I was definitely out of my depth.

“From the bulging of all of your pockets,” he said, “I have a feeling you are loaded down with an arsenal. Tell me, are any of those the same spell you threw at us at your place?”

“The flour?” I shook my head. “No, I didn’t bring that one.”

So Zane gestured at the chair again. “A truce, Sylvia. And in order to prove I’m being honest about that, I’ll even tell you it works in my favor. You see, I have exactly no magic right now. Your little flour spell fucked all of us up badly. That means you’re safe.”

“I have a feeling it doesn’t, based on your reaction when I knocked on your door,” I countered.

“Magically safe,” he corrected. “Sadly, that is not the same as safe from a gun, a knife, or being hit by a car. Plenty of people disappear without a single drop of magic being used.”

“Which isn’t exactly making me feel safer,” I pointed out.

So the man turned and headed for his kitchen. “Well, then, how’s this? Tea or coffee?”

“It’s too late for coffee.”



“Tea it is.” He opened a cabinet and began pulling down two cups. “And here’s the trade I’m going to make. I will answer every question you ask, for as long as you ask, if you will allow me to read the tea leaves when you’re done.”

I simply narrowed my eyes. “I thought you said you didn’t have any magic anymore.”

“I don’t. I cannot manipulate the tea leaves. That doesn’t mean I’m blind. I can still see what’s there.” Then he lifted one of the cups. “So? Is it a deal?”

Reluctantly, I moved to the chair he’d indicated twice now. “Sure...” Because what damage could that really do?

Sadly, I had a sinking feeling it could probably do a lot.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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SYLVIA

It didn't take long for the tea to brew. The whole time, I sat there fidgeting in this incredibly comfortable chair. I wanted to hate the thing. It should've been stiff, torturous, or something evil. Instead, it was really very nice.

So was everything else around me. It didn't matter if that was the art on the walls or the books on the shelves. While Zane clearly did not have the same ostentatious style as the Grimsons, he was willing to spend money selectively.

But somewhere in looking around and judging him, I began to relax. Setting the little vial on the table beside me, I reached for the teacup and saucer with both hands when Zane brought it to me. His eyes flicked to my spice jar, but that was the only move he made towards it.

Then he headed to the sofa across from me and sat down to claim his own teacup. "Why did you come here tonight, Sylvia?"

I wagged my finger at him. "You said I get to ask the questions. So I want to know why you called Reese and Jackson to look at land near my property."

"As a backup plan," he explained. "You see, that spell you made? You shouldn't have been able to do it. You know too little, you're too inexperienced to cast that much magic without serious repercussions, and you're a hedge witch."

"Nature witch," I corrected.

Which made Zane's head twitch slightly. "What's the difference?"

The best I could give him was a shrug. “I’m not quite sure. No one’s actually defined or explained anything to me. The most information I got about wixen was from Lucien Grimson listing off all of your powers.”

Zane murmured under his breath. “Interesting. So what made you decide to call yourself a nature witch?”

“My familiar. That’s what she calls me.”

Cradling his cup in his hands, Zane casually leaned back into the luxurious cushions. “Sylvia, you’ve also just let me take over this conversation. So, since I’m doing my best to play by the rules of our little truce, why don’t you tell me why you came here tonight?”

Yeah, that was going to be awkward. I bought myself a little time by taking a sip of the tea. Of course, it was amazing. I could taste dozens of flavors from flowers to other herbs. There was even a hint of lemon. That convinced me to take another, and the whole time Zane waited patiently.

But stalling wasn’t making this question any easier. With nothing left to lose, I decided to just blurted out. “What are you doing with Jackson?”

“Aha!” Zane said around a laugh. “So this is a jealousy thing? And here I thought it was a wixen thing.”

“And you also promised to answer the questions,” I reminded him.

He lifted a brow rather smugly. “Lesson number one when dealing with the wixen, Sylvia. If there is no spell, don’t believe the words. My promises mean nothing. My words are empty. The only thing that can compel me is magic, and you are sitting right in the middle of my house.”

I simply tipped my head at the little silence jar. “That’s not the most powerful spell I have on me, you know.”

“Good,” he praised. “And to set your mind at ease, the only thing between me and Jack is a lot of history.”

“Which is why you put that tarot card on my window to protect him, right?” I shot back. “It’s why you called him to

help with your backup plan. It's why Reese told me all about it, because the way you look at him is so very innocent. It's just history, right? Yeah, well, I call bullshit."

"Long, intimate, and complicated history," Zane clarified.

"Still not good enough," I said.

Which made him smile. "Okay, then let me put this another way. I pined for Jack for years. The whole time, I was still in love with that man, but my induction into the coven meant we couldn't be together. Then, about three, maybe four years ago now, Reese happened. *Finally*, Reese happened, and those two are so perfectly matched for each other that while I know it means things between me and Jack will never have a chance again, I also can't stop being happy for him."

"Why didn't you just keep your relationship secret?" I asked.

The look Zane gave me all but called me an idiot. "There aren't many secrets the Grimsons don't find out. And then, those dirty little secrets become blackmail. Worse, sometimes those little secrets vanish – and that was not a risk I was willing to take."

"So you broke up with Jackson because the Grimsons told you to?"

Zane groaned in frustration. "No. I broke up with him before the Grimsons had reason to wonder who was distracting me. I broke up with him to keep him off their radar. Sylvia, if normal people know about magic, they disappear, so I cut all ties with him to keep him as far away from the founding families and our coven as possible – and then you showed up."

"I merely hired them to fix the house," I insisted.

"Doesn't matter." He sighed heavily. "See, that's the part you don't get. It doesn't matter why or how that started. Jack knew better than to take a contract with you. He still did it. Why? Because of Reese. Reese doesn't – didn't – believe in magic, so he was simply looking at the business finances. Innocent. Easy. A good paycheck that would keep their

business afloat for about another year.” Then he leaned forward. “But you’re a witch.”

“But I didn’t know that,” I told him.

Slowly, Zane moistened his lips with his tongue. “When did you figure it out?”

“When that skunk who sprayed you became my familiar. Before that, I thought I was going insane. And not long after that, the wild thing showed up.”

Because while I was telling him a lot, I was pretty sure none of this could come back to bite me. It should all be pretty basic stuff for magic, from what I understood. I also wanted to make it clear I was playing by the rules. The more I gave him, the more Zane seemed willing to give me.

“So have they given you Margie’s spellbook?”

My head immediately shot up. “Why do you want to know about her spellbook?”

“Because the Grimsons want to know about it,” he admitted. “I will also tell you something I’ve never told anyone else. Something I hope will set your mind at ease.”

“Okay?”

“The day I walked away from Jackson Waller, I left my heart behind. I tucked all my vulnerable feelings so deep into that man, giving him complete control over me, and I never took them back. It’s safer that way, Sylvia. It also means that there is no line I won’t cross to keep him safe.” Then he pressed his lips together for a moment. “I have a similar feeling about you.”

“Oh, you love me?” I scoffed. “Not fucking likely, and I’m not that kind of girl.”

He just lifted a hand, begging for a moment to explain. “I don’t mean love. I mean that urge to keep you safe. And before you go thinking that’s some kind of sweet-talking attempt to get in your pants, let me explain. The coven forced me to join. They tried to force you to join. They destroyed my life. You got away and fell in love. Don’t you get it? I can’t

change my past, but I am a divination wix. My power is to change *your* future.”

“But why me?” I breathed.

Slowly, the man smiled. Damn, but he was beautiful. I wouldn't say he was more attractive than Jackson or Reese. It was a different type. Jackson was strong and powerful. Reese was elegant and gentle. Zane? Yeah, he had that bad-boy appeal, but I knew better than to fall for that. Granted, I could still appreciate looking at it.

“Because you're the only thing stopping the coven.”

My eyes hung on his face, aware of how his gaze dropped to the table between us. To his cup, I realized. Still, this man wasn't looking at me. He couldn't meet my eyes. I'd also already seen once that his eyes seemed to be his only tell.

“What are you saying?” I demanded.

He chuckled softly, still not looking at me. “It seems you're growing into your powers a lot faster than I expected. You also aren't the idiot most of us were when we started playing with this shit. I have a funny feeling that's a dangerous combination.”

“Answer the question.”

I didn't ask. I ordered. There was no room for him to wiggle around that, and from the way his body slumped, I had a feeling he knew it. Oddly, he wasn't trying to change the subject to get out of this. Instead, Zane kicked off his shoes and then dropped his legs onto the couch beside him, sitting almost sideways.

“How did you find out you'd inherited the cottage and the land?” he asked.

“An attorney contacted me from her estate. Answer the question.”

“I'm trying,” he assured me, “but there are things I don't know. I need your side of it before you got here so I can make this make sense.”

“Okay,” I said, leaning back in my chair and trying hard to relax. “Well, I got a certified letter from an attorney, went to a meeting where I was told I was the only person Margie had willed everything to, and that I had a new house in the middle of nowhere. I had every intention of selling the property because I was living with my boyfriend at the time.”

“And what went wrong?” he pressed.

I paused, watching him closely. How did he know something had gone wrong?

“After the meeting with the attorney,” I said carefully, “I was going to go to the grocery store that was on my way home – which wasn’t my usual route home – and pick up steaks so we could have a big celebration. Well, I happened to be stopped by a red light just in time to see my now ex-boyfriend kissing some pretty little white girl.”

“I’m sorry.”

That was it. It was all he said. It was shocking enough to make me glance over, only to find those pretty blue eyes looking at me with nothing but honest concern. Well, I had gotten over Andrew a *while* ago. Dating two guys like Reese and Jackson had a way of doing that. But from the look in those crystalline blue eyes, it seemed I wasn’t the only one who’d been betrayed in my life.

“I’m over it,” I assured him.

“You’re about to not be,” he said. “Because, you see, the day we buried your great-aunt, I performed one of the most powerful spells I’ve ever done. I summoned the next Maybrook. My goal was to put events into motion that would give you a reason to run here.”

I had to set down my teacup. “You made Andrew cheat on me?”

I almost reached over to smash that little jar. I debated flinging one of the others at him. What kind of fucking asshole did he think he was? Andrew had said he didn’t cheat on me. Had he been right? Had it been nothing more than Zane’s fucked up magic?



“No, no, no, no,” he said quickly. “I changed nothing in your life. To do that may have disrupted your magic or your ability, which would have completely destroyed the purpose of my spell. All I did was bring the worst things to light.”

“The coincidence that made me see him,” I realized, feeling my anger slip a bit.

He nodded slowly. “And I did it blindly. I didn’t know if I was calling a man, woman, someone young or old. All I knew was that I needed the heir to the Maybrook power to be here, because Kingsley Grimson wants to perform a ritual that will give all the magic in the forest to his son, Lucien.”

“What?!”

He nodded. “Kingsley seems to think he’s immortal. Granted, with the bastardized magic he’s been using, I can’t say he isn’t. Still, Lucien has been his loyal little lap dog for so long that it seems he deserves an ‘upgrade.’ The Maybrook spot in the coven is up for grabs.”

“But I’ve claimed that power,” I insisted.

“And you are not a member of the coven.”

I just groaned. “Zane, I don’t even understand how all of that mess works. My parents had no clue about magic. At all of our family reunions, no one said anything about magic. I have no clue how I inherited it, if I actually inherited it – or was granted it – or why it skipped everyone else.”

He just sighed and pushed to his feet. “More tea? Because it seems this is not going to be a short conversation.”

I held up my cup almost in defeat. It was only “almost” because Zane was actually filling in all those things I didn’t know. The things I was pretty sure I *needed* to know. And more than that, it seemed I actually liked talking to the guy. He might be blunt, but he was definitely getting straight to the point.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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“Okay,” Zane said as he sat back down and slid my tea towards me. “Let’s start with the basics. The covens were formed long ago. The records from back then are sketchy, but we think it was the late 1600s.”

“Okay, that seems to match with what I’ve figured out so far,” I agreed.

“But the part no one ever stopped to think about,” he said, “was all the other children. One is always picked as the heir. Usually, it’s the oldest, but not always. For many generations, a girl was preferred over a boy.”

“And if they died?” I asked. “Because a lot of children died young back then.”

He simply waved that off. “Well, then they picked another. Back then, people also had dozens of children. However, once the current powerholder in the coven died, the position came open to the next in line.”

“Like with Margie and me,” I said, showing I was keeping up.

He nodded. “But no one wants to have six, ten, or twenty challengers for the spot. I don’t know how many kids they had. It also doesn’t matter. The point is that whoever got sworn into the position via a very specific ritual was locked into the power until their death. In the time between the death of the parent and the recognition of the child, it was a free-for-all, so most of the chosen heirs made sure their siblings were long gone before their parents neared the end of their life.”

“Okay...” That made sense. “Even back then, people hadn’t died that young.”

Zane grunted under his breath. “Sylvia, you’re missing the obvious question. Where did the other children go?”

“Okay, so where did they go?”

“To other covens.”

And that was not at all what I’d expected him to say. “You mean there are other groups of witches like this?”

“Like this? No. In most situations, women still have the majority of the power. However, our coven is currently one of the strongest in North America. I would’ve said *the* strongest, but your spell changed the balance.”

“So, these younger siblings just drive off to the next town, buy themselves a house, and go knock on someone’s door to introduce themselves as a witch?”

“Or a wix,” he said. “It’s also a little more complicated than that. Typically, someone makes an arrangement with someone else. As an example, Kingsley has paid handsomely to get his brood of children spread across the country. A small financial donation for a poor coven goes a long way, after all.”

“And the children of the rich and powerful become absolutely normal peons?” I shook my head. “I don’t buy it.”

“Typically, they all have trust funds now. That makes them rich, and being rich puts them in power. That power allows them to take over and manage the coven. Do you see it yet?”

I didn’t, not at first, but his question made me think over his words. Money was power. Magic was power. Prestige was power. It all added up in a way, and since children typically had a loyalty to their family...

“Oh my god,” I breathed. “Kingsley is trying to take over all the covens?”

“Not all,” Zane assured me. “But enough to make sure his power never runs dry. You see, for the wixen in charge of the bloodline, all of their children are bound to them in a way. That bond can be used to drain them. The more children a

wixen has, the more power reserves they have. And they use them like little batteries.”

“But I thought you said my spell drained everyone.”

“It did. Everyone.” Calmly, he lifted his tea and took a very dainty sip. “Not just the ones in town.”

“And how do you know this?” I asked. “I thought you didn’t have any children.”

Making a face, he set his tea cup down on the table beside him. Next, he ran his tongue over his teeth behind his lips. Clearly, I’d just hit on something Zane didn’t want to talk about.

“Just tell me it has nothing to do with Jackson?” I begged.

“It has nothing to do with Jack,” he swore. “In truth, it’s my mother. You see, when my father died –”

“And how did he die?” I broke in, remembering the conversation from the library.

“The Grimsons failed to trap a wild thing. It was snared, but not completely caught. My father was sent in to deal with it, and the wild thing tore him apart. It killed him, and my family was told it was a bad spell. A tragic accident. The entire coven insisted my father had given his life for the betterment of all.” He snorted in disgust.

“And yet you were still inducted?”

“Mhm,” he agreed. “There was no way around that. If my mother and I had tried to run, they would’ve hunted us down. Never mind the fact that we weren’t informed when the spell was going to be performed. It was a graduation celebration, we were told. A way to show the coven was proud of me, they said. And then four hours later, I may as well have been chained as tightly as one of your ancestors who came over on those damned slave ships.”

“Pulling the race card isn’t going to get me on your side,” I warned him. “I just want to know why you didn’t try to stop it.”

“Why would I? I was in the middle of a spell that was supposed to be an appreciation of the full moon. They had promised me nothing would be done until after I’d received my high school diploma. Instead, it happened a few weeks before. Out of the blue, with no warning, I was trapped.”

“Was your mother a witch?” I asked next.

He nodded slowly. “Which is why I told her to leave. She didn’t want to. She wanted to stay by my side and do her best to protect me, but I wouldn’t let her. I made it clear that if she didn’t leave on her own, then I would force her to do it. So, she agreed to reverse our bond. She gave me access to her magic, hoping that would keep me alive long enough for me to figure a way out of this.” He sighed. “That was eighteen years ago. I am thirty-six years old, and I still haven’t figured out how to break this curse without killing myself.”

“So why did you bring me into it?” I asked.

“Because you’re supposed to be the answer,” he said. “Something about you is bringing about big change. Every single time I read the tarot cards, that is the only thing that is consistent. Besides that, your future is almost as murky as mine.”

“And Jackson?” I asked. “How does he figure into this?”

Yeah, that made him pause. Sitting across from me, it was hard to miss the way his eyes jumped over to the bookshelf, so I looked that way. There, tucked beside the selection of encyclopedia-looking tomes, was a picture of two young boys. Smiling. Carefree. That was where his eyes had gone.

“I wanted to keep him out of it,” Zane finally admitted. “Him and Reese both. I wanted them to be as far away from any magical problems as it was possible to be while still getting the benefit of the acceptance in Summerpoint.”

“Because they’re a couple,” I realized.

“Yeah, that anti-hate spell doesn’t only protect those of us who can do magic. It removes all blind bigotry. Sure, people can still hate each other, but it’s going to be for a reason. Someone will have to do something to someone else for that

emotion to be triggered. The blind hate and fear that comes with simply being different doesn't exist here. You see, that's how we keep them from coming after us with pitchforks and torches. If it helps the LGBTQ+ community as well, then good."

"And me," I said. "No one cares about my race at all."

Reaching over, he slowly began turning his teacup. "I happen to like your race."

"Not a good pickup line," I warned him.

"Not meant to be a pickup line," he assured me. "Trust me, if I was trying to pick you up, this is not the way I would do it. My point is that your race gives you a different view of our problem. You come from people who have historically been oppressed. I'm sure you've seen racism in action. And that, Sylvia, makes you very, very different from anyone else in the founding families."

"Because I've been hated?"

"Because you haven't had everything handed to you. And when that 'everything' isn't enough, you haven't had the power or ability to force your way into getting even more. You've learned sympathy and empathy. You understand how to care, and not even Margie Maybrook cared as much about people as you seem to."

"Based on what?"

Chuckling, he lifted his tea for another sip. I was starting to think it was a scripted move. It was hard to smile or scowl while drinking. It also drew my eyes to his hands instead of his face. In other words, this man was very good at deflecting.

"Jack talks to me. Nora talks to me. Sometimes, even Reese talks to me. The one thing they can all agree on is the fact that you are nice."

"Lots of people are nice," I pointed out. "Not all of them are pushovers."

"Oh, I didn't say you were a pushover. I said you had sympathy and empathy. You can understand the plight of

others and put it above your own goals. You are willing to use your magic to help them, and if you think I wasn't worried about Jennifer when you refused to join the coven? Then you're not only stupid, but also a bitch."

"The wild thing said there was a third option," I explained. "He said joining your coven would corrupt my magic. Not joining your coven would destroy many of the protections on this town – which makes me think there's more than just that one spell. However, he said I could go back to the natural way of doing magic, and that's what I've been trying to do."

"How?" Zane begged. "Tell me what I need to do, and I'll do it. If there's any way I can break this curse on me without putting myself at the Grimsons' mercy, then I'll *definitely* do it."

That sounded too good to be true. He also sounded really desperate, and that desperation was the kind that couldn't be feigned. It tore at his voice, sounding like pain and agony. Hearing him like this, my heart went out to the guy, but that didn't mean I was stupid. I wasn't going to promise him anything. However, I'd learned so much tonight, in a way Gyth and Flower had never been able to explain.

"You need to teach me," I told him.

Both of his brows shot up. "And how the hell do you think I would explain that to the coven?"

"I really don't care," I assured him. "But if you want me to increase your power, then you need to increase mine. That's what we're doing here, right? Trading? I give you information, you give me information, and hopefully we can find a way to stop this mess."

"And then?" he asked. "When you get more power, what the hell are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to take away the coven's power. I'm going to protect the people of Summerpoint. I'm going to figure out how to make cookies that prevent miscarriages and pies that cure cancer. Most of all, I'm going to make damned sure none



of the founding families can come after the two men I've just fallen in love with and destroy the good thing I have."

"Jack and Reese," he muttered, nodding his head to show he understood completely. "Okay."

Wait, what? He'd just said okay? This man hadn't tried to negotiate some kind of deal or barter for something in his best interest?

"What am I missing?" I asked.

Zane simply smiled at his teacup. "I told you. When I was in high school, I put my heart in Jack's chest and left it there. I left all of my vulnerabilities inside him." Then he looked up, his dark eyelashes making his gaze incredibly intense. "I also never stopped loving him."

"And if you play your cards right –"

Zane's laugh interrupted what was about to say. "Do you have any idea how often I hear that shitty joke?"

"I honestly didn't mean it that way," I promised. "All I'm saying is that Reese noticed the way you look at Jackson. He also noticed the way Jackson looks at you. Now, I can't speak for Jackson, but you know the three of us are in an open relationship?"

Zane shook his head. "No, you're not."

"Yes, we are," I insisted.

"Sylvia, you're in a polyamorous relationship. Those two men are completely committed to you. Yes, it still falls under the umbrella of ethical non-monogamy, but open is not the word I would use."

"So explain to me why Reese and I decided that if you can prove yourself, then we won't stop you and Jackson from getting back together?"

His teacup tumbled to the floor, slipping out of Zane's limp fingers, between his knees, and spilling the last of its contents on what looked like a very expensive rug. The man didn't even flinch. His eyes just hung on me, and I realized

that for the first time, I was seeing Zane Harkness without any of his emotional barriers up.

So I leaned closer and wrapped my fingers around one of his still upheld hands. “I don’t trust you, but I don’t think I hate you. I also haven’t missed how the whole time I’ve been here, you have pointed out every mistake I’ve made without taking advantage of it.”

“Because Jack’s in love with you,” he whispered.

I nodded. “And you fucked up my life. You ruined everything I’d worked so hard for before I came here.”

“I also set the spell to make sure you wouldn’t regret it,” he mumbled, blinking quickly. “I just had no idea Jack would be the price the magic would force me to pay.”

“What if he isn’t?” I asked. “Zane, what if you can help me get strong enough to keep them safe? Then you could honestly have a second chance with him.”

He smiled sadly. “That’s not how it works. Syl, that’s why I tried so hard to keep you out of the coven. Don’t you get it? All spells, when broken, have backlash. The person who breaks them is the one who pays. When the spell is as powerful as claiming one of the five points of the pentagram, then the backlash is the sort that kills.”

I just rubbed my thumb across his knuckles. “So help me find a better option. Nothing in this world is black or white. There’s always a third option. Zane, help me find it and I won’t even hate you if you steal Jackson away from me.”

Pulling his fingers away from mine, Zane leaned in a little more and cupped the side of my face. “But don’t you understand? I would never do that.” Those eyes dropped my lips. “I would have to be stupid to miss out on all the fun.”

And while my mouth opened to shoot back a reply, my brain was suddenly empty. I was speechless. The strange thing was that I was also smiling.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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The moment Sylvia left, I grabbed her teacup and turned it over on the saucer I had given her. The tea spilled over the edge and onto the rug, but my maid would handle that. I was more worried about the leaves that would be left behind.

Without stopping, I headed into my work room, leaving a trail of dripping tea behind me. There, I put the saucer in the middle of my table. Those decorative designs on the surface were aligned perfectly to the cardinal directions, which I hoped would make this reading even more accurate.

Only then did I lift the cup and look at what had been left behind.

Triangles, various shapes, and tiny little symbols had all clumped together. My eyes scanned them, making sure nothing was still settling as the last of the fluid drained away. Sadly, her future was barely more distinguishable than mine.

Love was one thing she seemed to have plenty of. There was also an abundance of celestial symbols that represented magic. Then there were the threats to each of those. Her magic, her lovers, and her entire future looked to be in jeopardy, but none of it was clear!

That didn't matter to me. A threat to her love was a threat to mine: Jack. That fool of a man had to get himself involved in witchcraft. I'd told him to stay away from all of this, and now the Grimsons knew he was involved. They *knew* he and

Reese had helped her, which meant he would never be safe again, so long as the coven was still intact.

Sylvia's future might not tell me much, but it reaffirmed what I already knew. If I wanted to protect the man I loved, let alone get my own revenge, then I had to help her. Sadly, my help would only make her life worse – yet the tea leaves said there wasn't any other choice.

She wasn't going to get the option of hiding away and being forgotten. She wouldn't get a happy ending without fighting for it. Everything on that stupid saucer was a threat, and it came from all directions. So, I had to do this. One way or another, I had to figure out how to train this witch to be powerful enough to keep the man we both loved alive.

And I had to do it without cutting my own throat in the process.

Not even an hour later, I got my chance. When my phone rang, I answered it without looking at the caller. The voice on the other end, however, was exactly the one I needed right now.

“I heard you're trying to buy land,” Kingsley Grimson said.

“Yes, sir, I am,” I told him. “I've been looking at large pieces of property, and I think I found one I like.”

“And the real estate agent made sure I heard about it,” he assured me.

“I'm not exactly surprised,” I admitted. “Or did I need to ask permission before trying to increase my investments now?”

There was a long pause. Evidently Kingsley knew I was testing him. Unfortunately, I was well aware that this entire call was a test. I just didn't know if I was passing or failing yet.

“I want to know what you're doing,” Kingsley finally said. “Dinner will be served in thirty minutes. You will be here. Do I make myself clear, Zane?”

“That works for me, sir,” I told him. “I haven’t made any plans for dinner yet tonight. Thank you for saving me the trouble. I will definitely be there.”

With that, he ended the call. There was no goodbye, no pleasantries, or anything else. The head of the Summerpoint coven simply hung up on me, which meant he was pissed. Clearly, he’d heard something. I just wasn’t sure what thing, since I hadn’t exactly been playing by the rules.

So I turned my feet to my bedroom and decided this meant I should dress to impress. If Kingsley was angry, then it was time to play to his vanity. It was past time to prove to them I was useful. Even better, Sylvia had just given me the perfect opportunity. I just had to work out the details in my mind, and a long shower would be perfect for that.



Tonight’s dinner was a somber affair. While we were seated at the large, formal table in Kingsley’s dining room, only he and Lucien joined me. The father sat at the head of the table. The son at the foot. Me? I was given a seat halfway between them and then offered a meal that looked absolutely amazing.

That wasn’t surprising, given that the Grimsons’ cook was the best in town. The woman not only made her meals look amazing, but they tasted even better. Hopefully, that meant my evening wouldn’t be a complete waste. It was just as I began to cut into my steak when Lucien had to speak up.

“So, one hundred acres?” he asked, giving me nothing else.

“That’s the last piece of land I looked at,” I agreed. “The price on it’s right. I still need to look at the availability of utilities and other such things, but it has potential.”

Which made Kingsley scrape his fork across the expensive china. “And what are you planning to do with a hundred acres near the forest?”

I finished cutting a bite off my steak and popped it into my mouth. Being polite, I chewed and even swallowed before I replied. That it made them wait didn't bother me at all.

"Potentially, a mobile home park." I waved that away. "We both know I simply want the land. Our powers are tied to how much land we own. What I do with the property to make money isn't as important as what the property can do for me. It isn't like I've hidden this from either of you."

"It's so close to the Maybrook land," Lucien pressed.

I shrugged. "I'm not the one selling the land."

"No, you're the one buying it." Lucien's jaw flexed with frustration.

"Potentially."

So Kingsley slammed his fist down on the table, making both me and his son sit up quickly. "What game are you playing, Zane? You know this property will give you more land than anyone in the coven but me."

Finally, a cold and calculating smile curled my lips. "Exactly. Nancy Redmoon will no longer be able to think of herself as the second most powerful in the coven. She won't be able to rest on her laurels, offering nothing to this coven except to bask in your presence and think that's good enough. Let her fall down a peg and realize that we aren't all lazy and incompetent wixen."

"Nancy would not be happy to hear you call her lazy," Lucien pointed out.

So I turned my focus over to him. "If you're looking to impress her, you only have two options. You need to be more powerful than her, which is hard while you're still merely your father's heir. Or, you need to be more attractive than her latest boy toy. Since I think he's in his twenties, we're both at a disadvantage there."

"I'm not looking to fuck her," Lucien nearly growled.

"Enough," Kingsley said calmly. "Zane, taunting my son won't change the subject. You're making a move, and a very

blatant one.”

“Also a subtle one,” I added. “The land? Oh, that’s going to let the rest of the coven know exactly where I intend to be in the scheme of things. Now, Lucien hasn’t yet grasped the implications of what it means for him, but it seems you have, sir.”

“What are you talking about?” Lucien demanded.

I looked over at him and smiled. “Once you become the next Maybrook, how much land will you have? If our powers are tied to our land, then Grimson land won’t do you any good. Considering there’s a witch who is very entrenched on her property, that land won’t do you any good either.”

“This is my land,” Lucien insisted, stabbing a finger downwards.

“This is Grimson land,” I countered. “This land fuels one bloodline – your father. Unless you intend to cut it in half and share with him, then you’re going to need some of your own. Or you can let me continue on and see if I might find a workaround for you.”

Which had Kingsley’s attention. “What kind of workaround, Zane?”

Leaning back in my chair, I chuckled as if this was my plan all along. “Using some of my contacts, I reached out to Sylvia Holt.”

“I knew you couldn’t be trusted,” Lucien snarled.

I just lifted a hand, begging for them to wait. “You see, quite a few of the people I went to school with are the same age as that woman. A few of them actually know her. It wasn’t even that hard to set up a meeting with her.”

“And what did you meet about?” Kingsley asked.

“How little she knows.” My smile grew a little more, and I looked between both of the men. “I positioned myself as a friend to that woman, offered to explain to her how things work around here, and flirted my ass off.” Slowly, I looked over to Kingsley. “That’s one of the benefits of still being



single. Women aren't disgusted when I tried to seduce them. Instead, they fall for it."

"And your plan?" Kingsley asked before shoving a bite of his own meal into his face.

"Is working perfectly, thank you." I began sawing at another piece of meat. "I now have an invite into the witch's forest. She wants to know more. Hopefully, I'll even get an invite inside the house."

"So you're playing both sides?" Lucien demanded.

Why yes, yes, I was. More Sylvia's than theirs, but they didn't need to know that. Still, the fact that Lucien was worried about me was going to be a problem. Somehow, I had to convince them that all of this subterfuge was really in their best interest. So, as I chewed my food before talking, my mind spun, and quickly.

The perfect idea hit me just as I swallowed. "I'm assuming that if she has the Maybrook spellbook, it's going to be inside her house. I also know that when someone is invited in, they can invite others in. And since none of us can even step foot on the property without the trees destroying us, I thought this might work out in the entire coven's best interest. Was I wrong? Should I cancel my meeting with her tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" Kingsley asked as he picked up his wine.

"Tomorrow," I agreed.

The man took a long, healthy gulp. "And what exactly does she want to know about?"

"The protection spell on the town," I lied. "That was what she mentioned when she came here for dinner. Now, it sounds like she's still curious about it. I'm assuming that as a woman of color, lack of bigotry is in her best interest."

"And the wild thing she's hiding?" Kingsley asked.

"I'm hoping to earn her trust first," I admitted. "I figure there's no reason I can't teach her a few minor spells. Inconsequential things like illumination or lighting a candle. Just enough to make her trust me."

“The simple spells we can all do,” Kingsley said, nodding his head slowly. “I don’t see how that could hurt.”

“Me either,” I agreed. “But to a witch who knows nothing? Well, it would sure sound like I’m going against the wishes of the coven and helping her out, hm? Might get me inside the house. Would likely even get me into her work room - which I bet is where Margie’s spellbook is being kept.” Then I turned my eyes on Lucien. “Unless you no longer need that?”

“And what do *you* get out of it?” Lucien demanded.

“Power,” I nearly growled. “I have every intention of pushing Nancy Redmoon down a step and becoming the one your father turns to when he needs anything. I will claim my place as a respected member of this town. When I walk down the street, people will know my name, Lucien. They will whisper it in tandem with both of yours, and they will never again sneer at me!”

Slowly, a sound began to rumble in Lucien’s throat. It sounded like an old lawnmower starting up and gaining speed, but it was actually a laugh. A dry, dusty, and cruel one.

“So all this time, what you’ve really wanted is respect, hm, Zane? Being a fortuneteller is finally not enough for you?”

“It has *never* been enough,” I admitted. “I’m also not my father. I have no intention of being my father. If I have to fuck this woman to get inside her defenses, you’d best believe I will make her beg me for more. Because, Lucien, I want so much more than my father ever did. That’s why he died and I haven’t.”

“Do it,” Kingsley decided. “Get me that book, Zane, and I will make you my third in command.”

“Right behind me,” Lucien added, making sure I still knew my place.

But I simply smiled, making it look as if that was exactly what I wanted. In a way, it was. The closer I got to these two, the more ruthless they thought I was, the more I learned. Every secret they let slip was another chance to bring them down.

And I was going to destroy them all, because I had a feeling every threat in Syl's tea leaves came from this pair. Once I destroyed them, the love of my life should never have to worry again. So what if I used Syl in the process? I had a funny feeling she'd be a willing volunteer.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

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SYLVIA

When I trotted up the front stairs, the door opened for me. I huffed in amusement and headed in, calling back a greeting to the ivy. But once I was inside, I turned and gently closed the door. I swore I'd locked that on my way out, but had I? Right before my eyes, the switch to the deadbolt turned, all but answering my question.

Okay, so my house was handling that now it seemed.

"Thank you, house," I said as I turned again, aiming for the kitchen.

*Oh, not even a greeting for me?* Lupe asked.

"Hi, Lupe," I said over my shoulder. "Sorry, I just need a drink and I think there's still some wine in here."

*Red, yes, Lupe assured me. Did the meeting with the wix go that badly?*

"Mm..." I found a glass, found the wine, and put the two together, filling my glass just a bit too much to be considered polite. "I don't know."

*You don't know if it went badly?* he asked.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I headed towards the couch, typing up a text as I went along.

**Sylvia:**

Thought I should let you two know I went to talk to Zane tonight.

Nope, that sucked. Deleting it, I tried to think of a better way to break this news.

**Sylvia:**

Hey, guys! Met with Zane tonight. He's not what I expected!

Ok, that was even worse. Lowering myself onto the couch so I was facing Lupe, I placed my wine on the coffee table and tried to think this out.

I needed to tell the guys what I'd done - because Zane surely would. I wasn't trying to keep this a secret, but Reese telling me that Jackson was into Zane made it all kinds of fucked up. How was I supposed to casually bring this up without bringing that up, which Jackson would deny?

**Sylvia:**

Guys, I asked Zane to teach me a bit about magic.

Before I could overthink this, I hit send and grabbed my glass again. The phone went on the cushion beside me. My focus, however, lifted to my cactus.

"Okay," I breathed, "here's the thing. Jackson likes a wix. Reese said Jackson's not doing anything about it, but Jackson also pushed Reese to ask me out. So, I'm kinda in this whole relationship with them because of this guy. Well, not exactly. I mean, it's complicated."

*That makes exactly no sense,* Lupe pointed out.

"I know," I groaned, shoving both hands into my hair. "And that's kinda the problem. See, I'm in love with those two. Reese and Jackson, I mean."

Lupe's reply sounded like he was laughing. *I know who you mean!*

"But Reese says Jackson's in love with Zane, and if we can make the three of us work, then would four really be worse? I

mean..." I lowered my voice, even though we were alone. "Zane's hot, Lupe. You have no idea."

*So are you doing this for Jackson or for yourself?*

"For Jackson," I assured him.

*And yet you are the witch, he reminded me. You are the one with power. You, Sylvia, are the one the forest listens to. When will you do things for you?*

I tried to wave that off. "I'm not some power-hungry wixen like the coven."

*No, but sometimes you aren't hungry enough, he said. You put yourself last. You're hard on yourself, always thinking it's your fault - even when it's not. You feel guilty for them loving you. You feel bad because you like things. You came here and started to bloom in a way you never did in our other homes, so don't stop now.*

"What do you mean?" I asked.

*I mean that you are a witch, my cactus said again. A woman with power. You are not the extra, the leftover, or the glue to hold it all together. You deserve this. All of this. The power, the men, and me. Definitely me.*

I couldn't help but giggle at him. "Oh, Lupe, when did you get so wise?" But my eyes shifted over to my phone.

There hadn't been a reply. There weren't dots, but the message had been read by at least one of them - probably both. Next, I checked the time. Maybe it hadn't been long enough? Or they could be busy, although that made me wonder why it had been read. So why wasn't there at least an emoji reply?

*I think, Lupe said, you went to talk to this man because you are not opposed to him. I think you say you hate him, but you don't. I think you like him enough to share one of your men with him, which means you like him enough to enjoy him yourself.*

"I like him for what he knows about magic," I said sternly. "That's it, Lupe. I also don't trust him because he's a part of

the coven. I mean, he let me into his own place, and he kinda helped me, but he was doing that for Jackson.”

And yet the memory of him saying he'd be willing to share in the fun? Yeah, that was going to stick in my head for a while. Zane was beautiful. His eyes were distracting. My problem was that he was dangerous, and I was already neck-deep in shit I didn't understand. The last thing I needed was to make it worse.

Never mind that I already had two very amazing men. Reese was sweet and considerate. Jackson was manly and adorable. Together, they were more than I could've hoped for. Plus, there was that other thing about them: they had a healthy relationship. One of the best I'd ever seen, and I seriously wanted a part of that.

*Just promise me something? Lupe asked. Don't refuse good things because you think you shouldn't have them? You're a witch. You always should. That is why the forest gave you this power: so you can turn shoulds into dids. Also, the men are here.*

“Wait, what?” But the words were barely out of my mouth before the guys' work truck pulled up in front of the house and parked.

A moment later, the house opened the front door, granting them access. That made it easy to see Reese petting a leaf of ivy as he made his way up the stairs with Jackson following right behind him. Neither man looked pleased.

“What the hell did you do?” Jackson demanded the moment he was inside.

Reese turned back to close the door, only for it to close on its own before he could touch it. Nodding slowly - like he was trying to accept that - he scrubbed at his face even as he faced me.

“The door...”

“Yeah,” I said. “Um, the house is doing more things every day.”



“Nice.” And then Reese headed for the kitchen. “Beer, Jackson?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Jackson said before dropping down onto the couch across from me. “Syl, what the hell are you doing?”

“Uh...” I twisted backwards so I could see Reese.

“I told him you don’t trust Zane,” Reese explained.

Which all but left me in the lurch. Was I supposed to tell him about how Reese was trying to hook Jackson up with Zane? How he’d asked me if I was okay with that? How I’d gone to talk to Zane to see if I really was? Or was I supposed to lie? Nope, there was no good answer here.

“Um...” I grimaced at Jackson. “So, I heard you had a thing for Zane...”

“I told her,” Reese said as he made his way back to pass Jackson a beer. Then he took the spot beside me, moving my phone to the table. “I said this was something she needed to have time to think about, since you’re clearly into him.”

“But I’m not,” Jackson insisted.

“He’s still into you,” I said. “I know because I asked. I also got my ass chewed out for being in town - which is a whole different problem.”

“Wait.” Reese turned to see me. “You *went* there? You didn’t just call him?”

I tossed my hands up in defeat. “Yes, I went there. I wanted to see the look on his face.”

“Which won’t tell you much,” Jackson admitted. “Zane’s learned how to school his features. He shows what works for him and has been doing that since high school.”

These two were killing me right now. I loved them, but why couldn’t they make this easy? Then again, this wasn’t an easy thing. We weren’t a couple. We were a trio who was thinking about a fourth. That was serious stuff. Add magic on top of that and it got messy as hell.

“Okay!” I said, making both men flinch slightly. “Look. Reese told me you look at Zane like you’re still into him, Jackson. And you, Reese? Well, you wanted me to think about how I felt about Zane, so I did. I went to figure it out for myself. No, I didn’t tell either of you because I didn’t want you going. *I* wanted to figure it out. I wanted to see if I can trust this guy at all, okay? That’s it. I just wanted to see if I could stand to be around him or if I wanted to make a tree fall on him.”

*Literally*, Lupe muttered even though I was the only one who could hear him.

“Don’t help me,” I snapped.

“Didn’t say shit,” Jackson promised.

So I pointed at the cactus by the door. “I’m getting extra comments. Look. I wasn’t stupid about this, okay? I took spells.” Just to prove my point, I began emptying out the pockets of my cargo pants. “I had one to silence him in my hand when I knocked on the door. I just wanted to see what he’d do.”

“And what did he do?” Reese asked.

I leaned forward to grab my wine again because I needed a very big gulp. “Uh, he invited me in.”

“Shit...” Jackson breathed. “Syl, that means he can’t keep you out now.”

“And he’s coming here tomorrow,” I added. “We kinda talked. He told me about why he’s in the coven, how much he hates it, and that he’s buying land to do magic the right way. He also kinda showed me ways I’m making mistakes.”

That made Jackson’s head twitch. “Like how?”

“We agreed to a truce. Question and answer. Then he pointed out how he didn’t have to answer because we didn’t have a spell binding it. That came right before he answered.”

“Answered what?” Reese wanted to know.

“Anything I could think of,” I said. “He told me I’m here because he did a spell. When Margie died, he summoned the

Maybrook heir. I don't really know how that works, but that's why I saw Andrew kissing his side piece. I caught him cheating because of Zane's spell, so I ran here! It was right after I got the deed and inheritance. Right when I had somewhere to go. Right when I needed it."

"So you showed up to claim the power before the coven could steal it for themselves," Jackson muttered. "Did he say what it cost him?"

"You."

Those pretty grey eyes jumped up to hold mine, but Jackson didn't say a thing for a little too long. "How?" he finally breathed.

"The spell was also made to make sure I wanted to stay, it sounds like. To give me something worthwhile. I'm kinda thinking that's the pair of you."

"I am not with you because of a spell," Reese insisted.

Jackson patted the air. "That's not how divination magic works. There's no such thing as a love potion. All Zane did was put coincidences in motion that would result in us meeting her, Reese. We had the future potential to love her. She had the potential to love us. The spell simply made sure we got together so that would happen. The feelings are real. The contracting job, however..."

"Huh?" Because now he had my full attention. "No one else wanted to do it because it was on Margie's land. The Maybrook Forest, cursed forest, and all of that."

"And a spell like the one Zane cast would make them think about a horror story right before their phone rang. Some reason to be busy right before it rang. To not get the call, or whatever else. To make it so that you couldn't find anyone else except us so that we could become this."

"Is that bad?" I asked, feeling like I wanted to pull into myself.

"No," Reese answered. "So far as I care, the magic got it right. The first time I saw you, Syl, I knew you were my type."

Shit, Jackson knew it too. That's why he encouraged me to ask you out. I just didn't realize you were his type as well."

"She's a lot like you," Jackson told him. "I didn't realize I even had a type, but the pair of you? I like people who try. I like people who are very nice to look at. I also like kind, caring, and compassionate people."

"So what do you see in Zane?" I asked.

Jackson's mouth opened but nothing came out. Slowly, he let his head drop. "He's all of those things, but in the hardest way possible. The man fucking risked his neck to stop a wild thing from being trapped. He made Finn flub his lines so Gyth could get away. What is that, if not kind?"

"Devious," I offered.

Jackson simply licked his lips. "Okay, let me rephrase that to being that I like those who consider others, not just themselves in their plans. Better?"

But now I was the one smiling. "Yep, because you just admitted that you like the man. That's a good thing, because he should be here tomorrow to start teaching me magic."

Beside me, Reese just began laughing. Across from me, Jackson's eyes went wide, aware I was right. He'd admitted it. He'd even rephrased his criteria so Zane could be included. That meant all his little protests about how he didn't feel a thing for the man were no longer valid.

The real question was whether or not I'd be okay with this. Zane might be sexy, but he was deeply in love with Jackson. In love enough that nothing else mattered to him. Not my safety and not Reese's. I just wasn't sure if this might be the thing that pulled Reese and Jackson apart - and be my fault.

Lupe said I should want more. All my life, I'd worked for the safest option. This? It was neither one. For all I knew, I was making one hell of a mistake. The kind that could ruin all my happiness in one fell swoop.

# CHAPTER THIRTY

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I didn't wake up early. Not if I could help it, at any rate. So when I turned my car onto the small section of the drive outside the gate to Sylvia's property, it was almost eleven. Still morning, which meant I wasn't slacking, right?

But the gate was closed. More than that, it now proudly declared that this was the "Holt Forest." Maybrook had been removed, Sylvia's last name had replaced it, and the whole thing had been repainted. On the upside, it didn't look as if the thing was locked, so I got out of my car.

Gravel crunched as I walked over to the latch. It was a simple lever that could be activated from either side. Nothing fancy at all. Reaching for it, my hand landed on something that felt like fire. Jerking it back, I sucked in a breath and tried to figure out what had happened.

Hornets. Dozens of them swarmed out of the post where the gate was secured. One of them must've stung me! Snarling under my breath, I tried to wave the things away, hoping I wouldn't irritate them more, but I needed to open this gate if I wanted in!

And then a vine began to curl its way up. On the other side, more moved. The trees leaned in ominously, and I quickly took a step back. My pinky finger hurt like a bitch now, but that? Seeing the plants move so easily? I did not want to tempt the forest's wrath again.

So I climbed back in my car, but I didn't leave. Instead, I unlocked my phone, found Sylvia's number, and dialed.

“Good morning, Zane,” she answered, clearly having added me to her contacts.

“So,” I told her, “I can’t open your gate. I just got fucking stung by hornets for even trying.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said. “Hang on.” Then the sound was muffled like she’d put her hand over her phone. “Hey, you can let him in. That’s Zane.” A pause. “I know he’s in the coven, but I invited him. No, this isn’t a blanket pass. Just for today. Yep. Thanks!”

And the gate latch released. The hornets all calmed down and crawled back in the hole they’d come out of. Before my eyes, a tree leaned over to push the whole thing open and blackberries pressed between the bars to secure the gate in that position.

“You should be able to come in now,” Sylvia said on the other end.

“Fuck me,” I breathed. “Yep, it’s open.”

She just giggled and hung up on me. Well, here I’d been thinking I had the upper hand. I’d assumed that whatever spell she’d cast on the coven had been a one-off. I’d always heard that hedge witches were weak things who were all but useless.

This? It was not weak.

I shifted my car into drive as I re-thought every reading I’d ever done on this woman. My cards were convinced she was the bringer of change. The tea leaves said she was in danger. The coffee grounds promised she could not be stopped. While each reading I did had variants in it, depending upon how I’d asked the question, they all came back to those things, and merely opening her gate was enough to convince me it all might be true.

Then my car bottomed out on the drive. A wheel dipped into a rut I couldn’t see. The other side hit a bump right after. I wasn’t even moving fast! Still, the hellacious gravel path she called a drive was going to rip the suspension out of my sports car!

“C’mon,” I breathed. “It’s almost like this is another trap to keep her safe.”

Then again, it might be. For all I knew, Jack and Reese had designed this so the ones in the know - them - could make it through without a problem. Right about now, I should just be happy the trees were merely leaning in, not battering my car the way they had the SUVs when she’d turned them loose.

The next bump was so bad it tossed the change out of my cupholder and into the passenger seat. The one after that scraped the oil pan. I had to glance in the rearview mirror to make sure I didn’t leave it behind. My poor car could not handle much more of this!

And then the cottage was in sight. The drive smoothed a bit. The parking area was even better. I found a spot on the far side of Jack’s work truck, then got out. I felt like I needed a second to regain my land legs after that.

But when I headed for the stairs, I realized this was not going to be easy. I’d only made it through half the gauntlet. The lovely English ivy that covered her entire porch? It all rustled, and far too many tendrils of it reached out. So I stepped back and pulled out my phone again.

**Zane:**

Pretty sure I can’t make it onto your porch to knock, but I’m here.

A moment later, the front door opened and Sylvia stepped through it. Damn, the woman was beautiful. Her hair was loose and wild. The spiral curls had to be natural, and the fullness made it look like a crown around her head. Her light brown skin nearly shimmered in the dappled sunlight, showing off some very nice legs. Shorts. She was wearing shorts and a tank. Yeah, I’d just noticed the long limbs and very nice curves.

“So,” I said, holding my arms out to my sides to prove I had nothing. “I come in peace?”



“Be nice,” she told the ivy before waving me up the stairs. “Sorry about that. You didn’t exactly make a good impression last time.”

“To the plants?” I asked.

She opened her door and stepped inside, smiling back over her shoulder. “To the plants,” she agreed.

Chuckling at how much I clearly had to learn, I followed her right up to the threshold. There, the groove in the bottom had been filled completely with salt. I had a feeling Jack and Reese were doing their part to make sure that stayed full. Unfortunately, it was my final hurdle.

“I need an invite,” I admitted, gesturing to it.

Standing on the other side, she crossed her arms, lifting up her ample breasts. Behind her, Reese and Jack were standing the same way. Yeah, I should’ve expected this.

“What do you want?” Jack asked.

“I came to show her magic,” I told him.

Reese just murmured under his breath, which only encouraged Jack a little more. “Why? Why now, Zane? Why aren’t you scared of the coven? What are you doing, and do you really think we’re going to trust you with our witch?”

Ducking my head, I couldn’t help but smile. “Yours, huh, Jack? Or does that go the other way around?”

“It goes all the way around,” Sylvia assured me. “But if I invite you in once, is there a way to stop you from getting in again?”

“No. Well, not to alter the salt line. Once invited, it changes the spell. You’d have to either recast the spell - which not a lot of people are willing to burn power for - or you’d have to trust me enough to let me in.” Then I paused and gestured behind me. “The real question is whether or not I could even get close to the salt to worry about it.”

Syl’s eye jumped to the side, landing on something behind me, and then she smiled. “Okay. Come in, Zane.” And she stepped back.

“The ivy?” Reese asked.

“The ivy, the trees, the drive, and more,” she told him. “The oak said the risk is worth it. Besides, he came. I wasn’t sure he would.”

I pushed out a tense breath, unaware I’d even been braced against this meeting, and then stepped over the threshold. The lights inside were off but the place was filled with natural light. Light colors and an open space greeted me, looking surprisingly modern.

Then pain.

“Yeow!” I gasped, doubling over to grab at my thigh.

That was the only reason I saw the next attack, but I didn’t move in time to dodge it. Right beside the door, a plain-looking cactus whacked me, leaving the thorns lodged not only in my clothes, but also in my skin.

“Lupe!” Syl hissed. “That’s enough.”

There was a pause, which gave Jack enough time to move forward and help me limp deeper into the house.

“I don’t care! I asked him in!” Syl snapped. “Are you seriously going to smack everyone you don’t know? How the fuck am I going to get people to come over if you do that?” The look on Syl’s face was appalled. “No! That’s not how it works. I have a damned front door for a reason. I mean, unless you want me to put you at the back? Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“What the fuck?” I asked Jack as he helped me onto the couch.

“Lupe’s the cactus,” he explained. “He’s been her house plant since college. He just got a bigger pot, and now he thinks it’s his job to protect the house. Plus, you’re with the evil coven, and that makes you a threat by default.”

“A cactus?” I asked, trying to wrap my mind around all of this.

Reese moved in from the other side with his phone’s flashlight on and holding a pair of tweezers. “All the plants in

the forest talk to her, so the one-sided conversation thing is somewhat normal.”

Then he began plucking.

“And we’re going to need a spell for removing cactus thorns,” I mumbled.

“I’m so sorry,” Syl said as she joined us. “I mean, Lupe knows you were here for the battle, and the forest fucking hates you, but I didn’t intend for any of this to - “

“Stop,” I told her while Reese continued to find the sharp little things poking me.

Her head snapped up and the most amazing green eyes widened. “What?”

They weren’t olive green. Close, but that color wasn’t quite right. Emerald or pine were definitely out. No, this was a muted shade of green that was lighter, almost hazel but not quite. Definitely green, but much more natural than that - and very beautiful.

“This is your home,” I told her, trying to ignore how damned good she looked dressed casually like this. Never mind Jack kneeling beside me. “This is the one place you are supposed to be in charge and in control. Do not apologize for your defenses. When the next wix gets whacked by that... *thing!* You just tell him he should’ve expected you to be prepared.”

“But...”

I slowly shook my head. “Home, Sylvia. It’s where we need to be safe. It is the place we want all others to fear invading. You pushed the Grimsons out with some concoction that drained us all for over a month. That was a defense. This is too, and I’m the enemy.”

But it was Jack who spoke up next. “So why are you here?”

“Mm... right about now, I’m really wondering if this was a bad idea,” I told him. “I’m also starting to think I need to learn a lot more about hedge witches.”

“Why?” Reese asked as he plucked another thorn.

“Because I have always been told that witches who work with spices and baking are limited,” I told all three of them. “Their power is weak, nothing to worry about, and easy to control.” I lifted a hand before they could jump on me for that. “Same for divination. We’re just fortunetellers, right?”

“Like fuck you are,” Jack huffed, pushing to his feet. “But what do you really want here, Zane? You’re inside. Isn’t that enough?”

I let my eyes drift back to Sylvia. “No, I’m starting to realize it isn’t. See, I’ve been looking for a way to stop all of this, and I assumed she was just a way to hold off the inevitable end. Now, I think I’ve misread all those fortunes, and badly.”

“What fortunes?” Syl asked.

“The ones I did to try to understand you.”

Her eyes narrowed. “And what did they say?”

“You don’t want to know your future,” Jack quickly told her. “Don’t ask him that, Syl. Sometimes he sees things and you can’t forget it.”

“In this case, it’s safe,” I assured him. “Over and over, it’s been confusing and murky, but that’s because I was asking the wrong question. I wanted to know what she would do. How she would fit into the coven. If she was going to be in my way. But last night she stayed long enough to have a cup of tea.”

“Two, actually,” she corrected.

I smiled. “Mhm, and the leaves say you are surrounded by love. I assumed that was Jack and Reese, but I think I was wrong. It’s all of this. The entire forest loves you. But that love is threatened from all sides, yet the love is much stronger than the threats.”

“What about the rest?” Jack pressed.

“A force of change. Dangerous, but not to me. Lovers. Death. Those are common. So are all the most powerful cards

in the major arcana. If I don't look at each reading, but rather interpret all of it as a single glimpse of her?" I paused.

"Then what?" Reese pressed.

"Then I'm not sure I'm the one to stop the coven. I think she is, so I need to teach her everything there is to know about magic." I pulled in a breath. "And I have to ask, just because it will make that easier. Syl, do you know where Margie's spellbook is?"

Jack growled under his breath. Reese tensed. Syl simply shook her head. "I don't think she actually had one, Zane. If she did, it isn't here. We've torn this house apart and found nothing. There's no magical spellbook to fix all our problems and teach me what I need to know."

"So what do you need to know?" I asked. "Because your spells aren't weak."

"I need to know *about* magic," she told me. "About covens and history and everything else. Spells? Those are easy enough. It's all about the intention, after all. But understanding why the coven attacked me? *That* is what I need."

"Lucky for you, that is one thing I know all about," I promised. "So, how about we do this in your work room?"

"How do you know she has one?" Reese asked.

"Because we all do," I said. "We need a place we can leave a spell half-finished and not need to worry about it. She has one. It may not be the best, but I'm sure she's already fallen into the habit, because all wixen do."

"It's the cellar," Syl said. "Come."

Jack just chuckled. "So you know, Zane, we'll stay up here, but she's still not defenseless, so don't fuck up."

"Promise," I assured him. "She's safe from me." Everyone here was. They just didn't believe me yet.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

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I led Zane down the stairs to the cellar. He followed slowly, looking around as we descended. When we reached the bottom, he murmured in a way that made me think he approved of my work space, and then he began looking around.

“Seems Jackson paid more attention to me than I thought,” he said, gesturing upwards.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The recessed lights are in a pentagram, Syl. That’s a protective symbol for a witch.” Then he trailed a finger along the edge of a shelf. “And you seem to have more spices than your great-aunt ever did.”

“I kinda bought in bulk,” I admitted. “I thought it was for cooking.”

“Mm...” He continued on, walking past the sink. “Useful.”

I moved to the couch and claimed one end. “The spices tend to get a little messy, so they’re working on plumbing that for me.”

“Good idea.” He paused to gesture to the other end of the couch as if asking for permission to sit.

“Please,” I said, tipping my head that way to make it clear he was invited.

So Zane eased himself down with a polite space between us. “Sylvia, I just have one question. You seem to have your spell components figured out. I’ve already seen more magic

around you than anyone else in the coven. That spell you hit us with when we attacked was potent. All signs point to you knowing your magic well, but you say you don't have Margie's spellbook."

"What's with the spellbook?" I asked. "And why are you so sure she had one?"

"Every wixen has one," he explained. "It's where we record our good ideas. Usually, it's passed from parent to child as a way to teach us. Giving us a leg up on what works and what doesn't."

"But Margie didn't have a spellbook," I told him again. "At least not one I've found. I mean, maybe she took it when the Grimsons moved her to their place?"

"She didn't."

That made me look up, meeting his eyes by accident. "What am I missing, Zane?"

"The Grimsons want her spellbook," he explained. "Kingsley intends to make Lucien the next Maybrook. Lucien knows nothing about hedge witchery. He *needs* that spellbook to have a chance of using the new magic they want to give him."

"He can't have my magic!" I hissed.

"It won't take yours," he assured me. "It will merely make him a hedge witch to replace Margie in *our* coven. Since you aren't in our coven, it won't affect you at all." Then he grunted softly. "It will, however, give Kingsley access to all the bloodlines again, increasing his power."

"Even if Lucien doesn't have a spellbook to learn from?" I asked.

Zane nodded slowly. "From the sounds of it, yes. Then again, Lucien's just a magical battery for his daddy right now. Nothing would change except the flow of power. If Lucien became the head of a line, he'd get more - and thus Kingsley would get more."

"We have to stop that," I insisted.



“No, I do,” he corrected. “You won’t be there. I’m already working on a plan to postpone it as long as possible. You, Sylvia, need to fill in the holes I have so I can know what I’m working with. How did you learn magic?”

“My familiar taught me.”

He sat up a bit more. “The skunk?”

“Flower. Yes.”

“A skunk taught you how to make the spell that kicked our asses and chased us out of the forest?”

“Yes,” I said again. “Well, mostly. I mean, the wild thing said it’s all about intention, so I was kinda winging it.”

“Fuck.” He pushed his hand across his mouth, looking more stunned than I expected. “Okay, so your familiar can feel magic, right?”

“I...” I grimaced. “I honestly have no idea.”

“Then how did she teach you to ground and reach your source?”

I shook my head, those words meaning nothing to me. “What?”

“To draw magic into yourself,” he explained.

“I don’t... Zane, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh boy,” he muttered, standing up just to walk to one of my shelves.

There, he pulled down a simple white candle. Next, he found a pan I used to catch the overflow from filling my jars with spices. What he didn’t reach for was the grill lighter that was sitting in plain sight. Instead, the man moved to the center of the room and lowered himself down to sit on the rug.

“Come here,” he ordered, offering one of those seductive smiles to go with it.

“Okay?” I got up and moved to stand before him.

“Sit. We’re going to see if you know this.” He chuckled once. “I mean, I am supposed to be teaching you magic, right?”

“And here I thought you were just interested in seeing Jackson a little more,” I joked as I eased my body down to sit on the floor.

But something on Zane’s face changed. “I don’t want to cause problems for him, Syl. Reese is so good for him. Hell, you are too. He seems happy. I like seeing it - even when that’s him trying to protect you from the big evil wix in the room.” He pointed to his chest so I could be sure who he meant.

“You mean when Reese was removing your cactus needles?” I asked.

He nodded slowly, setting the pan between us. “And Reese casually plucking those out without needing to be asked.” Zane chuckled once. “He’s a good man. A gentle one, but not a weak one. He’s always made Jack just a little less reckless.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty amazing together,” I agreed.

“So how do you fit in?” he asked. “And no, I don’t mean in the middle.”

I just shrugged. “I’m not sure. I figured this was a rebound for me. I mean, after Andrew cheated, I didn’t really have anything to lose, and the offer was too good to be true.”

“But it is true,” he countered.

“And I tried so hard not to catch any feelings,” I admitted. “I just kept it shallow. Sex, dinner, a couple of friends who are an absolutely amazing couple. It was casual, right? Until it wasn’t. And then I was their girlfriend, but I kinda figured it wouldn’t last, yet everything is so easy with them. There’s no fighting, no stress or complications, you know?”

“And lemme guess, you think passion means clashing, hm?”

This time I was the one huffing a single laugh. “Why am I even talking to you about this?”

“Because we’ve both been naked with the same man,” he said. “We’ve both learned how nice it is to have someone willing to hold you up and make you feel like you can be more - who never asks for anything in return. It is easy. It’s also really nice. But here’s the thing. Jack doesn’t do that often. He doesn’t let people in.”

“But he let both of us in,” I pointed out.

Zane nodded. “He did. And Reese. Nora, to a point. His family. See, Jack puts up walls to keep out those who will use him. When he realizes someone isn’t like that, he lets them in.”

“It’s a very short list,” I said, proving I understood.

Zane smiled and nodded. “Exactly. Reese? I don’t know him as well. I know he’s loyal, honest, and very intelligent. I know he’s sexy, although I have a feeling the only man he wants to get naked with is Jack.”

“Probably,” I agreed. “Or someone else he trusts. I think trust is a big thing for Reese when it comes to other men.”

“Because in his family, men are not often kind,” Zane explained. “I wouldn’t say his father is abusive, but the man is definitely strict. He also has standards that are impossible to meet, making it just as impossible for Reese to ever make him proud. Reese compensated by being overly kind to everyone else. That doesn’t make him a pushover, though. He’s nice. He’s polite. He’s also very willing to walk away from most things. Not you, it seems.”

“I hope not,” I admitted. “Because the truth is that I’m...” I blew out a breath. “I don’t even know. I feel this thing for them, and it’s amazing. One part excitement, two parts passion, and just comfortable. Like I’ve known them all my life, you know? Like this is where I belong. It’s kinda like how I moved here and it just felt like home. Jackson and Reese give me that same feeling.”

“Good.” Then Zane set the candle down in the middle of the metal pan. “That feeling? The one you call ‘home’? Focus on it. When you find it, use that to light the candle.”

“Like, just wish it on fire?” I scoffed. “In case you missed it, I work with spices, not fire.”

“Every wixen in the world can do this,” he assured me. “All you’re doing is releasing a small amount of pure magic onto the wick. That magic is friction. The friction is hot. The wick lights. It’s nothing more than a spark of power. Just a way to be sure you have access and control of it.”

“Okay,” I breathed, trying to wrap myself up in the happy feeling of my boyfriends, my house, and my wonderful forest.

When I thought I had it, I pushed, staring hard at the wick. Then I pushed some more. Harder, even. I tried everything I could think of until I was holding my breath and moaning in my throat.

“Enough!” Zane snapped.

I looked up, not surprised at all to see the man smirking at me. Yet it wasn’t the sort of look that made me feel bad. More like this was amusing, and also somehow what he expected. Like he knew a little something I didn’t.

“You, little witch,” he teased, “need to learn some basics. Tell me, did that spell kick your ass?”

“Yeah...”

He nodded. “Because you used yourself up. You didn’t pull in magic first. You just used what you carry around naturally, leaving your body empty.” Then he lifted his hand and wagged a finger like he was scolding a child. “Not the way you should work. You’re too strong for that.”

“I...” Huffing in frustration, I leaned back, using my arms to brace me up. “Zane, I’m winging this! I told you, I didn’t know magic existed until I got here.”

“And yet you’re doing so very well at it,” he purred. “You, Sylvia, are a natural. You just skipped over a few things to protect *you*. Not to help your magic. Not to make you stronger or weaker. Think of this like stretching before you work out. It’s little more than a way to learn how to keep your body from falling apart at the seams.”

“But I can’t do it!” I insisted, thrusting one hand at the candle. “I tried. You do it. Show me it’s even possible.”

He shrugged. “Let’s see if I have a single drop of magic to my name right now.”

Glancing at the candle, he stared and the wick immediately lit. It sputtered and flickered to life, almost as if that took all the magic Zane currently had available. Then, with a snap of his fingers, the flame immediately went out.

His eyes lifted to mine. “It’s possible. If I can do that with your spell still draining me, then there’s no reason you can’t do it better.”

So, sighing one more time, I sat back up. “I just don’t get it.”

“Where does your power come from?” he asked.

“The spices?” I guessed.

He shook his head. “Those are your symbols. When you set off a spell, using your words, where does that power come from?”

I tapped the middle of my chest. “Kinda like here?”

“And that’s a big problem,” he said. “You can’t use yourself. You need to use the magic of the world. The power that is all around us. I’m going to guess dirt would help?”

“Dirt?”

“It is the basis of nature,” he pointed out.

Which made me think of something else. “Is that why, when I heal the trees, I feel like I’m pulling magic from the ground?”

“When you do what now?”

“Heal the trees,” I said again. “The ones from where the wild things are dying.”

“And how do you heal these trees?” he asked.

“Kinda like how I made the ivy grow,” I admitted. “I just sorta, um... I get annoyed and shove. I mean, that’s the best

way I have to describe it.”

He nodded slowly. “Right. Can you try that? Grab whatever you do when you’re going to heal a tree, but instead, make fire on the wick?”

Pressing my lips together, I tried to reach down, feeling for that same thing. The last time I’d tried, it had been hard, but I’d also been empty. Gyth had said something about an empty well. This time, it felt full again.

So, not wanting to fail at what felt like it should be an easy task, I pulled hard. When I was sure I had something - whatever it was - I then shoved, just like I did when healing a tree. I shoved as hard as I could, wanting to get all of it out so the spark could be lit.

Between us, there was a whooshing sound. Flames not only appeared, but they erupted. The wick of the candle sparked, caught, and then a four-foot flame rushed straight up towards the ceiling, searing my face with heat.

For a split second, the room was too bright. The flames reached up for the ceiling. The wax of the candle grew soft and dripped quickly. This wasn’t a mere flame. This was a damned blow torch!

“Fuck!” Zane hissed, snapping his fingers and immediately putting it out.

And for a moment, the pair of us just stared at each other.

“Okay,” Zane finally said. “Well, seems you know how to find your source.”

“Yeah?”

“Oh yeah,” he agreed. “That almost burned my eyebrows off. I was expecting you to barely be able to light it. Instead, we have the opposite problem.”

“Can you help me?” I asked.

“I think I’d better,” he said, leaning forward to take my hand. “I think I came here expecting to show you parlor tricks, and instead I need to help you gain a little control. It seems you’re not a weak witch at all.”

“So that’s a good thing, right?”

“Not exactly,” he said. “Instead, you’re a ticking bomb. You have enough power to tear all of this down, and if it gets away from you, there’s no telling what could happen.”

“Oh.” That did not sound good at all.

But when he released my hand, his fingers slid gently off mine almost like he didn’t want to let go. “But I promised to help, and I do keep my promises. You have the spells. We’ll find your control. And then I dare the coven to try to mess with you again.”

“Or you,” I said. “I stand by my friends, Zane.”

“Is that what I am?” he asked.

I just shrugged. “It’s what you could be.”

When he smiled this time, it looked honest.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

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For the next few days, Zane came over. Every time he showed up, Syl had to tell the trees it was okay. The ivy accepted him faster, letting him up the stairs on his third visit. And while Lupe didn't hit him again, the cactus did lean menacingly each time Zane entered the house.

The skunks, on the other hand, were okay with him. Not happy, not thrilled, but "okay." Fern was too shy to let Zane pet her. Sprig was brave, but it was Twig who demanded all the attention. Flower let them. According to Syl, her kids were at that age where they didn't want to listen anyway, but the familiar was willing to give the man a chance. One. If he screwed that up, I was pretty sure the entire forest would rip him apart - and the skunks would lead it all.

But Syl was learning. Over dinner, she told us all about sources of magic and control. The smile on her face was the best part, though. It seemed Zane was breaking down magic in a way she could comprehend, unlike Gyth's and Flower's lessons.

In truth, this looked good on her. Watching her greet Zane like an equal? Yeah, that made her sexier than I'd ever imagined. It didn't matter if he was dressed up and she was in her loungewear. Syl was changing right before my eyes, gaining confidence, and I liked it a lot.

Jackson was different. Except for that first day, he was always somewhere else when Zane arrived. Oh, I caught how Zane always looked around for a hint of his ex. I saw the longing in his eyes. More than that, I saw Jackson.

He was surly. That was the best word I had for it. Jackson did not want to be cruel to Zane. The guy hadn't done anything to deserve it. At the same time, Jackson also refused to be too nice. Every evening, he promised me there was nothing there, reassuring me that Syl and I were all he needed.

It was a lie.

Not to me, though. He was lying to himself, and I couldn't convince him that it was okay to be friends with the man. Not lovers. Not boyfriends. I just hoped they could become friends again, but Jackson insisted he wasn't interested, even as his eyes said he'd never gotten over his first love.

I was trying to juggle the pair of them when Syl announced she had to run to the library. Erika had finally finished gathering all the information on the Grimson properties Syl needed. She also wasn't ready to tell Zane about it. So, she said she'd called to cancel their lesson, letting him know he was welcome to come over, but she wouldn't be around.

"I'll go with you," I said.

Jackson's head snapped around to look at me. "What? Why?"

"Because I'd rather Syl isn't in town on her own."

"She'll be with the girls," Jackson countered.

I shrugged. "Once she gets there, sure. Until she's there, she'll be alone in her car. Jackson, I can't help with this part anyway, and I was thinking I might find something on early twentieth century plumbing to help us out."

"Is there a problem?" Syl asked.

Dropping his head, Jackson sighed. "The pipes in the house aren't the standard size. They aren't PVC. I'm worried they might be lead - which would mean we'd need to change them. I'm not sure, though. Could be steel or zinc."

"And seeing what was common back then might help us figure it out," I said. "So a visit to the library is a win-win, right?"

He just flapped his hand at me. “Yeah. You’re right. I just want to get the sink working in the cellar. I can hook that up, since Syl won’t be using the workroom today.”

“Thank you, Jackson,” Syl said, making her way over to wrap her arms around his back.

The man softened. A little smile touched his lips and he glanced back. “Kinda my job.” But he still turned and pulled her closer. “Be nice to my boyfriend.”

Stretching, she dropped a kiss on his lips. “My boyfriend too.”

Damn, they were cute. When we’d first started this, I’d been so worried I’d be jealous. Instead, I kept finding myself smiling at them, happy for them, and only later realizing they were both mine as well.

And yes, I stole my own kiss, but before I could steal a set of keys as well, Syl rattled hers. So, wrapping an arm around her waist, I led her outside and did the chivalrous thing. Yeah, I opened the door for her. Not like it was hard, but the smile I got? So worth it.

We were barely out of the forest and onto the main road before Syl looked over at me with a shit-eating grin. “You know Zane’s probably going to stop by, right?”

“Are you trying to hook our boyfriend up with another man?” I teased.

Her eyes got big and her head snapped back to the road. “I thought you were okay with it.”

“I thought you weren’t,” I reminded her. “He’s evil, a member of the coven, and all of that.”

“And he’s still in love with Jackson.” She giggled. “Who he calls Jack. I thought only his mom did that?”

“And Zane,” I admitted. “He actually stopped going by Jack when they broke up.”

“Ah...” She nodded as if that cleared everything up. “He’s really more of a Jackson, in my opinion.”

“And you’re avoiding my question,” I said, shaking a finger at her. “Don’t leave me worrying here, Syl!”

“Do you like him?” she asked instead.

Oh, I knew what she was doing. She wanted to make sure her opinion would be “right.” Not that opinions were ever right or wrong, but she was clearly worried that whatever she really thought might not line up with my feelings, so she was trying to get that out of me first. I knew because I’d once done the same thing.

“I’ve never had a problem with Zane,” I assured her. “Oh, he’s a fucking arrogant son of a bitch, but you know what? He punches up. He’s never been a bully, not even back in school. Zane always was an asshole, but the kind of asshole you knew had your back, if that makes any sense.”

“Kinda...”

“I also know just how much Jackson loved him,” I admitted, my words a little softer now. “I know how bad their breakup broke Jackson’s heart. That was the only time I’ve ever seen him ugly-cry, and it was bad. Worse because I kept saying I was straight, rubbing salt in the wound.”

“Which isn’t your fault,” Syl told me. “Look at what everyone said to Jackson’s little, uh, brother?”

“Brother,” I assured her. “Jayden still uses that title.”

“Well, if it’s okay for them to change their mind later in life, then why not you? Maybe you just didn’t know yet. I mean, I could meet a woman who makes me rethink things, and I think I’d be okay with that. Right now, I think I’m straight, but maybe things change. Maybe the right person or situation hasn’t happened yet to open my eyes.”

“Which was pretty much my situation,” I said. “I moved in with Jackson, started getting possessive about him - wanting him to always be with me, pay attention to me, and so on. Then I realized I wanted to kiss him.” I laughed softly. “Yeah, sex sort of freaked me out for a bit, but that was all from outside stuff. Things others said. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to be with him like that. It was that I was sure being on bottom

said a lot about me, and that being on top said other things.” I turned to look out the window. “Mostly that I was failing at what everyone expected of me.”

“And yet you ended up amazing,” she said, reaching over to rest her hand on my thigh. “Pretty sure I wouldn’t have fallen in love with the other version of you.”

That made me feel so much better, yet I hadn’t answered her question. She also hadn’t answered mine. The issue of Zane was still there, still hanging between us.

“I want them to get back together,” I said after much too long of a pause. “I want Jackson to be as happy as I am with you and him. I’m just worried this is too much for you and you’re going to feel pushed out.”

Her eyes stayed on the road, but a little smile appeared. “What if I want a piece of Zane too?”

“Kinda makes sense,” I said, although I hadn’t really thought about it before.

“Do you?” she asked. “I mean, he’s sexy. He thinks you’re sexy.”

“What?”

Because I hadn’t expected that. Zane was Jackson’s. He’d always been Jackson’s. Sure, we talked, and I’d say we were friends, but more of the “little bit better than acquaintances” sort of way. I knew the man was attractive, but I’d only ever been with one man. I’d only kissed, held hands, and anything else with one man. I’d never even considered there being another in my life.

Jackson was my everything. He’d been my rock all through my life. Syl was like an obsession I couldn’t get enough of, but Jackson was the safety net. Combined, they made me feel like life was perfect. I had this beautiful woman to make me feel like a man, and this powerful man to hold me when I wanted to be weak.

And Zane.

He was teaching Syl all about magic. He could make Jackson feel whole again - because I couldn't think of any other way to phrase that. Not that Jackson was broken, but that flame was definitely still burning. I could make this happen, encouraging both of them to get with this guy.

But me?

"I'm going to start with friends," I decided, letting Syl know even as I figured it out myself. "I've honestly never thought about that. I mean, I assumed you and Jackson would tag-team the guy at some point, but I dunno."

"Always putting ourselves last," she said as she slowed down for a turn. "Yeah, I think Jackson's right about one thing. Reese, you and I are a lot alike."

"We were both the stay-at-home spouses," I pointed out. "We're both the soft ones. We care, and we're not ashamed of it."

"I like that you care," she told me.

And now I was smiling like a moron. "Good, because I never wanted to be some hard-ass. My father was the 'perfect man' and it drove me insane. He always yelled at me for things like having feelings. I couldn't cry, couldn't be worried about a test at school, and was a 'pussy' for being nervous about my wedding. A wedding I was too young to really be having, mind you."

"I like this version better," she said. "Reese, I *like* knowing it's okay for me to be worried, or overwhelmed with all of this, or anything else. I like that even if I get angry, you're right there, telling me it's okay. It's nice. It's..."

"Nice works," I promised. "I completely get what you mean. I actually think that's why the three of us work so well. I let you lean on me, I lean on Jackson, and he leans on you."

"Yeah," she breathed as she turned again, this time into the library's parking lot. "But we can't make Jackson get back with Zane, you know."

"So you're on board with this?"

She nodded even as she found a parking space. “For me, it’s a win-win-win situation. Three hot men? Live-action porn when you boys make out with each other? I mean, what’s the downside? I’d normally say cleaning, but you clean, Reese!”

“So does Jackson,” I reminded her.

“But?” She turned off the car and looked over at me. “Downside? Where is it?”

“The coven,” I said. “Zane’s still a part of it.”

Syl just waved that off. “He doesn’t want to be. I’m also going to figure out how to get him free of that. I just need to talk to Gyth, but he’s been out doing his wild thing, uh, thing.”

“But what if Zane is playing us?” I asked. “I mean, we’ve let him in, shown him how to get past a few of your defenses, and he *is* still a part of the coven.”

Slowly, she licked her lips as if choosing her words. “He said he pulled out his heart, put it in Jackson’s chest, and left it there. I don’t think he’ll do anything to hurt Jackson,” she finally said. “I’m just not sure if this will tear Jackson away from us.”

“So is this a mistake?” I asked.

Syl shrugged. “I have no clue, but I think you’re right, Reese. I think Jackson looks at Zane in a way that needs to be resolved. To me, that makes me think it’s better to do it now before I’m in too deep and get my heart ripped apart, but that’s not true for you.”

“No,” I said, “it’s not. If Jackson leaves us, I’ll be the one with that look in my eyes.”

“Which means we need to make sure Zane is what he says he is,” she told me. “And I’m trying. I really am, but all signs are saying he is.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

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I was thinking about Syl's words as we entered the library. Worrying about losing Jackson was probably the only excuse I could use for why I didn't see her. With my arm wrapped around Syl's waist and her body pressed against my side, I was trying to convince myself that all of this would work out when I heard my name.

"Reese?"

The voice was one I knew a little too well. For over a decade, my ex-wife had said my name that exact same way when I was in trouble. The sound of it made my feet freeze and my head snapped up.

"Charlotte?" I asked as my eyes landed on her.

She stood at the check-out counter with a friend I didn't know. Like this, my ex was beautiful. Her blonde hair was long and perfectly straight. Her curvaceous body was leaner than I remembered, and her clothes were stylish enough to show it off. In other words, she looked good.

"I thought you were with Jackson," Charlotte almost sneered. "Or are you cheating on him too?"

Beside me, Syl stiffened, but I ignored that. "It's complicated," I said, intending to turn and walk away from this mess.

But Syl resisted. "I thought you asked for the divorce, Charlotte?" Then she let go of me and walked over, holding her hand out. "It's nice to meet you, though. I've heard good things about you."

“What?” Charlotte asked, taking Syl’s hand out of habit, but confusion was etched all over her face.

“Reese told me his ex-wife was brilliant, beautiful, and driven. He said you’re the kind of woman who knows what she wants and won’t let anything stop her.” Syl pushed a polite smile onto her face that honestly looked like she meant it. “He also said you two got married too young, had vastly different life goals, and he’s proud of you for chasing your dreams.”

Charlotte finally let go of Syl’s hand and looked at me. “You did?”

“It’s come up,” I mumbled, feeling like I was right in the middle of the worst-case scenario of my life.

I’d always known that Charlotte came back to Summerpoint. Her family was here, after all. Nora typically didn’t tell me until after she’d left again, but it happened often enough that I knew one day we’d see each other again. Evidently, today was that day.

“So you’re the new girlfriend I’ve been hearing about?” Charlotte asked as she turned her attention back to Syl.

Which was when Nora hurried towards us from between the stacks of books. “Charlotte!” she hissed, not stopping until she was between my ex and Sylvia. “What are you doing?”

“Did you know they were coming?” Charlotte asked.

“Uh, yeah...” Nora told her. “I invited them. Well, sorta. Look, if you’re going to make this awkward, you can go back home. I’ll get a ride with Syl.”

Charlotte’s mouth flopped open. “You’re picking them over me?”

Nora just leaned into her big sister’s face. “You left him. I didn’t. Reese is still my brother-in-law. Syl’s my friend. Jackson’s my friend. That the three of them have a working polyamorous thing going on? Don’t be jealous.”

“Charlotte...” the friend whispered, sounding a little nervous.

And I was dying. I would've been perfectly happy for Syl to never meet my ex. I would've been thrilled to just keep going like we had been, worrying about magic and monsters. Something as stupidly mundane as my ex being jealous? Or angry? Or whatever she was?

But seeing Syl standing beside Charlotte was like a slap in the face. Sylvia may have been an inch taller at most. Those could've been her shoes, though. Both women were built the same way. Both had curves that made a man crazy. Both were beautiful. Both of them stood tall and proud, but that was where the similarities stopped.

Because while they might look a lot alike, they really weren't. Syl, the woman who hated confrontation, had just pushed right into the middle of mine. She had no problem fighting to protect others, but she couldn't do the same for herself.

Charlotte was the opposite. She had no problem taking care of herself. She knew what she wanted, was willing to chase it, and nothing would stand in her way. Not even me. Then again, she'd also been right. We hadn't worked as well as we'd hoped when we were kids. She wanted more than I could give, and I wanted things she could never understand.

So I moved forward and wrapped my arm around Sylvia again. "Charlotte, I'd like you to meet mine and Jackson's girlfriend, Sylvia Holt."

"A pleasure," Sylvia said.

Slowly, Charlotte looked her over. "You're not quite what I expected," she admitted before smiling.

"Oh?" Syl asked, a hint of tension tightening her posture.

Charlotte just ducked her head and sighed. "No, I figured he'd chase someone completely different from me."

"He did," Syl pointed out. "Jackson."

"And..." Charlotte glanced at me, then Nora, and finally looked at Syl again. "The three of you are..."

“Together,” Nora supplied. “Yep, the cutest little trio you can imagine. Syl here is the great-niece of Margie Maybrook too. She’s new to town, but fits in perfectly.”

Slowly, Charlotte began to nod. “I see. So are you getting sick of being called a witch yet, Syl?”

“Not at all,” Syl promised. “I kinda like it. I mean, didn’t we all want to grow up and be witches at some point? You know, strong women with enough power to make sure the boys couldn’t fuck us over? To be weird enough to stand out? It’s fun.”

Charlotte actually laughed at that, nodding her head in agreement. “I bet it would be.”

And then they started talking. Charlotte introduced her friend, Leah, who’d made the drive up with her. Syl shook the woman’s hand, including her easily. Then they began discussing Summerpoint and all its cute little quirks.

Gently, Nora pulled me back, giving the other women space. “What the fuck?” I asked when we were far enough away to not be overheard.

“I said I had to go to the library,” Nora explained. “Charlotte said it’s been years since she’s been in here, and she wanted to say hi to Erika. Well, I was hoping to get her out before you arrived, and that didn’t work so well.”

I just groaned. “You know this is going to blow up, right?”

“I’m not so sure,” Nora said, glancing over to where Syl was easily talking with the pair of women. “I think your girlfriend is a lot better at this than you give her credit for.”

“And Charlotte’s jealous,” I countered.

“Yes and no,” Nora said. “I think she’s mostly shocked. You’ve been with Jackson for years now. That made her feel like things fell apart because you were gay.”

“And I’m still not gay,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, but if she told herself you were, then she didn’t fail at being your wife.” Nora lifted a brow. “Reese, it’s not about you. It’s about her. It’s about her own insecurities, and she

knows you're a good man." She laughed. "It also doesn't hurt anything that your 'replacement' for her is basically a carbon copy."

"Yeah, they do look a lot alike," I agreed. "I mean, Jackson wasn't wrong when he said Syl's my type. Thing is, looks is all they have in common."

"I dunno," Nora said softly. "I think they both have spines. They're strong women, Reese, and you like that. You like Jackson for being just as strong." Then she patted my shoulder. "But you weren't supposed to be here either, so what's up?"

I leaned my head back and groaned. "A lot. Um, Zane's been helping to train Syl. He comes over almost every day now to teach her the basics."

"Basics?"

"Mhm," I agreed. "Seems Syl went straight to hard mode. She skipped the tutorials. Zane's helping her fill in those gaps." Then I leaned closer and dropped my voice even more. "And he's probably at the cottage with Jackson right now."

"Zane?" Nora asked. "And Jackson? How's that going?"

"It's kinda not," I admitted. "Jackson's adamant there's nothing there. He says he's over Zane, but he's not. Zane says he's still in love with Jackson, so there's that too."

"And?" Nora pressed.

"And what?" I asked.

She huffed at me. "Reese! What happens if they hook up? I mean, what do you think about that? Syl? I mean, you sound like you're trying to get them together, but..." She flapped her hands against her sides.

"Well, Jackson's the one who convinced me to date Syl," I reminded her. "He's the one who said we don't have to be a couple."

"And?" she said again.

“And Syl thinks Zane is hot. She said she’d rather figure this out now instead of a few years in. Well, basically. I mean, I get it. It’s easier to get dumped after a month than after like four years.”

“Getting close to another anniversary, huh?” Nora asked.

“Close enough,” I admitted. “But if we can be three and make this work, then why not four? And Jackson clearly is into Zane. He’s always been the ghost between us, you know? So why not just let that happen?”

“Because of the coven,” Nora whispered. “That’s the whole reason they broke up in the first place.”

“And we put ourselves in the coven’s crosshairs when we helped Syl,” I countered. “Zane’s also been helping. He leaves his damned tarot cards with Syl all the time. Okay, twice, but it feels like a lot. He also broke the blood oath with Jackson so that Jackson can explain magic to Syl.”

“So he’s on our side,” Nora realized.

I could only shrug at that. “I think so, but I’m not positive. He’s Zane.”

“He’s on his side,” she corrected. “Yeah, sounds more like him. But what if Jackson does get back with him, Reese? What does that do to you? I mean, do you like Syl more than him?”

“What? No!” I shook my head just to make the point. “No, it doesn’t work like that. Apples and oranges, Nora. There’s no better or worse. There’s just different. Jackson is Jackson. Syl is Syl. I love them for being themselves. I mean, I expected to be jealous of Zane, but after we started dating Syl, I’m kinda looking at things differently now.”

“How so?”

“It’s about him being happy, not me,” I told her. “I want to give him everything the way he does with me. Am I happy? Yes. But I’m not with him to make *myself* happy. I’m with him to spoil him, to remind him how amazing he is. Same with Syl. Doing that makes me happy.”

“Selfless,” she said, reaching up to pat my arm. “Yeah, kinda sounds like you. Sounds like Syl too. Jackson isn’t selfless, though, Reese.”

“He kinda is,” I countered. “He takes care of the people he cares about. For them - and only them - he’s selfless.”

“Good point,” she relented. “And I should probably save Sylvia, hm?”

“I should help,” I agreed.

Together, we walked back over to where the three women were talking about books. From the sounds of it, romance books. That wasn’t at all what I’d expected.

“I prefer urban fantasy,” Syl was saying. “Contemporary romance just feels like they’re all the same anymore. Boy meets girl, they fall in love, boy screws up and has to grovel, and then they find a way to make it work.”

“Oh, but I like the groveling part,” Leah, Charlotte’s friend, said. “It’s my favorite.”

“I like the fantasy part,” Syl was saying. “Vampires and the fae, you know? Impossibly hot and sexy men who don’t have to be assholes to be amazing.”

“I’m with her,” Charlotte said, pointing at Syl. “Although I love shifters. Not wolves. I’m so burned out on them, but I like the cats, the bears, and things like that.”

I just chuckled. “Comparing smut now?” I teased.

Syl looked back at me with a smile. “Maybe. Don’t tell me you’re going to get jealous of book boyfriends.”

“Nope,” I promised. “I’m secure enough to understand that I can never keep up with a well-written man.” Then I tilted my head towards the back of the library. “And we’re supposed to be meeting Erika.”

“She’s in the basement,” Nora said. “Beth’s with her. We were waiting on you.”

“Yeah, we should probably get to that,” Syl agreed, turning back to Charlotte. “And it’s nice to meet you. No offense, but

I'm pretty glad you divorced him."

Much to my surprise, Charlotte laughed. "Well, I can honestly say it's nice to know he's found a woman who seems to be a perfect fit for him." She smiled at Syl. "I mean that. I'm also still protective of him, so if you fuck him over..."

"Then it won't be my intention," Sylvia assured her. "So far as I care, Reese is a hero, and I have no intention of losing that."

"I didn't either," Charlotte agreed. "But you're a Summerpoint girl. I never was." Then she leaned closer and bumped my shoulder. "I like her, Reese. You did good with this one."

All I could do was nod. I wasn't sure how to take that, but for some reason it felt... good? Like we'd finally found an understanding. I wasn't even sure, but Charlotte was smiling at me. Syl was smiling at me. Hell, even Nora and Leah were.

"I kinda like this one," I said lamely.

But Charlotte nodded sagely. "Yeah. See, I always knew you liked women. That was why I couldn't figure out you and Jackson."

"I'm still with Jackson," I reminded her.

Charlotte just shrugged. "Yeah, but you're the husband type, Reese. I mean, you've always seemed like the kind of man who needs to take care of his woman. Now you can."

"Yeah," I agreed as I wrapped my arm around Syl's shoulders. "And she can take care of me too. It was nice to see you, Charlotte." And I turned us towards the back.

Beside me, Syl had her head ducked down at the floor. Her shoulders trembled slightly like she was trying not to giggle. Behind us, Nora was still talking to the women, but I didn't care about that. I just wanted to get out of here, because even this apparent truce with my ex-wife still felt dangerous somehow. Like it was going to blow up in my face.

But when we were out of sight, Syl finally looked up and amusement was sparkling in her eyes. "She doesn't get it," she



whispered. “Charlotte can’t wrap her mind around you being in love with a man. She thinks it has to be all or nothing.”

“I know.”

Syl just shook her head. “And that’s why it never would’ve worked. She wanted you to be a thing, to fit into a role she had in her mind. You’re a good ‘husband,’ Reese. She saw you as what she wanted to make you, and she’s still trying to do that.”

“And you?” I asked. “What do you see me as, Syl?”

She leaned her head against me and smiled. “I see you as the man I can relax with. The one who will wrap me up in his arms, tell me it will be okay, and then help me figure out how to make that happen. Reese, I see you as my partner. An imperfect one who somehow makes that more amazing than being perfect.”

“Yeah,” I breathed. “I think I like that better.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

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It didn't take long for Nora to separate herself from her sister and catch up with me and Reese. Slapping the man lightly on the back, she gestured for the pair of us to follow and aimed for the elevator. Once the three of us were inside and headed down, she turned to Reese and made an overly dramatic apologetic face.

"I'm sorry about her..."

"It's fine," Reese assured her.

"She's not bad," I added. "I mean, she clearly doesn't understand the idea of bisexuality, but she seems nice."

"She's not bad," Nora admitted. "She also gets bisexuality just fine - when it's not her ex-husband. Then again, they were together since high school."

"And that's a long time," I said just as the elevator doors opened to reveal the basement.

Beth and Erika were sitting at the table we'd used last time, but the pair were leaning over a book. The same book. As Reese, Nora, and I approached, I tried to see what it was, but only caught glimpses of green.

"Find something?" I asked as we reached the table.

Both women jerked upright. Beth quickly pulled the book closer to her and Erika spun to face me in the most guilty way possible. Behind me, Reese chuckled, which made the pair exhale and relax.

“It’s a book that doesn’t exist,” Erika explained. “I found it tucked into one of the shelves, but it’s not listed in the library at all. Not down here, not upstairs, and not in any category.”

“And it’s weird,” Beth said, sliding the book over so I could see it.

I pulled it a little more, then claimed a chair and leaned in. The book was old. The type of old that probably should’ve required white gloves to handle. The pages were crisp and felt almost brittle. And yet, as I turned them carefully, they were all filled with pictures of plants.

Stems, leaves, seeds, berries, and more. Some images were clearly meant for identification. Others were impossible - like the grass tangling around a man’s legs. Then there were the words, because this book had plenty and I couldn’t read a single one.

“What is it?” I asked, looking up at Erika since she was the librarian.

“I have no idea,” she admitted. “It was at the back of a shelf, right behind the Grimson property records.” She gestured to another leather-bound tome further down the table. “But this thing was turned sideways and hidden. The spine wasn’t facing out. It’s smaller than the other books there. It was almost like someone hid it back there, and from the dust on it, I’d say it was a while ago.”

“Like centuries?” I asked.

“No!” Erika laughed. “This building isn’t that old. I dunno, five years? That’s a wild guess, but not recently.”

I nodded and kept flipping. “This reminds me of something.”

“The Voynich Manuscript,” Beth said. “We were just looking at pictures of it.”

“The what?” Reese asked as he moved in to look over my shoulder.

“Isn’t that some kind of witch book?” Nora asked. “I heard it was all about birthing or something, and that some woman

had broken the code.”

“They haven’t,” Beth corrected. “Like twelve people have said they can translate it, but none of them can. It’s always a big splash in the news and then fades away. Sounds like the problem is that neither the language nor the letters directly correspond with anything we know.”

“And this is all about herbs,” I told the rest. “Spices too. See?” I pointed. “Saffron and thyme. It’s almost like a cookbook, but there’s no cooking.”

Then I turned another page and Reese stabbed at it, not quite touching the paper. “That’s a jar, Syl.”

It was. It also had layers of colors in it. Beside the picture were words that matched each color, lined up like a description, but I couldn’t make them out. I could, on the other hand, identify what the drawing was supposed to be.

“Hickory root, rosemary, mustard seed, and I think that’s basil.” I looked up to find everyone staring with their mouths parted.

“How do you know that?” Erika asked.

“Because that’s what it looks like?” I explained. “I do have my hands in herbs and spices a lot.”

“Magic,” Nora said as an explanation. “She also puts spices into jars like that.”

Erika just reached over and flipped the book closed. “Then take it home. Look through it - carefully, though! See if you can figure it out? Because that thing doesn’t exist, so the library won’t miss it.”

“Okay,” I said, pushing it to the side and then gesturing to the rest of the paperwork on the table. “What else do we have?”

“Um...” Beth said. “Well, the first thing is the Spellmans. I heard them talking at work a couple of days ago.”

“Dare?” Reese asked.

Beth nodded. “And his mother, Mari.”

“I thought her name was Marissa,” I said.

“It is,” Beth assured me, “but everyone calls her Mari. She was also ranting about how Nancy made an offer on your place, and then gloating because you didn’t sell. I mean, I’m guessing it was you, because she said ‘that witch in the forest.’”

“It was me,” I said. “The real estate agent came by with an offer that was too good to be true. Multiple millions for my land, but the buyer wanted to remain anonymous.”

“Yeah, and the Spellmans don’t have multiple millions. But staying anonymous doesn’t work when Mari has a tantrum that loud,” Beth said. “Then again, maybe she wanted to be overheard. Evidently, there’s some land rush going on. Zane’s buying more land - “

“He is,” Reese confirmed. “He talked to me and Jackson about it.”

Which made Nora flail her arms at him. “And you don’t think that’s something we need to know? How the fuck are we supposed to protect our witch if the coven is making a move and no one says shit?”

“Zane’s not quite aligned with the coven,” I assured my friends. “He’s on his own side, but he’s keeping me in the loop and has been helping to teach me a few things.”

Beth’s eyes narrowed as she looked up at Reese. “And Jackson?”

“Swears there’s nothing there,” Reese said. “He’s also avoiding Zane. So, yeah. Um, I dunno.”

“Complicated,” Erika mumbled.

“Very,” I agreed. “But the coven thinks that more land is more power. It doesn’t exactly work that way. It could, but not always.”

“Gotcha,” Beth said. “So, does that mean that if Mari got you kicked off the Maybrook land it wouldn’t help her at all?”

“Pretty much,” I said. “I also think the Holt Forest might make it impossible for her to step foot on it. Seems the forest

doesn't care for anyone in the coven."

"Including Zane," Reese added. "Syl has to talk down the trees every time he shows up."

"Nice!" Erika said. "Seems our witch is a badass bitch."

"I'm trying," I said. "But finding out where these wild things are and getting them out will make that even easier. Once they're back in the forest, I have a feeling there will be more available magic, and I kinda think they might get vengeance on the coven themselves."

"If they can," Reese said. "Syl, Gyth seems to be a pacifist. He defends himself, but he doesn't exactly attack."

Which made me grumble, because he was right. And if the wild things couldn't or wouldn't destroy the evil coven, then I would have to. Somehow, I'd have to stop them from continuing to hunt wild things so we didn't end up repeating all of this again.

"Okay," I said, patting the table. "What do we have on possible sites for these things?"

"Well," Erika said, grabbing a stack of photocopies and passing them to me, "the mansion has a full basement. Permits for that were drafted back in the late eighteen hundreds, so a long time ago. Lucien's place has been fully finished out, so I'm not sure they'd be there. Granted, they could've made some kind of prison with a guard lounge, so I dunno."

"Any other buildings?" I asked.

"Nancy Redmoon's stuff's a bust," Beth said. "Flooded four years ago. Had permits for pumps and all of that. If the wild things were there, they would've been seen."

"Fuck," I grumbled. "So it's the Grimsons for sure, huh?"

"Has to be," Erika agreed. "And yeah, it makes sense for it to be Kingsley's place. His house is like sixty-eight thousand square feet. It's got more rooms than they'll ever use. The original designs look like some bastardization between a plantation house and a palace, so you know showing off has been in their family a long time."

“And a basement that size,” Nora said, “means it’s going to be hard as fuck to figure out where they are. We’d get busted if we tried to break in.”

“They’re wixen,” I reminded the ladies. “They’ll know if you walk in. I’m sure they have spells to prevent that.”

“Which means you’d need an invite,” Reese said. “Syl, think they’d ever talk to you again?”

“No,” Nora said, slashing her arm through the air. “Nuh uh. Not happening. Sending Syl into the middle of the coven is all but asking them to force her to join. She needs to stay far away from that place.”

“So how the hell are we going to get these things out?” I demanded. “We can’t just give up! Gyth is the last free one, but these are still alive. He keeps saying they are, so we need to get them out, or the protections on the town are going to crash when the magic goes away!”

“Then we need to plan,” Erika said. “Syl, you look at that book. See if your not-tree friend can offer any insight. Beth, we’ll try to see if the Spellmans leak anything and work with that. Beth will hear it, and I’m in the diner all the time, so might too. Nora? You pay attention to who’s coming and going through town.”

“No one yet,” Reese said. “New moon isn’t for a few more days, and we’re not sure when Syl’s last spell will stop draining them.”

“But it will eventually,” Nora said. “It has to. I’ll keep track of the coven. Those two will eavesdrop on the Spellmans, since it won’t be weird for them to hang out at the diner. Reese, you and Jackson need to lie low. Syl?”

“I know, learn magic.”

“I was going to say figure out the book,” Nora said around a smile. “But probably the same thing.”

Which made me look down at the aged leather cover. “Do you think this might be Margie’s spellbook?” I asked.



“In that language?” Erika said, shaking her head. “I mean, I don’t know anything about spells or spellbooks. I can say that book is old. Centuries, at least, depending on how it was kept.”

“Okay,” I breathed. “Because Lucien Grimson wants Margie’s spellbook. Just one problem. I don’t think she had one.”

“She must’ve,” Nora said.

Which made me give her a confused look. “Why?”

“I saw her writing all the time when she came to the coffee shop,” Nora explained. “Well, could’ve been a diary, I suppose. I dunno. She just always had a book with her. Like a bullet journal, but long before those were cool.”

“I remember that,” Beth said. “Back when I worked at McDonalds...” She grimaced. “So, like, when I was seventeen? Yeah, she had this book she carried. I thought it was a diary.”

“What did it look like?” I asked.

Both women shrugged. “Like, old school?” Nora said. “I just remember thinking it would fit in on one of those archeological digs in the 1920s.”

“Blank pages,” Beth said. “No lines. I remember that much, because the page I saw when she came through the drive through? It was all crooked, like she was writing while she drove.”

“Like grandma’s recipe book!” Nora said.

Which made me pause. “Are you sure it wasn’t a recipe book? I heard she loved to bake.”

“And baking was her power,” Reese reminded me.

“Yeah,” I breathed, “but I think I’ve seen her cookbook. I think it’s in the book nook.” And the words were no sooner out of my mouth before I remembered one other thing.

There had been a book with notes in the margins. One that mentioned the Voynich Manuscript. One that bitched about the

myths around witches. And now, here I was holding a book that looked like a sister to the Voynich Manuscript.

That couldn't be a coincidence.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

---

JACKSON

I heard a thumping from upstairs. I tried to ignore it. Syl had said something about Zane coming by while she was gone. If I “couldn’t hear him,” then maybe he’d just leave. That would be much safer for both of us. Well, all of us, really.

But the pounding came again. A moment later, something tickled the back of my mind. *Jackson.*

That made me jerk my head up. Halfway down the stairs, little Sprig was doing his best to come find me in the cellar, but those steps were still a lot for a skunk his size.

“I’m coming, Sprig,” I promised, putting down my tools and heading that way.

I grabbed the little skunklet on my way up and he started chattering. Yeah, I’d heard the knock at the door, and since I was halfway up, clearly I was going to answer it. Sighing one more time, I reached the first floor and made my way over to the front door. It opened just before I could touch it to reveal Zane on the other side.

“Hey,” he said, and then stopped hard. Lifting his hands, Zane quickly took two steps back. “Fuck, I wasn’t trying to break in.”

“Huh?” I asked.

But in my arms, Sprig was chattering in amusement. Belatedly, I laughed, realizing the problem. Zane had been sprayed by Flower once. I’d used Sprig to defend the back

door. I'd also held the little guy pretty much the same way I was holding him now.

"I was just helping him up the stairs," I promised. "You're fine, Zane."

So he gestured at the house. "Mind if I come in?"

"She's not here."

He nodded. "Yeah. She said that. She also said I could come over, and I brought a few things for her." He gestured at the messenger bag slung over his shoulder.

My eyes narrowed. "What kind of things?"

"Magical training things," he said. "Jack, I'm just trying to help her survive all of this."

So I turned and headed deeper into the house, leaving the door open behind me. I didn't invite him in per se, but the offer was still there. When I reached the table, I bent to set Sprig on the floor. He squeaked at me twice and then rushed through the plexiglass flap that led to the porch the skunks used.

Behind me, I heard the door close. "What did I do wrong, Jack?" Zane asked as he moved closer.

I refused to turn. "You're here."

"I'm helping. It's no different than how you helped me when you brought my card back."

That was more than I could take. Spinning, I stormed right into his face. "Like fuck it's not! You show up at *her* house, teaching *her* magic, and weaseling your way into things. That would be fine except for one big, glaring problem, Zane. You refuse to say you're on our side!"

"I'm on - "

"Your side," I finished for him. "Yeah, I know."

So he cupped the side of my face. "Her side, Jack. I'm on her side."

The feel of his hand on my skin made my body forget how to move. Those blue eyes of his were so close. Chest to chest, he was only a bit taller than me, but not quite as broad. That made him feel like he fit, like he'd fill all the spaces my body left between us.

"Zane..." I breathed.

Reluctantly, he let his hand fall. "Jack, they want to kill her. They want to completely destroy her and everything she stands for. I'm just trying to help make sure she can fight back."

"But you won't fight with us," I said.

He shook his head. "I can't."

"No, I get it." I took a step back. "So, yeah. Make yourself comfortable, or whatever. Fridge is stocked. We make sure to keep it filled with groceries so she doesn't need to leave as often. Um, TV's got streaming only." Then I turned for the cellar.

"I was planning to go down there," he said without moving.

My feet stalled and my head dropped. Of course he was. I'd promised to get Syl's sink working, and Zane would want to check out her work space. He'd want to see all of her magical things without her around to ask any questions. Recon, right?

"I don't want you snooping around her stuff," I said, refusing to turn.

"Then I won't snoop," he promised. "I also have you as a chaperone to make sure the big bad wix is minding his own damned business."

"Fine." And I took the last few steps, pulling open the door to the cellar and jogging down.

I wanted to hate him. Fuck, but it would be so much easier if I could. If I could just get over him and chase him off, then that would be one less thing for Syl to worry about. One less

threat that I couldn't predict, and that was my real problem. I'd never been able to predict Zane Harkness.

When I reached the bottom, I didn't stop until I was at the sink again. The first-floor bathroom was right overhead, so I should be able to hook these up easily enough. I just had to find the right connectors for the antique lines this house had been using for who knew how long.

"She's excited about the sink," Zane said as he moved to the center of the room.

"She's excited that we support her," I said.

"I would've been too."

Tossing my wrench down, I turned to face him one more time. "What the fuck do you want from me?" I asked.

"No." He dropped his bag on the floor and closed the space between us. "Jack, you're the one who stayed to clean my fucking apartment. You're the one who told me how to get honest power. You're the one who's been helping me, so why the fuck wouldn't I help back?"

"Because the Grimsons are pulling your strings," I reminded him.

"And I know how to work around those fuckers," he promised. "Yes, they know I'm here. Oh, they think I'm seducing her. They think Syl's a stupid little bimbo who can't think for herself. The only reason she beat us last time was luck, they're telling themselves." Then he leaned closer. "But we know that's not true."

"And what's your play?" I demanded.

"I'm here to look for Margie's spellbook and to teach her a few parlor tricks," I said. "To 'help' her, I told them. A reason for me to get inside so I can find what they really want."

"A spellbook that doesn't exist." I scoffed. "And then what?"

"The harder it is to find," he said, "the longer I get to keep coming back. And yes, they're watching me. Not in the forest,

of course, but outside of here? Yeah, they know what I'm doing."

"And what *are* you doing?" I pressed. "No bullshit, Zane. What the fuck are you doing?"

Those amazing eyes of his dropped to the rug under our feet. "I can't tell you that, Jack."

"Why the fuck not?!"

He pulled in a deep breath, then simply stepped back. "Because I can't lie to you. I won't. I also know you'll try to stop me."

"Will it hurt her?" I asked.

"I honestly hope it will help her." He glanced up, but only for a second. "Jack..."

"No," I said. "Zane, I can't do this. I can't balance you with them."

"Friends?" he offered.

Stepping back, I kept going until I found the couch and then dropped onto it. "Zane, we've never been just friends."

"Yeah," he agreed, lowering himself down in the middle of the room just to pull his bag closer. "I know. I thought it might be nice to try it, though."

"I'm not sure I can," I admitted.

He began pulling things out. Candles. A small bucket like children used to make sand castles. Chalk, a rolled thing that looked like a poster, and more. Piece by piece, he laid them out beside him, and the silence hung between us.

"What's all that?" I asked.

"Sylvia knows how to cast powerful spells," he explained. "She doesn't have a clue how to control her power - and that woman has a lot of it."

"Because of the forest," I said, nodding to show I was keeping up.

But he looked at me strangely. "What do you mean?"



“She bonded to the forest and set it free,” I said. “That’s how she got so much power. The Maybrook Forest accepted her as its witch.”

“And the wild thing?”

I murmured disapprovingly. “How about we don’t bring him into this yet.”

“I’m just saying that a bond with one is how the Grimsons got their power,” Zane explained. “They say we can force the bonds. They also drain their blood and mix it with the wine we’re given before every ritual. Those of us who prove ourselves are given more. An extra shot, basically.”

“You drink wild thing blood?”

He nodded slowly. “It’s like a hit of heroin. That shit is a rush, and it increases our power. Not just for the moment, but permanently. Like opening up the magical pipelines. And if we don’t drink it, that would cause a lot of questions I’m not in a good position to answer.”

“You drink their fucking blood?” I snarled.

He lifted his hands like he was holding me off. “I’d rather not. I’m fucking *trying* to do this the right way, but I’d really prefer not to have the Grimsons kill me. You know, it’s a minor little obstacle for me.”

“Okay, that’s a good point,” I relented.

“So I’m hoping to make my new pasture - well, once I close on it officially - as wild as possible. I’m going to spend some time there, learn how to camp, or fish, or such.”

“Fish?” I asked.

“There’s a little pond,” he explained. “I also thought Syl might be able to give me some seeds from the trees here, so I can get more growing out there.”

“And rewild it,” I realized.

Zane just nodded. “I’m not the bad guy, Jack.”

“You also aren’t the good one,” I reminded him. “You keep telling me that, and then you act like it’s strange that I believe

you.”

“I just hate that you have to.” He sighed. “And I’m sure you’re going to hear the worst about me.”

“Like what?” I asked.

Slowly, he began unrolling the poster. It wasn’t at all what I’d expected. As the image became visible, I realized it was a pentagram, but not a simple one. This had all sorts of extra lines and shapes drawn across it, almost like some kind of complicated math problem.

“Um...” He began using the other items to hold the corners down. “I’m trying to work my way higher in the coven.”

“Why?”

“So they’ll trust me.” He looked up and that devious look was back. “Because if I’m as power-hungry as the Grimsons, they won’t think it’s odd at all. Currently, I’m trying to replace Nancy Redmoon as the third to Kingsley.”

“With Lucien ahead of you,” I realized.

He nodded. “The son is a fucking idiot, though. Kingsley doesn’t care if he’s ever a strong wix. He simply wants more power, and he’ll channel it through Lucien. If Lucien is standing in for the Maybrook line, then that’s even more for Kingsley. Doesn’t matter to him at all if Lucien can’t even bake a cake. He’s just a battery to be drained on command and to do Kingsley’s dirty work.”

“And you?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I’m just a poor little divination wix who wants to do more than tell fortunes.”

“Do they know what you can do?” Because I had an idea. A very small and incomplete one.

Zane just smiled. “No, Jack. No one knows what I can do, but I brought Sylvia here. I pulled at the strings of the future to convince her that this was what she needed. I didn’t know who and I had no clue how that would manifest, but I cast a spell to

save Summerpoint from the corruption in our coven, and she showed up.”

“But she doesn’t know enough,” I said.

“She will,” he promised. “That woman?” He paused, an expression crossing his face too fast for me to catch. “That witch. Jack, she’s everything. She’s fucking gorgeous. She’s so sweet - but not a fool. She’s brilliant and filled with more power than I’ve ever heard of. She is the forest’s weapon against the rest of us, and...”

“And what?” I pressed.

He smiled at me a little sadly. “And she’s perfect for you and Reese. She honestly loves you both, so don’t you dare take that for granted. She thinks the pair of you have hung the moon in the sky, and for a witch, that’s a pretty big compliment.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, breathing out the word. “I didn’t see her coming, Zane. I thought I’d convince Reese to hook up with her, help him gain a little confidence back, and we’d have a nice little fling. The problem is that she just kept getting better. She got under my skin.” I paused to lick my lips. “Just like you.”

“Friends,” he told me. “We’re just going to be friends, Jack. Trust me, it’s safer that way.”

“What if I can’t?”

He exhaled hard. “Yeah. I dunno, because I keep asking myself the same thing. I also won’t ever get between you and those two. I give you my word on that.”

“Don’t,” I said.

His brow furrowed. “Hm?”

“Don’t give me your word,” I clarified. “Zane, this thing we’re doing? If Syl is interested, I’m not going to stop you. If Reese...”

“Reese is yours,” he told me. “He’s always been yours.”

“And now he’s Syl’s too,” I pointed out. “Things change, Zane. All I’m saying is that I’m trusting you here. I’m also not going to stop you.”

“I’m not here to steal your lovers,” he promised. “I’m here to make sure all three of you survive what’s coming.”

“And what is coming?”

“That’s the problem,” he told me. “I don’t think any of us really know, but the cards have said something is. Something big.”

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

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When we made it back home, the first thing I did was aim for the reading nook. The strange book Erika had given me went in a gap on the middle shelf - just because I didn't want that to come up yet - and I started trying to find that book Margie had written in.

It was a non-fiction book about folklore history. When I pulled it out, I was sure I had the right one, but finding that comment? Not as easy. I flipped through, hoping a line in the margin would stand out, and then had to do it again.

"I'm going to let Jackson know we're back," Reese said. "You good with that?"

"Yep," I said, going through the book one more time, but slower.

Finally, I found it.

*Witchmarks are just moles and have nothing to do with wixen! Early American fears have warped the true lore, and European witch hunts killed off the rest. Check the Voynich manuscript.*

I had to chuckle a bit. That line made a lot more sense to me now. I now knew what wixen were. I'd heard about the fears of normal people, which was why Summerpoint had a

spell to prevent bigotry. I hadn't heard a thing about witchmarks, but I sure hadn't gained any.

Yet that comment about the Voynich manuscript stood out. I wasn't sure how it related to anything else Margie had been saying, unless it was tied to the European witch hunts? But if no one had managed to translate the thing, how would I ever know?

Letting out a groan, I put the book back where I'd found it, and then paused. The next book on the shelf was boring-looking. The pages were a bit frayed and warped, as if it had been used often. Sliding it out, the worn binding fell open in my hands, revealing page after page of handwritten notes.

But I recognized the layout. Even before I began to decipher the cramped handwriting, I knew this was a recipe. At the top was the standard list of ingredients, and below that was the directions for how to put it all together. And yet when I began to read, I realized this might be a bit more than I was expecting.

Flour, sugar, butter, water. Those things were normal. Paprika? For a cake? That stood out, so I quickly looked down to see where that would be added.

*Mix dry ingredients. Be gentle with the paprika, as it will increase the results with more. Subtle is always best to prevent too many questions.*

And then my eyes jumped up to the very top where Margie had named her dessert: A sweet for focus.

I lowered the book down to my lap and just stared. That was Margie's recipe for a spell! It had to be. Feeling a flare of hope, I flipped a few more pages to check another. *Cancer Cobbler* and after that was *Diabetic Mashed Potatoes*.

"Holy shit," I breathed just as the door opened to the cellar.

“Syl?” Reese asked as he headed my way. Jackson and Zane followed him.

“I found it,” I said. “This whole time, it’s been right here on the bookshelf with the werewolf smut and folklore books.”

“What about werewolves?” Zane asked. “Fucking temperamental shits.”

And that had my complete attention. “What?”

“She meant the books,” Jackson clarified. “Margie read fantasy romance stuff.”

“It’s called paranormal romance,” I corrected. “Fantasy romance is different.”

“So not real werewolves,” Zane said. “So why do you look like you just saw one?”

“Wait, werewolves are real?” I asked.

He laughed once, a little harder than I expected. “Yeah. Kinda. Not the way the movies show them, but they exist. You know, sorta like wixen.”

“Fair point,” I said before lifting up the book. “But I think I just found Margie’s recipe book.”

“Okay?” Reese asked.

“For things like *Cancer Cobbler*.”

“And the other book?” he asked.

I gestured behind me. “Oh, I put that on the shelf to worry about later. But this? I think this might be Margie’s spellbook.”

And Zane took a step back. “Fuck. I told them she didn’t have one.”

“Yeah...” I said, turning a few more pages. “I dunno. You might be able to give this to them.”

“Or,” Jackson said, “to have him snap pictures of it. You know, since he can’t steal it without tipping you off.”

“Nice,” Zane said. “And yet I really don’t want to give Lucien anything to work with.”



“Yeah, but...” I paused on another recipe. “*Aphrodisiac Roast Beef.*” And I lifted a brow before reading the description. “For the wife who needs more attention in the bedroom. This meal will make her husband randy until the next dawn.”

“Sounds just like her,” Zane admitted. “But we need to make sure there’s nothing in there Lucien can use against us.”

“A whole lot of cooking,” I assured him. “Considering that I can’t imagine Lucien Grimson in a kitchen at all? Yeah, this might just piss him off.”

“So Margie kept a spellbook after all,” Reese said as he moved closer to see the pages. “Is it all just recipes?”

“So far,” I said, reaching in the middle for a colored piece of paper that looked like a bookmark.

But when I flipped to that section of the book, I found something else. This looked more like a diary. At the top was a date, and one from long before I’d been born. Margie must’ve been a young girl at that time.

“I think she has some journal stuff in here too,” I said, glancing up at Zane.

“You need to read that first,” he told me. “Syl, I’m going to keep saying I can’t find it until you tell me it’s safe to mention. I will *not* give the Grimsons any power. I swear.”

“You’re also the one who told me a wix’s word is only as good as the spell that cast it,” I reminded him.

“I’ll cast a spell if you want,” he assured me. “In about two days when I can do some fucking magic. Until then, my word is all I’ve got.”

“I trust him,” Jackson said.

That made both Reese and me look over in surprise. For days now, Jackson had been doing his best to keep distance between himself and Zane. He’d insisted this was a bad idea, Zane wasn’t on our side, and more. Mostly, Jackson had just tried to keep distance.

But right now, the pair were standing almost shoulder to shoulder. They looked easy and comfortable like that. Clearly, they'd been in the cellar together before we got back, since they'd both come up with Reese.

So what had happened while we'd been gone? I looked over the pair, trying to find signs of rumpled clothing or bruised lips. Sadly, I saw nothing. So I was pretty sure they hadn't been making out, but they at least seemed a lot more comfortable in each other's presence.

Then I turned my eyes on Zane. "Then I'll trust you," I decided. "You can tell the coven I was hiding a book and you're going to see what it is. If we have to, I'll remove the pages with anything they can't have."

"And destroy your great-aunt's spellbook?" Reese asked.

I scoffed at that. "She's using paprika for focus! I have no clue why she'd do that. It makes no sense. Paprika is much better for energy and activity. Basil would be what I'd pick for focus."

"Because you don't do magic like your aunt," Zane realized. "You're following your own abilities, not her recipes. *That's* why you're stronger than I expected."

"Maybe?" I shrugged. "I just know that from what little I've seen, Margie and I do not have the same taste in food, which I think would alter the outcome of the spells too. I mean, pot roast for fucking?"

"And she was from the age when a wife was expected to make her man a hearty meal," Jackson pointed out. "Wouldn't shock me at all to find a few gelatin mold recipes in there."

"Eww," I mumbled, flipping to see if he was right.

Instead, I found a recipe for Spam. Yep, that was a sign I was done. Closing the book, I pushed myself to my feet and carried the thing over to the table. There, I dropped it, letting the thud of its weight ring out.

"Okay, so Margie did have a spellbook," I said, turning to face the men. "We know the coven wants it. We know this

would help Zane, because if he gives it to them, that means he's not betraying them. I can't use it - "

"That you know of by one quick glance," Zane countered. "Also, once I find that spellbook, I'm going to be hard-pressed to find a reason to keep coming back. I think Jackson's idea of stealing photos out of it will work best. I can tell the Grimsons that I found it, I can only get to it sometimes without getting caught, but I'm taking what I can."

"Makes sense," Reese said. "And ends up as a win-win. Zane gets to keep teaching you while showing progress to the Grimsons."

"And then?" Jackson asked. "What's the end game here?"

I glanced at Zane, because I knew what my endgame was. I just wasn't sure I was ready to say it in front of him yet. Yeah, he seemed nice enough, and he had been helping, but he was also a part of their coven. I wasn't completely sure where his loyalties lay.

"I'm going to guess this is related to the little trip you just had, hm?" Zane asked.

"I don't want to tell you about that," I admitted.

He lifted a hand. "Which is fair. Can I ask why?"

"Because I'm not sure of your endgame," I said. "Zane, you coming to help me while you're magicless is one thing. What happens when you get your power back?"

"Then I'll be able to use it," he said.

"Yeah." I flopped a hand in his direction. "That. See, that's the whole problem. I mean, you said it yourself. You're chained by them. What can they make you do? What would you be willing to say if you had to? We all know that if there's a choice between me or Jackson, you'll throw me to the wixen to save him."

"No!" Jackson said, snapping his head over to Zane.

"He would," Reese agreed. "C'mon, Jackson. We're not dumb. We're also not blind. Whatever thing is between the two of you is real. There's nothing wrong with that, but while

the Grimsons are pulling Zane's strings, we can only trust him so far."

"And they are *not* pulling my fucking strings!" Zane growled. "That's the whole fucking point. I will not let them." Then he looked at me. "And I wouldn't. So you know, if the choice is you or Jackson, they'd have to torture it out of me. I love him. You're the only hope I have of ever getting free. Those two things are tied together. I can't have one without the other."

"So I'll go over the spellbook," I said, "and see if there's anything I can give you. See, I'll use you back, Zane. I mean, that's kinda how this works, right? You're helping me to prove yourself. I'm helping you to learn while I can. If we're lucky, maybe this will even work out."

He nodded. "Yeah. I think that's actually a pretty fair assessment." Then he looked at Reese. "And I'm not going to do a damned thing to either your witch or your boyfriend."

"Or me," Reese said. "No, I got that. You've already walked away once to keep us safe. Zane, it's not that we don't trust you."

"It's just that we can't," I clarified. "We can't take that risk. I'm helping you as much as I can already. With the land, the information I've shared, and letting you in here? That's a lot, Zane."

He pushed between Jackson and Reese to stand before me. Slowly, he guided a chunk of my hair back so he could see my face easier. Then, with those two right behind him, Zane met my eyes and smiled like we were completely alone.

"It's easy to be cruel, did you know that?" he asked. "So easy. You learn to hate everyone. You never have to worry about anyone but yourself. It's also very lonely. Being kind, compassionate, and loving is a hell of a lot harder. Don't ever think you're weak because of it, Sylvia." Then his thumb swept across my jaw tenderly. "Just tell me when I'm pushing, okay?"

"Promise," I said softly.

He nodded once. “Good, because you’re too good of a witch to let anyone try to push you down. Even me.” Then he turned for the door. “I’ll be back tomorrow for your next lesson. Read the book before then.”

Together, Jackson, Reese, and I simply watched him leave. I wasn’t sure what had just happened, but it felt like we’d figured something out. Like all of us had.

Like maybe we’d just found our balance.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

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That night, after the guys had gone home, I picked up Margie's book and headed into the living room. They said I needed to look through this, and they were right. My problem was how little I knew about my great-aunt. The woman was all but a mystery to me, and it almost felt wrong to snoop in her things.

I hadn't been close to her. I probably could've been, but I'd never had the chance. Plus, from what I'd seen so far, her magic and mine were only vaguely similar. We both used spices - although different ones. That was pretty much it.

But with a full glass of wine and soft music playing, I stretched out on the couch and began flipping through her supposed spellbook from the first page. Immediately, I found something interesting.

*My mother always said that food is the way to a man's heart. I think it's more than that. Good food is comforting and healing. It makes the world better. In this journal, I will record all of my most successful recipes in the hopes that my daughter will one day be able to use them. If you're reading this, Hi honey!*

But Margie hadn't had any kids. According to my parents, she'd never been married. Had she hoped for a traditional family? Well, as traditional as a wixen's family could be, at any rate. Had she been lonely in life?

As I read through the recipes, I realized all of them were designed for large groups of people. This one feeds six. That one feeds eight. Only her desserts seemed to be a normal size, and that wasn't true for all of them.

She did have a lot of good ideas, though. I found a milkshake that would cure alcoholism, a casserole that was meant to increase fertility, and a dozen different dishes to cure various diseases. Cancer was common, but so was influenza, heart disease, and more.

It seemed Margie had just wanted to help people. My memories of her were of a sweet woman who was delighted by children. She'd never made me feel bad for being darker-skinned than the rest of the family. In truth, the only time it ever came up was when she'd helped me braid my hair. Her brush hadn't touched my wild curls, so she'd asked me how I combed it to braid. Then we'd put flowers in it.

I was smiling as I read dish after dish, thinking about how special she'd always made me feel. When I'd come here, I'd been a little princess, a fairy, and other things. We'd played make-believe all the time, finding the magic in the smallest things. And now, I knew that magic had been real.

"Oh, Margie," I breathed as I flipped the page again. "You were a good woman. I'm sorry I didn't know you better."

The next page, however, was the start of her journal. There, right at the top was a date that seemed like ancient history to me.

*May 8, 1967*

*I talked to Sammy today! He's so cute! Mom would be so mad if she knew, but Sammy won't tell her. Barbara said we shouldn't talk to*



*their kind, but Sammy's not really a monster. I think he might even be a little shy. I think I'm going to have lunch with him tomorrow.*

*~ ~ ~*

So it seemed Margie had at least had crushes on boys. I wasn't sure how old she'd been back then, but that sounded like she'd been in school. Middle school? High school? I didn't know, but it was odd to think about her that way.

I kept going, reading about my great-aunt's life. Most of it was boring, talking about getting grounded and other normal things for a young girl. She also hadn't written in her "diary" often. Once a month at most, it seemed, unless something special happened.

*June 27, 1968*

*Sammy was swimming down at the creek when I went to collect moss. His friends tried to chase me off, but Sammy said it was okay. He didn't mind if I stayed and hung out. I'm not sure I like his friends, though. They were drinking beer! They also curse like sailors, but Sammy came to sit on the bank with me. He asked what the moss was for, and I can't believe I told him! I know what he is, but I think he just figured out what I am.*

*~ ~ ~*

Wait, what? Was Sammy someone's kid from the coven? If so, how could he and Margie not know about each other? I

flipped a few more pages, reading through the entries until I found the guy's name again.

*October 12, 1968*

*He asked me to the dance! I said YES! Mom won't let him pick me up, so Barbara is saying that we're going together. Oh, her brother will be so angry if he finds out, but that's okay. We'll make sure he never knows. Besides, Kingsley never goes to things like this. He's too cool for that.*

*I just have to find a dress! Sammy said he likes blue, so I'm going to wear a blue one. I can't get over how pretty his eyes are or how easily he smiles. Barbara said I have to be careful with him, but I asked Mom. She said wixen are immune to them. I had to lie about one of them stealing my milk and drinking it to explain why I was asking, but Mom said they're all just beasts with no manners. Sammy's not, though. He's different.*

*~ ~ ~*

Well, it sounded like Margie had really been into this guy! Her mother was also completely against it. Granted, I got the impression the coven had decided wixen could only marry other wixen. Zane had said a few things along those lines, so it was probably some stupid tradition they were holding onto.

So why had Margie's other siblings blended into normal society instead of finding a coven? My grandmother had never mentioned anything about magic. My mom seemed to be completely unaware of its existence outside of fairytales and fantasies.

October 18, 1968

The dance was amazing. Sammy was a perfect gentleman! He even wore a blue tie to match my dress. We danced, and while he's not very good at it, neither am I. All I could do was stare at his beautiful honey eyes. I probably looked pathetic, but he kept smiling at me, and when the dance was over, he asked me to walk with him!

We ended up behind the football field. There's a lot of trees out there. That's when he finally asked if I was really a witch. When I said yes, he said that made it all okay then and kissed me!

I kissed Sammy!

I think I'm in love with him. I have been for so long, but he's so nice. He is so cute! He also likes me back and asked if I'd be his girlfriend. We have to keep it a secret because his dad and my mom would never be okay with this. Still, we can meet in the forest. I just have to sneak out, and no one will think it's weird for a wolf to want to go running. I told him we should meet at the creek.

~ ~ ~

Wolf? I read that twice, then looked over to Margie's bookshelf again. She had an extensive collection of witch and werewolf romances. Zane said werewolves were real. But there was no way. Maybe that was the name of his gang? She'd said his friends seemed to be the tough kind. And if Sammy was a bad boy, that would make more sense why Margie's mom didn't want her around him, right?

*November 9, 1968*

*Sammy said he loves me!*

*He loves me, he loves me, he loves me! I can't believe it. Of course I said I've been in love with him forever. I don't care that he's a wolf, and I think living with his pack would be amazing. They're all so happy! Besides, I could help. I told him how I can make things to heal them or help with the effects of the moon. Tomorrow, I'm going to make him some cookies to prove it.*

*~ ~ ~*

My breath fell out. Wolves? Pack? Yeah, this was definitely sounding like werewolves.

*November 11, 1968*

*Kingsley saw me kissing Sammy! He said he's going to tell my mom if I don't break up with him, but I won't! That jerk thinks I should be dating him but Sammy's so much better. He*

loves me! Kingsley is just jealous because Mom still owns the forest. I'm going to have to tell Sammy, but maybe we can just pretend? Because I don't know what will happen if the coven fights with the pack. Our families have both lived here for so long now. Besides, the wolves are much stronger.

~ ~ ~

And now I couldn't stop reading.

November 17, 1968

Sammy bought me a ring. It's just a promise ring, but he wants to get married. He said his mother understands and supports him, but his father thinks I'm going to make problems. I don't care. I love him! I love him as a man. I love him as a wolf. When the moon comes out, he'll lay in the forest with me and let me rest my head on his side. His fur's so soft and his ears are cute. His eyes are always the same, though. Always that golden color. Not brown, not yellow, but somewhere in the middle. He says it's a wolf thing, but I just think it's beautiful.

I also think I'm ready. I want to be his. I don't care if anyone else approves. I don't care

what Mom thinks about their kind. He can't give me the disease, so it's okay. And you know what? If I end up pregnant, then Mom will have to let us get married!

~ ~ ~

November 23, 1968

I'm not a virgin anymore. We made love! Sammy promised that no matter what, he will never leave me. He said he even sneaks out to watch the coven do our rituals. He thinks I'm beautiful! The most amazing boy at school is in love with me, and I feel like it's too good to be true.

I will remember every touch of his hands on my body. The way he kissed me. The words he whispered as we did it. He's the only man I will ever love. I made a vow to him and sealed it. No one else will ever have my heart but him.

Marjorie Maybrook + Sampson Delaney

4 ever!

~ ~ ~

November 24, 1968

Kingsley knows. He told my mom! She said I can't see Sammy anymore. She said I'm just a little whore! She's going to unenroll me from school! She said she did fine without an education so I don't need one either. I'm a witch. I need to worry about being a witch, but I love Sammy! She can't do this to me!

~ ~ ~

November 25, 1968

I snuck out. I told my mother that I will never take her place in the coven because I want to be Sammy's wife. I don't care if I can't become a wolf like him. I'm a witch, and there's no reason I can't still be a part of their pack. I don't want to be rich! I don't care about magic and power and the other stupid stuff she's so obsessed with.

I am going to marry Sammy! We'll run away if we have to. We'll find another pack somewhere. Together, we'll be happy, and it doesn't matter if we're young. It doesn't matter if no one believes this is real. I love him so much it hurts!

~ ~ ~



November 30, 1968

I haven't been home in days. Sammy's mom is helping to hide me, but Mr. Grimson came to their house today. He says he owns all the land. He says he has allowed the wolves to be there because they kept to themselves, but now they're stealing from the coven. I think he means me.

But I'm not a thing to steal. I'm in love with Sammy and we're going to be together forever. Mom has other kids. I mean, my brother can barely feel magic, and my sister has none. I don't care. It's not like I'm a strong witch either! Maybe that's because Dad was normal? Mr. Grimson always says that Mom made a mistake, and I think that's what he's talking about. Then again, he only cares about magic.

I think Sammy and I need to run away. He says he has family in Ohio. We can move there, get married, and no one will ever find us. I'll make sure of it. Then none of this will be my problem!

~ ~ ~

December 2, 1968

At the coven meeting, everyone was staring at me. They know I ran away. They know Mom asked Mr. Grimson to find me. They know I was dragged out of Sammy's house! Now they're calling me a hussy and saying I'm easy, but I don't care. I'll leave again just as soon as I can. Sammy's making plans, he said. We will be together.

This is all Kingsley's fault. He's ugly and rude and a jerkface! I'm not going to leave Sammy for him. I don't care what he says or how much he threatens me! I'm not going to date Kingsley Grimson ever!

~ ~ ~

December 4, 1968

Tonight, we have a ritual. Tomorrow, Sammy and I will run away. This is it. I just have to pretend to be good for one more night and then I'll be happy forever.

~ ~ ~

December 5, 1968

I want to die.

*I helped.*

*I didn't know the ritual would destroy the wolves! I didn't know Mr. Grimson's threat was real! I just thought he was trying to act like the big man again. I didn't know!*

*The smell of smoke is still in the air. Even in the forest, we can smell it. All the houses burned. So many wolves died. Sammy's mom is dead, and he knows I was a part of it. He said he hates me.*

*Mom says there will be no more wolves in Summerpoint. She says this is because I couldn't keep control over myself. She said it's all my fault and I just want to die! I can't live without Sammy. I won't ever love anyone else but him! I swore it. I bound it to the world. I said it three times and I don't care if he never feels the same way.*

*I did this. I helped Kingsley and his father kill the wolves. I am the reason the ones who lived will never come back. I'm the reason Sammy was burned! His beautiful face! His arm! He tried to save his mom, but he couldn't, and now he hates me. He hates me so much!*

*Magic is evil.*

~ ~ ~

That page was covered in tear stains. The writing was scribbled and wild-looking. It was raw, as if a young Margie had poured out her true emotions onto the page. It also made a lot more questions.

So, picking up my phone, I sent off a text to the one person who might be able to tell me if any of this was real: Erika.

**Sylvia:**

Do you know anything about a fire in 1968? A lot of people died, it sounds like.

Her reply came back faster than I expected.

**Erika:**

Yeah, the subdivision fire. That's when people started to realize the founding families could do more than threats. The fire started and ended within an hour, the fire department couldn't get in to put any of it out, and it moved fast.

**Erika:**

It also stopped at the edge of the subdivision.

I sat there staring at the screen with Margie's journal in my lap. That sure sounded like magic. It definitely fit what Margie had been saying.

**Sylvia:**

The Grimsons did it. Margie said so.

**Erika:**

Was that before or after they had wild things?

**Sylvia:**

During. I think this is going to be a lot harder than we thought.

**Erika:**

Beth and I are still all in. You know Nora is too.

**Sylvia:**

Yeah. I'm just hoping that isn't a bad idea. I don't want anything to happen to any of you.

**Erika:**

Why? What did you find?

**Sylvia:**

A reason to think this coven is even more evil than I imagined.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

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I read the entire book - every single entry Margie had made in her life. After the fire, she stopped writing as much, but the woman didn't quit until well into the 2000s. She also never forgave Kingsley.

Sammy had moved away the next day. He blamed Margie for his mother's death. She never saw him again, but she also never stopped loving him. At some point, the entire coven got together and made an agreement that no other supernaturals would be allowed to use the powers of Summerpoint's protective spells.

Now, I wasn't sure what "other" kinds of supernatural things there could be. Wixen and wolves. Those were all I knew about, but I was starting to realize the world might be a lot more complicated than I'd ever dreamed of.

I also hated it. From the way Margie talked about them, werewolves were just people. Normal people who seemed to become animals sometimes. They couldn't be wild and uncontrollable beasts if Margie had been laying her head on Sammy's side while he was in his canine form, right?

And in the end, Margie *had* ended up with Kingsley. She hadn't married him, though. She hadn't given him her land. She'd resisted in the only way she knew how: passively. The woman seemed to have been a saint who only wanted to help others, and I got the impression from her diary that she was an outlier in her coven.

Power. Magic. Control. Those were the things every other founding family member valued. Even Pearl Maybrook, Margie's mother, had chased it. From the little bits Margie said about magic, it seemed that not only did she not have much, but she also didn't care. She could help, so she did - and Kingsley spent the rest of his life taunting her about it.

A "pushover," he called her in one entry. An "idiot," in another. She wrote about how he could make her more powerful, but she refused. He promised her the world if she'd just give him a chance, and she locked herself away in the forest.

But the trees never talked to her. The wild things ran outside her windows, but they never stopped to check on her. She didn't have a familiar. She didn't have a bond with the land she lived upon. Margie simply baked pies and meals to help the normal people in town, using that as her own form of redemption.

She'd also been sweet to me. She'd shown me miracles that had made me feel special. She'd played with a lonely little girl, showing me fantastical things that I'd spent most of my life thinking I'd imagined. And when I went to bed that night, I dreamed of all of it.

From lightning in jars to fairies taking up residence in the silly little "homes" we'd made for them, my dreams were like something from a children's book. The entire forest became our little haven, shutting out the horrors of the real world while Margie and I played as hard as little girls could.

So the next morning, I woke up, put on my hiking boots, then picked up both books. The strange one Erika had given me might be nothing. For all I knew, it was some historical relic the library had lost, but I happened to know someone who'd been around for a few centuries.

I was making my way through the back porch when Flower fell in beside me. I smiled down at her, but paused.

"I'm just going to find Gyth," I promised.



*And I can find him easier than you,* she pointed out. *Let me be a familiar, Sylvia. You do not have to do everything on your own, and you spoil us too much.*

“Okay,” I relented.

The kids stayed behind. They were squeaking over something that sounded like a game. Flower also didn’t seem concerned at all. Then again, they were growing up. Too soon, they’d be mature little critters and likely vanish into the forest with everything else.

Hopefully Flower would stay. Maybe she’d even have another litter, although I wasn’t quite sure how that worked with a familiar. I definitely didn’t want to ask, because I was a little scared of a conversation about skunk mating habits!

It was nice outside, though. The morning was still early, which meant cool. The sunlight fell through the thick canopy above, and leaves crunched under our feet. With her tail up in the air, Flower led me deeper into the forest, aiming for the part I rarely visited.

*Gythiom!* she thought loudly. *The witch has questions!*

To my left, something crashed. A moment later, a stick snapped. The sounds were ominous, but I’d already figured out that my forest would take care of me, so I wasn’t too nervous. Only a bit.

And then Gyth stepped out from between trees and looked at me with a smile. “What kind of questions, little witch?”

I moved the books from my side to my chest. “History questions,” I said. “Can we sit? These things are heavy.”

Folding his legs, Gyth lowered himself down. It was always strange to watch him, because he didn’t quite move like a person. His joints were just a bit different and his body seemed much more flexible. Still, I joined him, groaning a bit as I bent, which made Flower chitter in amusement.

“Hush,” I teased. “I was curled up on the couch all night reading. I’m a little stiff today.” Then I passed the books to Gyth. “One of these is Margie’s spellbook, I think. It’s recipes

and a diary, mostly. That's what I was reading. The other one was found in the library."

Gyth immediately reached for the strange tome. His body softened. His long, clawed fingers treated the thing with care as he lifted it into his lap and then opened the cover. With one talon, he traced the pages, his goat-like eyes flicking across the many drawings.

"This is not for people," he said.

"What is it?"

He glanced up for a moment, then back to the book. I waited as he carefully turned the pages, scanning each one. Around us, insects filled the silence and the trees rustled softly. It was calm. He wasn't upset. I just didn't know what that thing even was!

When he reached the end, he closed the book and curled his hands around it. "This is a grimoire."

"So a spellbook?"

"No." He caressed the cover. "This is more. This is a history of magic. It has records of the spells that protect Summerpoint, the plants that grow here, and their uses to protect us and the coven. This, Sylvia, is our agreement with the wixen of Summerpoint. It is our attempt to share knowledge, but none of you can understand it anymore."

"What language is it in?" I asked.

"Mine." He smiled.

"Is it related to the Voynich Manuscript?" I tried next.

"I do not know what that is."

So I pulled out my phone and quickly Googled the well-known book. Pulling up a photo of one of the pages, I turned it to him. Gyth's eyes narrowed even as he leaned in.

"This is not from Summerpoint."

"No, I think it's from Italy or something," I said, since I'd read a ton about this thing when I'd first gotten here and found Margie's note. "But it sure looks like the same language."

“Because it is,” he agreed. “That page is about the agreement between the women and the woods. These grimoires are meant to be our contract. They are what binds my kind to yours. They are the means for witches to get magic, and because that one still exists, the descendants of those women will have access to the magic that most humans can never touch.”

“So if it burned up in a fire, the witches from those bloodlines would lose magic?” I asked.

“No,” he admitted. “But if it was destroyed in a way to end the contract, they would.”

Okay, there was a lot there in that one little sentence. To me, it sounded like a way to cut the Grimsons and their coven off.

“So what does it take to end the contract?” I asked.

“A ritual,” he said. “One my kind performs, but there aren’t enough of us to perform it anymore, and I cannot do it alone.”

“Can I help you do it?”

His head jumped up and those strange inhuman eyes met mine. “I do not know. Two is still not enough. Three is the smallest amount that can make a pattern. More is better.”

“But it can be done,” I realized. “Somehow, you can destroy the coven’s power, right?”

“In theory,” he admitted. “Not in reality, because I do not have enough to work with.”

“Which means we really need to get your brothers free.” I nodded, thinking this might be more important than I’d realized.

“And then healed, and then convince them to agree to sever the spell - because it will harm us too, Sylvia. It removes magic. It will take *your* magic.”

“So?” I asked. “Gyth, if we can stop the coven from being so powerful, then can’t I just get magic back? Isn’t there a way to make that happen?”

“I do not know,” he said softly.

Flower simply rubbed up against his bent leg. *You could change the coven, though, she pointed out. Instead of destroying it, you and the other wild things could simply reassign it.*

“But we can’t!” Gyth snarled.

“Why can’t you?” I pressed, aware that he looked angry, and that was not something I was used to.

The growl that rumbled in his throat sounded like a bear. His clawed hands clenched into fists. Sitting before me in a calm pose, Gyth was struggling not to lash out, and I kinda wanted to lean away - but I wouldn’t. I knew him. I trusted him. I was also sure this anger wasn’t directed at me.

“Gyth?” I asked.

“A coven needs five. Six is better.”

“But you, me, your two brothers...” I paused, not sure if my idea was stupid. “... and maybe Zane? That’s five.”

“No,” he said. “You do not understand.”

“Because you’re not helping me to understand!” I snapped.

“We need five or six,” he said. “Of my kind, Sylvia. Not combined. We need more of my kind, and my kind simply do not exist. We’ve been hunted. We’ve been killed. The forest is dying where we were ripped away from it. There are three of us left, and two have been trapped for so long that they are weak and powerless. We need five. At best, we have three.”

“Wild things,” I realized.

He nodded slowly. “So there is no point in removing your power when you are the only one who can help.”

Which sure made it sound like he could still destroy the coven and its power. Granted, Gyth never spoke in a way that was easy to understand. He knew so much that it was all just common sense to him but completely mind-boggling to me. The question was what I’d missed this time.

“Do you even want to stop the coven?” I asked.

“Stop them from what?” he asked back.

“From hunting you and your kind!”

“That? Yes.”

“From hurting people in town!” I added quickly.

“The affairs of humans matter less to me,” he admitted. “I care when the forest cares. Our agreement was to protect nature. To protect our forest from the greed of humanity. To do that, we gave power to humans, and some are now using it greedily. It is your nature, after all.”

Ducking my head, I let out a groan of annoyance. “Okay,” I breathed. “So what does this grimoire mean for me?”

Gyth chuckled softly. “It means Margie found a way to hide it. She was the keeper of the contract. Now you are. That is the place of the nature witch. She shall belong to the forest, and the forest shall belong to her.”

“So, I’m just supposed to keep this?” I asked.

“And learn to read it,” he said, reaching over to tap my brow. “This book is our agreement. It lists the spells we have made together. It is a history of this coven, the plants and animals that were involved, and the women we bound ourselves to. You, Sylvia, are now its guardian. Do not let it fall into the wrong hands.”

“And the other book?” I asked. “I think that’s Margie’s spellbook.”

“It is,” he said, “but she was never strong enough to make spells that mattered. She was a hedge witch who cared for her community. You are a nature witch who cares for her forest.”

“And my community,” I insisted. “Gyth, I’m going to take care of Jackson, Reese, Nora, and all my other friends. And their friends, if I have to.”

“All without harming the forest,” he said. “Yes. That is why you are a nature witch. You watch both. The last Maybrook could only watch one.”

“And if I happen to let the coven see Margie’s spells?”

Gyth began to chuckle, leaning back with a strange little smile on his lips. “Then maybe they will cook better?”

“You do know Kingsley Grimson is trying to make his son the next Maybrook, right?” I asked.

“So he will definitely need to learn how to cook,” Gyth assured me. “Show them Margie’s spells, Sylvia. Do not show them your own.”

“I don’t have a spellbook,” I pointed out.

“Maybe you should.”

And that was one thing I hadn’t even thought of. “But I don’t really follow spells, do I?”

“You follow nature,” he said. “You feel the plants. You know their power. That is what you need to record so that the next generation of wixen will learn that it isn’t about a recipe. Power is about an intention.”

“I don’t even know how to do that,” I admitted.

“Me either,” Gyth said, “but you humans are very inventive. Just keep the grimoire safe? So long as we have that, we still have some control over the contract of the coven.”

“Yeah,” I breathed. “I think I actually know the perfect place for it. The same place I got it.”

Back in the library, after I’d snapped pictures of the pages and figured out how to read them. If Margie had hidden the book away, she must’ve had a reason. Erika said it wasn’t listed in the library at all, so would she be willing to put it back? Probably. More if I told her why.

“No,” Gyth said. “I think you need to keep that close. Your home is safer than you know. The forest and your familiars make sure of it.”

“Oh.”

And now I was even more confused. I kinda felt like my entire chat with Gyth had raised a lot more questions than

answers this time, and I was already overwhelmed with all the things I didn't know.

# CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

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Monday morning, I woke up feeling rested and refreshed. No. It was more than that. Cracking open my eyes, I checked the digital calendar clock I kept on the wall and saw the dark circle at the side which indicated today was the new moon. It was also Monday, but I cared about that a lot less.

Because I was no longer being drained.

Finally, my body was starting to retain the magic I was used to. For a little too long, I simply lay there, enjoying the refreshing feeling - until I realized what this meant. If I was no longer being drained, then neither was the rest of the coven.

Sitting up quickly, I grabbed my phone, unplugged it, and was swiping for my texts, only to see an unread message waiting. Confused, I found it was from Sylvia. It also included a picture. A very nice picture of her bent over, putting a book in one of her kitchen drawers.

Yeah, I had to enlarge that a bit. Damn, her pants made her ass look amazing. Her spiral curls fell across her face and shoulders, but her position? It gave me some very bad thoughts. Only belatedly did my eyes focus on the book she was holding.

I blamed my lack of caffeine for that, because it was the same handwritten thing she'd just found. Margie's spellbook, she'd called it. A list of recipes, it looked like. But now that I realized what this photo was about, I closed it and read the actual message she'd sent me.

**Sylvia:**

New moon today. Trees say the spell is done. I also read the entire spellbook and it's got nothing in it to worry about. The diary part isn't quite as nice.

Okay. That was from just after nine this morning. Why the hell was this woman - who worked from home - awake at that hour? More importantly, who had been the lucky man to take the picture? Jack or Reese? Had he taken advantage of that position the way he should've? Because if he hadn't, he was a fucking idiot.

But I had to write out a response, so I rubbed my eyes and then started typing.

**Zane:**

Magic is returning so your trees are right. I'm guessing I'm supposed to say I took that picture? What part about the diary is a problem?

She responded within seconds.

**Sylvia:**

Yes, you're supposed to say you took that picture when you visited. We even checked for reflections in the glass. As for the diary, well Margie was in love with a wolf, it seems. Was there a group of werewolves living in Summerpoint back in the late 60s?

**Zane:**

Yes. Kingsley's father leased houses to them in a subdivision he made. When the wolves turned against the coven, the coven burned them out. No shifters of any kind have been allowed back since. There's a spell on the town to alert the coven if one even passes through.

**Sylvia:**

other shifters?

**Zane:**

They aren't all wolves. I know there are bears and some others. Never met one. Don't want to.

**Sylvia:**

Sounds like Margie was going to marry a wolf and run away with him. Kingsley put a stop to it. Margie unknowingly helped the ritual that burned them out, killing her boyfriend's mom. She swore to resist the coven after that. Not sure Kingsley would like that part.

**Zane:**

But it would also prove it's the real thing. I think we should eventually get there. So what's my story with this book?

**Sylvia:**

Calling.

My phone rang almost immediately, so I swiped to answer. "Mm?" I greeted her.

"Did you just wake up?"

"Yeah," I muttered. "Don't judge. I am a slumlord by trade, which means I don't have to worry about actual work. Sleeping in is good for the soul too. Now what's my story?"

"You caught me baking," she told me. "When you came to see what I was doing, I quickly put my recipe book away, but you caught a picture of it."

"Hard to explain," I told her. "You were trying to hide it and I'm trying to snap a pic? Nah, that's got a good dozen holes in it. The picture is nice, though."

"Fuck off," she laughed. "Zane, we need to feed this to them. You said the Grimsons want this spellbook, and it's

basically worthless. It also isn't anything I can use, so I'm more than willing to let them have it."

"Eventually," I told her. "I'm going to start off easy. No, not using the picture. I'll sneak that in later. For now, I'll just say that you have a very old and handwritten book in your kitchen that you keep moving around and do not want me touching, so I'm suspicious."

"Whatever you want to do," she told me. "And if you're getting your magic back, does this mean my lessons are going to take a step up?"

"Not until you can control yourself," I said, smiling at the double meaning there. "You, little witch, need to learn how to keep your hands - er, magic - to yourself."

"Ha-fucking-ha," she replied.

"And I want to know who took that picture."

She scoffed. "Reese. Why?"

All I could do was sigh. "I'm going to guess he was too much of a gentleman to take advantage of your naughty little pose, hm?"

"What?!" she asked. "I'm just putting the book in a drawer!"

"Yeah," I muttered as I threw off my blankets and finally decided to get out of bed. "Keep telling yourself that, Sylvia."

"You can call me Syl, you know," she chided. "Everyone else does."

"The same everyone you're sleeping with?" I headed into the bathroom. "I figured that little nickname was reserved for your boy toys."

"And my friends," she said.

But that made me pause. Friends? Us? I felt my lips do a stupid twitching thing but tried to ignore it.

"And here I thought we were mortal enemies," I taunted. "You know, me as part of the evil coven and you the devious

little witch who is going to siphon off all my power for *over a fucking month.*”

“Yeah...” she muttered. “About that. Does ‘sorry’ make it better?”

“Not really, no,” I told her. “I’m going to have to spend the next week recharging my tarot just to get everything working properly. Oh, and I won’t be visiting you today. Seems I have to go be a truly evil wix with my own coven and hint about this book you’re trying to hide from me.”

“Tomorrow?” she asked.

And I swore there was a hint of hope in her tone. Well, shit. It seemed I liked this woman. Yeah, she was hot, and I would definitely hit that - or would’ve if she was single. The whole relationship with Jack and Reese definitely complicated things.

“Tomorrow,” I promised her. “I might even make it there before noon if you’re nice to me.”

“Then I’ll make cookies,” she said. “Bye, Zane. Go be an evil wix.”

“Bye, Syl,” I said, my lips doing that stupid thing again.

It was a smile, but the dumb kind. The kind a guy did when he liked a girl. The type of smile that had a life of its own and I couldn’t control. Thankfully, no one could see me to call me on it, but I knew it was there. I was also going to have to be very careful with that.

I wasn’t supposed to be getting close to those three. I was supposed to be helping Syl become more powerful. I was supposed to be making sure they were safe and stable. I was *not* trying to push my way into the middle of their relationship!

Oh, Sylvia had made it clear I was welcome to rekindle things with Jack, but that wouldn’t be fair to any of us. Reese loved that man too much to deserve me stepping in and messing that up. Those two men worked well with Sylvia. Together, the three of them were an adorable trio. The kind

that seemed like it would last. The kind that might actually have a chance of working.

I wouldn't get that luxury. Making peace with Jack was nice - if that was even what we'd done. He was talking to me, at least. Reese was easier, but he always had been. He'd accepted mine and Jack's relationship so easily back when we'd first started messing around. He'd made me feel like two guys being together was perfectly normal. And now he was the one standing where I'd always wanted to be - at Jack's side.

The three of them deserved everything they had. Plus, it was my spell that had set this all in motion. My fault, one might say. I'd called the Maybrook heir here. I'd pushed for a powerful wixen to hold the coven's aspirations at bay. I'd intentionally designed that spell to give the Maybrook heir something to tie them to Summerpoint.

And now I was the one who got to see it all playing out before my eyes.

A beautiful woman, the man I'd always loved, and the man who was perfect for him. If that wasn't the cost of my own goals, then I couldn't think of what more I could pay. It would be worth it though. In the end, it would definitely be worth it.

While I thought, I got myself presentable. Today, I felt like a whole new man. Or maybe it was more true to say I felt like my old self all over again. That vacant feeling inside my body was refilling, and I knew I could once again perform magic. So if I could tell, I was sure the Grimsons could as well. Hopefully, that would put them in a good mood.

Two hours later, I drove across town to the Grimsons' mansion. This time, the door opened just as I reached it. On the other side, the butler actually smiled. That was a good sign. And when I asked to speak with Kingsley, the man immediately led me through the house to one of the sitting areas.

There, Kingsley, Lucien, and Nancy Redmoon were all sharing afternoon tea. There were quaint little cookies and pastries set out, along with two different teapots that looked like they might still be partially full. Cups and saucers were

casually placed beside the three of them, and they were chatting casually.

“...Two weeks until the full moon, roughly,” Nancy was saying.

Then the butler tapped at the open door. “Sir? You have another guest today.”

“Zane!” Kingsley said when he saw me. “Come in, boy. Sit. Have some tea with us.”

“Thank you, sir.” I made my way to an empty chair and reached for what appeared to be an unused cup. “I take it I’m not the only one feeling the return of magic then?”

“Not at all,” Nancy assured me. “Like I was telling Kingsley, the weather isn’t wanting to cooperate for this next full moon. The pressure is suggesting rain. I’m not sure if I should bring that forward or push it back.”

“Forward,” I told her. “Rain it all out a week before so we won’t have to worry about missing the night. I think the entire coven has to be ready for a celebration.”

“And this ritual will definitely give us something to celebrate,” Lucien said, smiling like a fool.

“We’re replacing the Maybrook,” Nancy told me.

“Oh, Zane knows about that,” Kingsley assured her. “I told him a while ago.”

Which made the woman’s smile slip. Her eyes narrowed and she looked me over again. “I see. Odd how you decided to only tell me about it today.”

“Not your fault, Nancy,” I assured her. “It seems this is one task you’re not cut out for.” Then I looked over to Kingsley. “However, I think our plan is working.”

“Oh?” he asked.

I nodded slowly. “I will admit, helping the Holt woman wasn’t as easy as I’d expected. She’s not a complete idiot, but she’s clueless about magic. My problem was that I kept thinking I was looking for, well, a book of spells.”

“Aren’t you?” Lucien asked.

Which was when I let my most devious smile show. “It seems that Sylvia has a very old, handwritten book in her kitchen. I didn’t think much of it at first, but she always closes it when I walk past.”

“Okay?” Lucien asked. “And?”

“And what do Sylvia’s spells consist of?” I asked. “Recipes. A fucking cookbook. All this time, I was looking for a tome filled with symbols and witchcraft when I should’ve been looking for a cookbook.”

“Because Margie’s magic was in her baking,” Nancy said.

I nodded. “And Sylvia doesn’t want me looking at one specific book. The one she always goes to when she’s making her little goodies for her friends. The one that probably has all the information about how her magic works, because she knows a little. More than she could’ve learned by chance. And where else would she have gotten that knowledge if not from Margie?”

“And that bitch hid it as a cookbook!” Kingsley growled. “That’s why she wouldn’t give it to me.”

“What good will a cookbook do me?” Lucien asked.

“Depends on what’s inside it, hm?” I said. “But this means our ruse is working. Sylvia can now light her own candles and pretty much nothing else. And since I’m welcome in her house...”

“And how did you make that happen, Zane?” Nancy asked.

I chuckled and leaned back in my chair. “It’s amazing how susceptible young women are to a pretty face, Nancy. Hence why this is one task you’re not cut out for. That little witch doesn’t have a damned clue about anything we do. She just knows that when I smile at her, she sure wants to smile back.”

Nancy just shook her head. “I thought she already had the construction boys.”

“Who are fucking each other!” Lucien grumbled.



“Which makes it even easier for me to make her the center of my attention,” I told them.

And it was even true, to a point. Because if I focused on teaching Sylvia how to be strong enough to hold off the coven, I would not be dragging Jack and Reese any further into this. If I kept my dirty thoughts to myself and my hands away from all three of them, then I would not be risking them with my plans.

If I let these three think I was taking advantage of Sylvia’s ignorance about magic, then none of them would ever suspect my real plans. Not Kingsley, Lucien, Nancy, or even Sylvia. No, if I played my cards right - pun completely intended - then no one would see this coming.

And that was the only way it would ever work.

# CHAPTER FORTY

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Now that Zane had a little magic, our lessons were easier. He could actually show me what I was supposed to be doing. Not that our magic was the same, but according to him, the concept wasn't that different. We both had to pull the power into ourselves and "channel" it.

Mine came from nature. His came from chance. I didn't really understand how that worked, but it did. Zane could pull in the magic of random events from around him. He said his deck of tarot cards helped him feel it, focus it, and pull it into his body. For me, it was the forest. Just sitting in the middle of it - even in my house - made me feel like I was connected to nature in a way that allowed me to fill myself with this warm and glowing sensation.

That was the magic I had access to. That magic could then be pushed out to create my spells. I didn't need to always take it from myself, because the world around me was offering it up. All I had to do was learn how to feel it, pull it in, and use it first.

Easier said than done.

We burned through a half dozen candles over the next two days. Every time I tried to light the wick, I created a bonfire. Zane didn't have that problem. He could barely light the wick, easily light the wick, or burn it down the way I always did. The trick was control, he said.

To master that, he'd brought stuff. The first was a big picture of a pentagram with detailed designs inscribed in it.

Jackson called it a poster, but it wasn't really. The paper was heavier and made with chalkboard paint or something similar, because Zane had chalk to write on it. The pentagram design was permanent, though.

He used that to show me focus. Instead of simply releasing my magic on the wick, I had to follow the designs. I had to bend the power around the shapes. I needed to go step by step, narrowing down the stream of magic until I finally reached the center of the pentagram where the candle was sitting.

I still melted half the candle the first few times, but I was getting better. By going through the shapes on his poster, it made me slow down. If I stopped pushing, I could almost feel the magic pulling me along, guiding me through the pure shapes of his design.

And finally, at the end of the second day, I managed to only "seriously" light the candle, not turn it into a blow torch. The flame was still more than what we were going for, but it was controlled and the moment I let go of the power, the flame settled down to something normal and sustainable.

"Nice," Zane said. "This means you're making progress."

I just flopped back. "Great. I also feel worn right the fuck out."

He laughed. "Mental focus is often the hardest part of magic, Syl."

I smiled at the sound of my nickname. He'd taken to that easily enough. "So how does lighting a candle apply to the rest of magic?"

"Mm." Zane leaned to the side so that he was lying facing me. "In ritual magic, we channel our power to the leader of the ritual. For me, that's Kingsley Grimson. Our presence in the formation allows him to manipulate our stream of magic. If I don't want him to burn me out, then I need to know how to control that stream before he gets access to it."

"And I don't have rituals with the Grimsons," I reminded him.

“No, but I’m sure you will have magic that isn’t made from spices and stored in jars,” he pointed out. “Margie could do more than merely bake. She could also heal with her hands. You’ve mentioned healing the trees, which sounds like it’s the same.”

“Wait.” That made me sit back up. “Margie could heal? Like, are we talking laying hands on someone and glowy lights to make boo-boos go away?”

“Sorta,” he admitted. “No glowing lights. Yes, the boo-boos went away. It also wiped her out. She barely had enough power to mend a broken bone, but she was willing to try.”

My eyes narrowed. “And you know this because...”

“Wild things aren’t easy to catch,” he admitted. “Kingsley has been trying to trap them since I was a boy. My father wasn’t the only one to get wounded by them.”

“And you helped?” I asked.

“I had to help,” he corrected. “I also have done everything in my power to make it fail. We haven’t been able to catch one since...” He looked down and pushed out a heavy breath. “I was like twenty, so it’s been a while.”

“Sixteen years?” I asked, trying to do the math. “You’re thirty-six, right? Like Jackson?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “It wasn’t a deer, and I tried to make the spell fail, but it was too late. The thing was in the trap. Now it’s under Kingsley’s control.”

“Where?” I asked.

Which made him look at me strangely. “What do you mean?”

“Where is it?” I asked. “If it’s under Kingsley’s control, then that means it’s still alive, right? So where is it?”

“I have no idea,” he admitted. “That isn’t the sort of thing the Grimsons would tell us.”

“So what happens to them?” I pressed. “Zane! When they’re caught in these traps, what happens?”

“They’re bound in a magical barrier,” he explained. “Once they’re secure, Kingsley casts a spell that knocks them out. The unconscious beast is transferred to a very well-secured steel cage. It’s like a dog kennel, but bigger. More like the sort of thing they use to transport lions between zoos.”

“And he just has those sitting around?” I asked.

“Or it could be just the one,” Zane said. “But the men all heave the thing in there, the cage is secured, the spell is activated, and then the Grimsons handle it from there. We’re all dismissed, leaving it in the field behind their place.”

“So he’s probably keeping them close,” I mumbled.

“Why?” Zane asked.

My head snapped up and I realized I may have said too much. “Uh...”

“Because you’re trying to find them,” he realized.

“I kinda want to free them,” I admitted. “But Gyth doesn’t know where they are, and we don’t have a clue. All signs point to Kingsley’s big mansion, though.”

“Is that the research you were doing that you didn’t want me to know about?”

I grimaced. “Yeah, see - “

Which was when the door at the top of the stairs opened. “Syl?” The voice belonged to Nora.

“Down here!” I told her.

“Shit,” Zane breathed, scrambling for the mess we’d made in the middle of the room.

“Don’t spill the wax,” I hissed as he pulled the poster out from under the stand that was holding the candle.

“What wax?” Nora asked as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

Zane’s poster was still unrolled even if it was in his hands. The candle was now sitting on my rug with a stick of chalk discarded beside it. Never mind that the pair of us were sitting

in front of it like we'd been having some kind of indoor little picnic.

"Witch stuff?" Nora asked, barely slowing down before she turned to the spice shelf. "I mean, it would have to be for the pair of you to miss the shirtless muscle-fest going on in the bathroom upstairs."

"What?" Zane asked.

I waved him off. "Jackson and Reese are redoing the first-floor bathroom. It was in bad shape. I wanted it modernized."

"No," he hissed, gesturing to Nora. "She knows?"

"Of course I know!" Nora said as she began setting down brilliantly-colored bottles on my workspace. "Who do you think helped her find her contractors? Who do you think has been helping her stalk all you wixen freaks? Oh, I'm sorry. The founding families, right?"

Zane's piercing blue eyes landed on me. "Sylvia, we're not supposed to leak this to the mundanes!"

"But you told Jackson?" Nora asked. "Dunno how to break this to you, Zane. He's as unmagical as I am. Reese? He knows everything Jackson does."

"Now," I corrected. "He didn't exactly know about wixen until I kinda went crazy."

"And your crazy is the good kind," Nora said before turning to Zane. "What about you, hm? As often as you've been cool with me, I thought you knew that I knew."

"I knew that you knew Jack," he said. "I figured you'd tell him things he could figure out!"

"So why can't Nora know?" I asked.

"Because normal people can't handle the idea of magic," Zane said. "That's how the pitchforks and torches get started. In case you missed it, Syl, there's more of them than us."

"And all of you kinda own this town," Nora shot back. "Besides, if you think everyone in Summerpoint doesn't know about the founding families, then you're a damned fool. Of

course we know. We call you the founding families as a way of not saying witches.”

“Wixen,” Zane corrected automatically.

Nora just pointed at him. “And that’s not a word real people know, bud. That’s your own term. To the rest of the world, those who cast spells are witches, wizards, sorcerers, or shit like that. I mean, I always thought witches were women and men were wizards.”

Zane groaned and flopped backwards on the rug. “I am not a damned wizard. That’s Gandalf.”

“Warlock?” I offered.

“I think that’s supposed to be someone who gets their power from the devil,” he said. “Not sure, but isn’t that how it works in your paranormal romances?”

So I flipped the guy off. “Those are Margie’s. I’ve only read like two of them.”

“The ones with sexy male witches?” he asked.

“Nope, werewolves.”

Nora snorted as she tried to hold in a laugh. “Werewolves are kinda hot. But Syl, I come bearing cool gifts for you. I figure this guy has to be on the good team, or he wouldn’t be down here, right? I mean, the forest let him onto the property, so he’s been cleared?”

“He’s cleared enough,” I assured her.

“Well, good,” she said before picking up a very red bottle that was almost a square shape. “So, the bakery had this wedding order, right? And they wanted to do all this fancy shit. Well, part of it was candy glass.”

“Candy glass?” I asked.

“This,” Nora bragged, “is made of sugar and syrup. Basically rock candy in a sheet, cut and sugared together.”

I was immediately on my feet. “That’s sugar?”

“Pretty much,” she said. “And it is just as fragile as glass.”



“So it’ll break?”

Nora’s face split into a grin, and she let go of the bottle. The thing fell to the painted concrete floor and shattered. The pieces were bigger than glass would’ve been, but not as sharp. They were also bright red, which made them easy to see.

“And that’s going to be a bitch to clean up,” Zane pointed out.

I waved him off. “The skunklets will eat anything we don’t sweep up.” And then I realized what I’d just said. Jerking back straight, my head snapped around to Nora. “Oh shit. The glass won’t need to be picked up!”

“Exactly,” she agreed. “Now, it keeps best when cold, but it’s rock candy. No different from a Jolly Rancher or such. It might get a little sticky on the outside if it gets warm, but it’s not going to lose its form.”

“And we can fill them with spices?”

“Mhm,” she said. “And we can make little sugar plugs, or you can do the wax thing, or however you capped all those ones you were making for the skunks.”

Behind me, Zane groaned. “Syl, how much does she know?”

“Everything,” I said as I turned back to face him. “And she’s not the only one.”

“Sylvia’s *our* witch,” Nora told him. “So we’re going to make sure she has just as much support as you rich fuckers can buy. She fights for us, so we fight for her.”

“She hasn’t fought for you,” he pointed out.

“And that’s where you’re wrong,” Nora said. “Zane, Syl let us meet the wild thing. She made it clear we’re not crazy for thinking we see things that are impossible. She also makes a damned good potato salad with happiness in it.”

“It was just a little spell,” I muttered.

“And Jayden needed it,” she told me. “They’ve been having a bit of a rough patch, realizing they’re nonbinary.”

“I’ll make them some cookies, but I don’t know how to get it to them.”

“I hang out with them all the time,” Nora admitted. “I mean, we’re kinda doing a thing.”

“A thing?” Zane asked. “With Jack’s brother?”

“A thing,” Nora agreed. “See, Jayden’s asexual and nonbinary. That means we’re not dating. It’s not a relationship. It’s more than friendship, but yeah. I mean, I figure that if open is working for you, Syl, then Jayden can be inspired by their brother.”

“A thing,” I repeated, realizing she was talking about a relationship. A very tentative one. “Well, then we’ll make those cookies together. I’ll show you how to make magic.”

“Doesn’t work like that,” Zane warned.

“Sure it does,” I told him. “She can mix and I can magic. You know, this magical power thing doesn’t have to be isolating.”

And for a long moment, Zane just stared at me as if I’d spoken in a foreign language. “But it does,” he finally said.

“No,” I corrected. “Your coven did that, not your magic.”

“And you intend to just, what, tell everyone?”

“Everyone I trust,” I said. “Yeah. That’s what trusting someone means.”

And right before my eyes, the funniest little twist took over Zane’s mouth. “Good,” he said. “Then make cookies. I think I have a few things of my own to deal with.”

Then he simply turned and jogged up the stairs, leaving me and Nora alone to continue talking about sugar glass and cookie recipes. And yet I couldn’t shake that look. It hadn’t been a smile. It hadn’t been a grimace. It was more like Zane had just had some kind of epiphany, and I was dying to know what was going through his mind.

# CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

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“Jesus H. fucking Christ!”

The sound of Zane cursing made me look up. Across from me, Jackson just shook his head, letting me know not to worry about it, but I was worried. He’d just been downstairs with Nora and Syl. What had those two done to piss him off? And how pissed was he?

“I’m just going to make sure that’s okay,” I told Jackson.

“Reese, he’s fine.”

“And you’re avoiding him still,” I pointed out as I wiped my hands clean and left the cramped little bathroom we were working on. Pausing at the doorway, I added, “Besides, you got this.”

Then the front door slammed. Pushing out a sigh, Jackson waved for me to go deal with that, so I left. Once I hit the living room, I jogged to the door, not surprised at all when it cracked open for me, and *I* didn’t slam the thing. I was pretty sure the house wouldn’t appreciate that.

But Zane was gone. His car was still here, yet I’d given the man just long enough to vanish from sight. Confused, I looked around for some clue of where he’d gone, and more importantly, why.

The ivy pointed, multiple strands standing up to reach out toward the forest. “Thanks,” I told it as I headed that way.

And then I heard him.

“How *dare* you risk her like this! How *dare* you drag everyone else into this!” Zane was yelling. “What more do you want from me? How am I supposed to keep the focus off them if you keep showing yourself to anyone she wants to fucking impress? How am I supposed to save them, huh?”

Slowly, as silently as I could, I crept forward until I could see him. Zane was far enough away from the house that his voice might not carry that far. It definitely wouldn't be heard inside, but the sight of him?

He had his arms spread wide, his too-tight T-shirt stretched to its limits as he glared up at the trees with nothing but anger on his face. He knew the forest could hear him. He also looked like he was offering himself up.

And across the clearing, a shadow shifted as Gyth slipped behind a tree.

“Aren't you supposed to stop the coven?” he continued. “Aren't *you* supposed to be the thing that decides who gets power and how much? Why are you dragging completely helpless people into this, huh? What did Nora ever do to you? *What did Jack do?! I am trying* to fucking fix this, but I can't if they aren't looking at me!”

“Zane,” I said.

He dropped his arms and spun to face me. “Reese.”

Licking my lips, I moved closer. “What are you doing?”

He dropped his head and shoved a hand through his pretty, dark hair. “Having a bit of a tantrum, if I'm honest.”

“Why?” I pressed.

He glanced up. No, he didn't raise his head, but those icy eyes of his were framed by his dark lashes and locked right on me.

“Who all has she told?” he asked, sounding almost defeated.

“Why?” I asked as I moved closer. Close enough to grasp his bicep and make him actually raise his head.

I expected him to shrug off the contact. This was Zane Harkness, after all - the arrogant bad boy of Summerpoint. The egotistical fucker who always managed to make himself look like he was in perfect control. Instead, the man simply sighed, his shoulders slumping as the air rushed out.

“Sylvia doesn’t trust me,” he said, “but she’ll tell Nora? She’s clearly done nothing to hide her magic from the townsfolk. Doesn’t she realize what the coven will do to them?”

“And you think they didn’t already know?” I asked.

His eyes narrowed. “I think people disappear for doing a lot less than helping the coven’s number one enemy. That’s why I broke up with Jack in the first place!”

“So that’s what this is about?” I asked. “Losing the love of your life?”

The man’s jaw clenched. Damn, it was a nice jaw too. Sharp, almost dangerously so. Combined with his high cheekbones and narrow nose, Zane was the kind of man who looked like he should’ve been a model.

“Jack may have been the love of my life,” he said, his eyes holding mine steadily, “but you are the love of his.”

“And Syl.”

His mouth opened, and then he deflated a little more. “Yeah, and her.”

“And you’re jealous?” I guessed.

“Fuck,” he laughed, shaking his head. “Reese, I’m pissed.”

“Why?” I asked one more time. “That’s the part you’re pretty much skipping over. Never mind that you’re out here screaming at Syl’s forest. I mean, what’s that supposed to accomplish, besides making it refuse to let you in next time?”

Finally, he pulled away, but only to walk two steps and then stop. “You know this is the source of magic, right?”

“That’s what she says. And the wild things are somehow wrapped up in that too.”

“Mhm,” he agreed. “But the forest is what makes the power. The wild things are what let us puny little humans access it. Even if no one could use it, a place as old and as wild as this would still be magical.”

“And?” I pressed.

So he spun back around and thrust an arm out in the direction of the cottage. “And they’re the ones who are going to pay for this war, Reese. Don’t you fucking get that? Syl wants to defeat the coven. She wants to protect the town. She wants to help everyone, and she fucking can’t if the coven still has power.”

“She knows.”

“Which means she’s going to try to break the coven,” he went on. “She fucking can’t. Not alone. Not with the last wild thing. Not with her familiar or you or...” his words trailed off.

“Jackson,” I realized.

“Yeah,” he mumbled, letting his arm drop. “She’s going to get people hurt because she doesn’t know enough.”

I closed the distance between us again. “So whose side are you really on?”

“Mine.”

I simply lifted a brow, all but calling bullshit on that.

“Mine,” he said again, leaning into my face this time. “I’m here because making her stronger protects what matters to *me*. I’m helping her because it makes *my* plans easier.”

“And it sounds like your plans and hers are right in line,” I pointed out. “You want to get revenge on the coven. She wants to stop them. Kinda works hand in hand, hm?”

He slung his head away, but didn’t turn this time. “Fuck you, Reese.”

“Why, because I’m right?” So I grabbed his arm again. “And Jackson doesn’t hate you. He’s scared of you, Zane.”

“What?”

“He’s scared of what you mean, of how much he still cares, and how easy it is for him to be around you. He’s scared shitless that if he allows himself anything else, he’s going to lose it all, but he won’t.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because Syl and I talk,” I admitted. “Because she thinks you’re a lot less evil than you pretend. Because we can both see the way you two look at each other.” Then I rubbed his bicep. “And how you look at her.”

“I’m not trying to push in,” he promised. “Reese, I’m really not. I’m just trying to make sure she can protect you two.”

“Us,” I said, repeating what he meant. “Not her. Not the forest. So she can protect us, hm?”

And his head dropped back down to stare at the forest floor. “Because you don’t have magic. She does. A lot, if I’m honest. More than any wixen in the coven.”

So I bent just enough to look him in the eyes. “I’m not stopping you, Zane. If you want to make a move on Syl, then that’s her call. If you and Jackson end up together again, Syl and I are okay with it. We’re just not going to let you push us out. This is an all or nothing deal.”

He laughed once. “Oh, so you’re into me too, huh?”

My mouth opened and I paused, unsure how to answer that. “I don’t know,” I finally said.

That made his head snap up. “You’ve only ever been interested in him.”

Jackson. He meant the only man I’d ever been with. Not as if my list of lovers - male or female - was exactly a long one, though. But when it came to Zane, he’d always been Jackson’s. I could see him as Syl’s now, but only because I wanted to give her everything.

Me? I’d never even considered it.

“I...” My hand dropped. “It’s just that...” I couldn’t quite make my thoughts work properly. “You’re theirs,” I finally



blurted out.

“No,” he said gently. “You’re the one who is theirs, Reese. You’re the man they’re both in love with. I’m the asshole who shows up and shakes things up a bit. I’m the prick who’s making you realize just how much you love that man - and woman. I’m the one who’s going to vanish as easily as I appeared in your lives, don’t you get that?”

“Why?”

This time he was the one looking at me as if he didn’t have the answer. “Because that’s how it has to be,” he finally said.

“Why?” I asked again. “Why can’t you love Jackson the way we all know you still do? Why can’t you heal that part of him that you ripped out so long ago?”

“Because he’s yours!”

“And I’m saying he’s not *only* mine!”

All around us, the forest had gone completely silent. The trees didn’t even rustle in the breeze. There were no birds, no insects, and no wildlife moving around. It was as if time had just paused completely.

“I can’t do that to him again,” Zane finally whispered.

“Syl likes you,” I reminded him. “She seems to actually enjoy your lessons with her - and for more than the knowledge. I’ve seen her little smiles. I know you flirt with her.”

“I don’t exactly mean to,” he admitted. “It just sorta happens.”

“Because you’re a flirt,” I agreed. “But you know what? She needs that. Jackson needs that. I suck at it, so why can’t you fill that gap? Why can’t you fit with us?”

“I’m still bound to the coven,” he reminded me. “Reese, that’s why. I’m walking a fucking tightrope here, if you haven’t noticed. I’m trying to steal a spellbook without giving them any more power. I’m trying to train a witch to reach her potential when I don’t know shit about what she can do! I’m

trying to keep their attention off you and Jack - and now Nora!”

“And Beth, and Erika, and Jackson’s mom and brother.”

He groaned. “Fuck. You want to just put up a sign in the coffee shop or something?”

“The whole town knows about magic,” I assured him. “According to Jackson and Jennifer, they’ve always known. They play ignorant because it keeps them from disappearing.”

“And that’s my point.”

“But you’re ignoring mine,” I shot back. “Everyone knows. Everyone pretends they don’t. All Syl has done is answer their questions so they can fake it even better. So they can protect themselves. So they can ask *someone* for help when they need it! And yet you’re out here screaming at the trees like it’s the end of the world?”

“Because Kingsley will destroy all of you,” he snarled. “Don’t you fucking get that? He’ll have Nancy Redmoon call down a tornado that wipes out the entire town. A fucking forest fire will sweep through so fast that people can’t be saved. Finn Undergrove will send the ghosts of the dead to haunt the weakest, convincing them to kill themselves to be together. It doesn’t matter what they do, but they will do it because they think they’re protecting their fucking secret!”

“Which isn’t a secret,” I said again. “Unless *you* tell them, the coven will never know anything’s changed.”

“They know you and Jack helped!” He flailed his arms at his sides. “Do you have any fucking idea how hard I’ve worked to make them forget about that little incident? About Jack pushing that damned powder in Kingsley’s mouth? They know you’re Sylvia’s boy toys, and they will fucking *kill* you for it!”

“Then help us,” I told him.

Zane just threw up his arms again. “What the fuck do you think I’m trying to do? Has it ever crossed your fucking mind that if all of this is pointed at me then you won’t be a threat?” And then his mouth snapped shut. “Fuck.”

“You’re trying to take the fall for all of this,” I realized.

“No,” he assured me.

But I could already see how this would play out. “Zane, you’re going to train Syl, get that spellbook, and then what? You’re out here screaming at the forest for help or to change it. Why? Because you plan to convince the Grimsons that *you* fucked them over, not her, huh?”

“No,” he said again, those blue eyes of his locked on mine. “But I won’t tell you what I am planning. I can’t. It’s also why I can’t do more than train your witch.”

“Jackson deserves more than that.”

I watched as his pupils flared, surprised at my response. Slowly, Zane began to shake his head. It was almost as if he was trying to push my words away, like denying them would give him some sort of power here.

“I can’t...”

“You owe him that,” I said. “You owe Syl that. Fuck, Zane, I think that after this long, you at least owe me a little friendship. You could be helping us. You could be on our side, working with us to fix this mess the Grimsons have made. Instead, you’re doing the same damned thing you’ve always done.”

“Fuck you,” he grumbled, turning to storm back towards the cottage.

So I called after him, “See, there you go again. You’re running. You’re always running from things that are too good, Zane. What you haven’t figured out yet is that if you want to ever win, you’ll need to stand and fight. It doesn’t even matter what you fight for, but you’ll never do it if you keep running.”

And like a whisper on the breeze his grumbled reply was carried back to me by the forest. “I’m not worried about losing. I’m only worried about *them* winning.” And then he was gone, swallowed by the green leaves and dappled sunlight as if the forest had offered him a safe exit.

All I could do was laugh at the irony of that.

# CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

---

Days passed. Sometimes Zane showed up, sometimes he didn't, but something had changed. His smile was gone, and I was pretty sure I was the reason for that. At first, I tried to ignore it. I figured he'd tell me what was bothering him or get over it.

He never did.

Nora and I made Jayden cookies. Then she came over so we could make the sheets of candy glass that would become bottles. Well, they were more like square test tubes, if I was honest, but shorter. I didn't need them to be very big. They were simply meant to serve as grenades for my spells.

It was when I ordered a chest freezer for the cellar that Zane decided to get over himself. He and Jackson carried it down. Reese helped to move the couch so it would fit by the plug. That put all of my food-related supplies over in one corner of the cellar, and shifted the relaxation area to be closer to the stairs. I actually liked it.

"So what's the freezer for?" Zane asked.

I smiled and gestured to the dozens of differently-colored candy bottles. "Spell grenades. Color-coded and environmentally safe. And they don't get sticky if they're frozen."

He chuckled, clasped my shoulder, and then leaned in. "The only witch I've ever heard of who makes cooking into an offensive weapon. Nice." And then he gave me a very sweet smile.

That was it. Just that one brief little exchange was all I got, but it made me feel better. Whatever I'd done to piss Zane off must be okay, or I'd fixed it. But he and Jackson went back upstairs while I focused on filling up my newest appliance.

I was starting to feel a little spoiled. My house was amazing. Maybe it wasn't the biggest, but I didn't care about that. It was more than enough space for me, my skunks, and my boyfriends. It also had everything I'd ever dreamed of, from the luxurious tub to the Juliette balcony, and even the downstairs bathroom was starting to look like something I wouldn't be ashamed for a guest to use.

There was a new toilet, a stand-up shower stall with a very nice glass surround, and a sink that was still in a box. Granted, so was the new cabinet that went with it. The full-wall mirror had been taken out, a hanging one had been ordered, and the current project was actual tile for the floor. The kind that wouldn't tear like linoleum.

My only problem was that once the bathroom was done, so was the work on my house. The guys wouldn't be spending all day here anymore, and I'd gotten incredibly spoiled with their presence. Both the daytime stuff and the nights where they just stayed and curled up around me.

But once they were done with the construction here, then what? I'd stacked a good forty bottles in my little chest freezer when the sound of feet on the steps made me look back. The sunlight against the wall was golden, which meant I'd lost a few hours with my organizing and fretting, but I was starting to get used to that.

Smiling at me, Jackson made his way over to the couch and tossed his body down on it. "So," he said.

"So?" I asked, turning to look him over.

He'd forgotten his shirt upstairs. All of the tattoos across his body were on full display, as were the muscles. His beard was a bit mussed, which made me think he and Reese had been sharing a few kisses in the middle of their projects, but that was cute.

“Now that you’ve had some time with the new arrangement, is it working?” Jackson asked. “I mean, we could put the sofa on the other wall, over there.” He pointed to the solid side of the staircase. “Unless you have another idea?”

“I like it there,” I told him. “There’s a light right above it. I think I want an end table beside it, though, so I can take breaks.”

“And a lamp,” he decided. “So you can read all your spellbooks and spice lists, right? Maybe do a little note-taking of your own like some occultist?”

“Oh, an occultist?” I teased, closing the freezer. “I will have you know that I’m an official website designer and ad copywriter.” And I headed towards the couch.

Jackson shifted over, making room so I didn’t even have to slow down before crawling up beside him. One arm wrapped around my back. The other pushed my hair out of my face, and he hugged me close to his massive chest.

“I like occultist,” he said softly. “Sounds smart, kinda like my girlfriend.”

Giggling, I pressed my face into his chest. Then I inhaled the scent of him. He smelled like stone dust and hand soap. Like man and hard work. In other words, he smelled like himself, and I liked it more than I wanted to admit.

“Is this your way of trying to convince me to take a break?” I asked.

“More like my way of seeing where you’re at,” he admitted. “I know Zane’s been pushing you to learn, but I honestly don’t understand any of your magic stuff. I just know you wanted to find the wild things, then you wanted to learn magic, and I’m kinda trying to figure out how it’s all tied together.”

“It is,” I assured him. “Gyth says the wild things have been captive for years. Zane said the last one the coven caught - that he knows of - was sixteen years ago. That means rushing is stupid, right?”

“Mm, I’m going to guess that yes is the correct answer.”

I slapped his chest playfully. “It is. But Zane’s been showing me how to channel magic so I won’t end up crashing like I did the last time. He says the power ebbs and flows from my source - which is nature - and the moon. His source is random chance, or coincidence, or something like that. I don’t really get it.”

“The possibilities of the world,” Jackson told me. “Yeah, that’s how he manipulates the future. Instead of just reading it, he bends it, but he only has so much control.”

“Do you know why?”

He shook his head. “Not really, no. He once said it had something to do with natural reactions, like how chemicals will or won’t react with each other. Baking soda and vinegar will bubble. Vinegar and water won’t. That sort of thing.”

“Which actually does make some kind of sense,” I realized. “It’s why Andrew chose that restaurant to take his side piece and I chose that same area to get groceries. The spell needed me to see the worst, and the locations worked for what we both needed at that time.”

“I’m sorry,” Jackson said, pushing my hair back again. “I can only imagine how much that hurt.”

“A lot,” I admitted. “The betrayal, you know? But at the same time, I’m also glad I know. I can’t help but think about how long it had been going on, how much longer it would’ve kept going before I had a clue, and all of that. But one spell from someone I didn’t even know kinda got me out at the best time.”

“That’s one way to look at it,” he said. “Although most people would be pissed that he’d fucked up your life.”

“Are you?”

“Am I what?”

“Pissed,” I clarified. “Zane fucked up your life when he dumped you, so are you pissed?”

He pushed out a heavy breath. “No.”



“So why are you so distant from him?” I turned a little more so I could see his face better. “Jackson, you still love the man, right? So why aren’t you, I dunno, making an effort?”

“Because I don’t want to lose you,” he said. “Or Reese. Or this.” Then he leaned his head back and groaned. “It’s just that I feel like what we have is too good, Syl. Me, you, and Reese? We don’t fight. We don’t always agree, but we work it out. We talk. We’re happy - or at least I think we are?”

“We are,” I promised.

Which made him smile. “So why would I risk all of that for a guy who pushed all my buttons and burned so fucking hot? Someone who I had a wild, rollercoaster type of relationship with? Zane and I were madly in love. We also weren’t easy. We pushed and pulled at each other. We broke up and got back together. The pair of us were nothing but raw passion, but it wasn’t like this.”

“Like you and Reese?” I asked.

“Or you and me,” he said.

“Yeah, but you and Reese are kinda my idea of perfect,” I admitted. “The relationship you have is so healthy. I try to copy you both in some ways, like speaking up when I’m worried.”

“Are you?” he asked. “Worried?”

“A little, but not about what you’d expect.” I stretched just enough to give him a peck on the lips. “I’m worried that this amazing man I’ve fallen for has given me everything and isn’t getting anything back for himself. I’m worried that Zane is actually a nice guy - and probably a lot more mature than the boy you used to date - but you still keep pushing him away. Jackson, I’m worried that I’m not being as good to you as you’ve been to me.”

“You are,” he swore, pausing when the door at the top of the stairs opened.

“Jackson?” Reese called out.

“Down here,” Jackson replied. “I got a hot little woman on me, so I’m sorta stuck.”

I groaned and made to pull away, but Jackson’s arm tightened around me. At the same time, Reese was making his way down the stairs, chuckling when he got far enough down to see us.

“Okay, that’s cute,” he said as he moved to sit on the arm of the couch, right by our heads. “So I guess we’re staying here tonight?”

“Mhm,” Jackson said. “So far as I care, I can stay *right here*.”

“There’s a bed upstairs, dumbass,” Reese teased. “Means I could join that puppy pile.”

“Dinner first,” I reminded them. “And I kinda lost track of time putting my bottles away.”

“So they’re working?” Reese asked.

All I could do was shrug. “Seem to be. Won’t know until I try a few. And if they do, then Nora and Beth are going to help me make a shit-ton more.”

“Women in the kitchen,” Jackson warned. “We’ll need to spend that day at our place.”

“Oh, fuck off,” I laughed.

But Reese bent down to kiss the top of my head. “No, I think he’s right. You deserve to have some girly time with your friends, Syl. To giggle about your boys, or whatever it is chicks do when men aren’t around.”

“Pillow fights,” Jackson offered. “I mean, I know Beth would totally be into that.”

So I smacked his chest again. “You’re working on sleeping in the guest bedroom, Jack.”

He gasped at my use of his shortened name. “No one calls me that but my mother!”

“And Zane,” I pointed out. “Or was I not supposed to notice that?”

“You weren’t,” Reese assured me. “He’s totally over Zane. Doesn’t notice him at all. Has no clue the guy’s been coming around and flirting with you, Syl.” Then he reached down and tickled me.

I squealed, trying to squirm away, but Jackson held me. “No!” I begged. “Stop! I didn’t mean it!”

Reese lifted his hand but held it there like a threat. “So you’re going to admit that you were flirting?”

“Maybe...” I glanced back at Jackson. “Just in good fun, I mean.”

“You were flirting,” Jackson said. “Syl, it isn’t even subtle.”

“But he’s hot,” Reese said. “I mean, you two do have good taste in men.” And he pointed at himself with both hands.

So I reached up and grabbed his knee, tickling it. “I’ll show you good taste!”

Laughing, Reese jumped up, nearly dragging me off the couch in the process. I leaned, teetered, and not even Jackson could hold me in place when I made it past the tipping point. With a loud yelp, I slid off the couch and onto my butt.

“Mine,” Reese said, quickly stealing my place.

“Hey, that’s cheating!” I told him, digging my fingers between the man’s ribs.

But it was Jackson who laughed the hardest. “Oh, fighting over me now, huh?”

“You know it,” Reese said while still trying to squirm away from my poking fingers. “Syl! Uncle! I’ll share!”

“Oh yeah, you will,” I decided before crawling my way on top of both of them.

And somehow, that old couch of Margie’s held up. No, it wasn’t exactly comfortable, but we made it work. Our arms were all tangled as we tried to keep ourselves from falling off. Our bellies hurt from the laughing, and so far as I cared, this was perfect.

It was why I loved these guys. It was also why I wanted to make sure I could give them everything they deserved, even if that wasn't me. They'd already made my life better than anything I'd ever been able to imagine before.

# CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

---

Reese and I were staying at Syl's house more and more. Every so often, we still had to go home, so when the candy-glass jars worked and she invited a slew of women to help her make more? Yeah, that was a good time to make sure my place hadn't fallen apart.

We left just as Beth and Erika arrived. Nora was running late, but that was normal for her. Syl had an entire counter filled with pans and sugar, which meant this was going to be a big batch of candy. An all-nighter, I had a feeling. Syl also deserved this. She needed friends around, not just me and Reese.

But neither of us felt like cooking. We'd gotten spoiled by living with a woman whose literal magical power was cooking. Well, among other things, it sounded like. So when I suggested pizza, Reese was quick to agree.

The buffet in town was cheap and filling. It also wasn't the same without Syl. I could still remember that time we'd brought her here. It had been the last time we'd come, and now the empty chair beside Reese felt just a little too empty. The pair of us ate quickly and then headed home.

"I'm spoiled," I said as we climbed back in the truck.

"Same," Reese agreed. "I've gotten a little too used to the three of us, and I hate to say it, but going home sounds worse and worse each time."

"Well..." I paused as I backed out of the parking spot and got on the road again. "I kinda wanted to bring that up."

Reese stretched his legs out and looked over at me. “That sounds ominous.”

“Jayden texted me. Well he’s - er, they’ve - been texting me. Sounds like they got a job in Summerpoint and are moving here again. He was - “

“They,” Reese corrected.

I just sighed. “I’ve called that kid my little brother for thirty-two years. It’s going to take me a bit to break the habit. They. They, they, they, they.”

“What did they say?” Reese asked around a smile.

“That they want to rent a room.”

“Oh.”

And I left it at that as I made the last few blocks to our house. For once, my mother wasn’t waiting to ambush me. Tonight was her movie night with a friend, so she’d be out for a few more hours. After parking the truck, Reese and I climbed out and headed to the front door.

“There’s no reason they couldn’t rent the room,” Reese finally said. “I mean, we’re never really here anymore.”

“Yeah...” I unlocked the door, then let him in first. “Nora’s also looking for a place, you know. Jayden said *they* - ” I got it right this time. ” - would probably lease something with her if we weren’t okay with it. And Nora told me that Zane said he’d find her a good deal.”

“Okay, I’m confused now,” Reese said. “So Jayden does or doesn’t want to rent a room?”

“Um...”

I headed to the laundry room and threw our filthy stuff in there. It wasn’t much, since we’d both taken over much of Syl’s laundry lately. Still, one less thing for her to worry about, right? Besides, we only had a drawer each, and that wasn’t exactly a lot of space for clothes when doing construction.

Once that was in the washer, I closed the lid but didn’t start it. Instead, I turned, intending to aim for the bedroom, but

Reese was blocking the doorway.

“You didn’t finish the thought,” he pointed out.

“I’m working through it,” I told him. “I also need a damned shower.”

“Company?”

“Always.”

But the moment we made it into the bedroom, I decided I might as well just put all of this out there.

“If we lease the house to Nora and Jayden, we can keep the shop for our tools, and they’d be able to watch over Mom.”

“And we only have two rooms,” Reese reminded me. “Well, if you clear out the office.”

“But what if we moved in with Syl?”

Reese pulled off his shirt, then moved towards me. “Have you talked to her about that?”

“No,” I said even as he began to untuck my shirt and lift it higher. “I wanted to run it past you first.”

He pulled the fabric over my head, tossed it aside, and began guiding me backwards towards the bathroom. “When do they need a place?”

“October first.”

“So we have time,” he realized. “Shoes, Jackson.”

“Yeah.”

I worried about getting my boots off, and Reese went to turn on the water. Why was I so nervous about this? I almost expected him to say he didn’t want to live out there, but half the time he was the one suggesting we stay the night. I was always thinking it, but he usually said it first.

“Have we been with her long enough to move in?” I finally asked, pretty sure that was the part that bothered me.

Reese murmured even as he kicked off his shoes, dropped his pants and underwear, then stepped into the shower without answering. I groaned at the sight of his bare ass, but pulled out



some clean towels before stripping off the rest of my clothes and following him.

The water was hot. The steam was already filling the room. When my boyfriend's hands pulled me under the water, the heat of the stream made my muscles relax wonderfully. The gentle massaging helped even more.

"I think," Reese said from behind me, "that we've already lived with her for a while. I think we all miss it, and we're definitely working. I think we're shit at romantic gestures, dates, and all of that stuff, though."

"Kinda hard with a coven of wixen wanting her dead if she leaves the property," I reminded him.

"And us being there means she's not a hermit," he pointed out. "Never mind the gaggle of girls she has there right now." Then he chuckled. "I'm also not opposed. I just don't want to feel like I'm ignoring you."

"You're not," I promised.

"Or her," he said.

I turned so I was facing him, aware of every wet, slick muscle on his body. "I think she's been a little distracted with Zane."

"So why aren't you?"

I felt my entire body jerk straight at the question. I knew he could see the reaction, which meant I couldn't bullshit my way out of this. So instead, I stepped closer and dropped my head onto his shoulder, feeling the water soaking my hair and running down my chin.

"Have you ever felt like things are so good that you're terrified of tipping the balance?" I asked.

"Yeah. With you. You might remember it. That was back when you told me to ask out the sexy client."

"And that's how I feel," I admitted.

"About Zane?"

I groaned before turning so I could grab some shampoo. “Yeah, I think. Reese, I love you. I’m in love with Syl. I also know Zane.”

“And you love him,” he said, moving to lather my back as I scrubbed my hair.

Yeah, that felt good. It also reminded me what was so amazing about this man. Reese didn’t pull away when things got hard. He pushed in, offered a shoulder, and listened without judgment. That was why he was my best friend. It was what had made me fall in love with him, even before he’d ended up as one hell of a good-looking man.

So I kept going. “That man has a crush on our girlfriend. He’s interested in her, and I can’t be completely sure it’s not for her power.”

“Bullshit.” That was all Reese offered.

I grunted, knowing he was right. “Well, he’s hiding something.”

“Of course he is,” Reese agreed. “He’s Zane. I think he’s self-destructing, though. I think that man has nothing left to hold on to, and the happier you are, the more he thinks he needs to make a sacrifice for that.”

“Zane?” I asked. “Sacrifice?” I scoffed, but I also knew Reese was right.

That was exactly the sort of idiotic move Zane would pull. So, stepping under the water to give myself a moment, I tried to think of what version of self-sacrifice Zane would think was noble this time.

He couldn’t do a damned thing to the coven. He’d already proven that, which was why we’d broken up in the first place. He was currently sneaking around, stealing snapshots of Margie’s spellbook to pacify the Grimsons about him still coming over. But why was he coming over? What was the man doing?

Swiping the water off my face, I offered the main flow to Reese. “What do you think he’s trying to do?”

“Make sure you can stay happy,” Reese said as he soaked himself down. “I think that man is doing everything in his power to make Sylvia as strong as possible so she can protect us. I also get the feeling he’s got some plan to help her. Now, I’m not sure if that’s going to be another one of his massive spells like how he got her here, or something else. I just don’t know enough about what he can do.”

“Or finding the wild things,” I suggested.

“Has anyone even talked to him about that?”

I could only shrug. “In all honesty, I don’t know. I think Syl’s brought it up, but we’ve sorta been avoiding it because he’s in the coven.”

“Only by default,” Reese pointed out. “He’s sure as shit not loyal to them. Jackson, he’s loyal to you. I think he’s starting to be loyal to Syl, and if I’m honest, I get the impression he likes her.”

“And she likes him,” I admitted.

Reese just nodded and took his turn with the shampoo. “Do you have a problem with her hooking up with him?”

Yeah, I had to actually think about that. Did I? Would I be jealous? No, because Zane and I had dumped each other for girls quite a few times. But with Syl, it should be different, shouldn’t it? She was mine. Well, ours. But if she could be so amazing to the pair of us, then why wouldn’t I want her to enjoy Zane as well?

The man was sexy. Not just attractive, but he had all the arrogance and cockiness that turned me on. He had all the sensitivity that kept me coming back. He was the polar opposite of Reese, but only on the outside. Only his shell of an exterior that he showed the world. Underneath, he was honestly one of the best people I’d ever met. Right up there with the two I was in love with.

“I don’t think I would,” I finally admitted as Reese stepped under the water again.

So he talked as he rinsed the suds from his hair. “So why won’t you hook up with him?”

“We tried. We failed.”

“Bullshit. The coven pulled you apart. Now you have backup in the form of a pretty hot little witch.”

Yeah, he had a point. I had another. “Because I love you and you two are all I need.”

“Used to be that I was all you needed,” Reese said as he stepped out of the water and into my chest.

His hands found my waist, holding me there even as our eyes met. Yeah, I could feel my blood flowing downward, and quickly. From the little twist on Reese’s lips, he knew exactly the effect he was having on me.

But he wasn’t about to lose his topic. “Wasn’t too long ago when you said I was all you needed,” he pointed out. “And now we have a girlfriend. Why? Because you said you didn’t want me to miss out on anything. But Jackson, has it ever crossed your mind that maybe I feel the same? That maybe I’ve always known that you’ve never gotten over Zane? So why can’t you have it all? Why can’t I give you the same thing you gave me?”

“What if it tears us all apart?” I asked.

He chuckled. “Isn’t this when your mom would say that it wasn’t meant to be?”

“No.” I cupped the side of his face. “Listen to me, Reese. I love you. God, I have loved you since before I knew what that word really meant. I loved you as a brother, as a friend, and now as my other half. I want to share everything with you. When we met Syl? I figured I’d have some fun with her, but this would be your thing and you’d tell me about it - but she kept working her way in, and now we’re here.”

“And?” he asked, that twist shifting into a real smile.

“And I don’t want to lose this,” I breathed. “I don’t want to lose either of you. I’ve already lost him once. What if it’s a house of cards, and adding one too many destroys all of it?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he swore, leaning in to brush his lips against mine. “I don’t think she is either. I have a

feeling our little witch just needs something to fight for, and we're it."

"And Zane?" I asked.

Slowly, Reese slid his hand down my chest, tripping over my belly button and still lower. "Well, if you're with him, that means I get to be alone with her. If he's with her, then I get to be alone with you. To me, it sounds like a win-win." His fingers closed around my half-hard dick.

I sucked in a breath. "That is not playing fair."

"Let's do a poly thing?" he said. "Jackson, let's move in with our girlfriend, add in a boyfriend, and flip off the Grimsons while we're at it? Let's stop worrying about what could go wrong and start focusing on what can actually go right?"

I pushed myself into his grip. "You know that right now I'll agree to anything you want, right?"

"Exactly," he breathed, catching me by the side of the neck before kissing me so damned hard.

His tongue took over my mouth. His hand worked my dick. My damned knees wanted to buckle, but the solid feel of Reese's body against mine held me up. On their own, my hands found the flat planes of his chest, tracing the elegant muscles that I loved so much on him, and a groan of pleasure slipped out.

"So is that your way of saying you'll stop avoiding Zane?" he asked, a hint of playfulness in his voice.

"Did you just find a new kink?" I asked back.

He chuckled softly before moving his mouth to the side of my neck. "I dunno. Maybe? I think I'd like to find out."

"Then yes," I breathed, turning around slowly in his arms until my back was to him. "But don't you dare tease me."

His hand never left my dick, but he did shift his grip to reach around me. His next stroke was slow, moving all the way down to my balls before making his way back up.

Something thunked on one of the bathroom shelves. Then his lips kissed my back, my shoulder, and finally my neck.

“I am never giving you up,” he swore as I felt the slick head of his dick pressing against my ass. “Or her. Nothing will tear us apart, Jackson, not even magic.”

And then he filled me, stroking me in time. My body stretched around him, the rush of pleasure so intense I had to thrust out an arm to brace against the wall. But Reese wasn't the kind of man to fuck and forget. No, he made love.

His fingers gripped me just the way I liked it most. His other hand found my hip. His body pushed, sliding into mine only to retreat and do it again. Every movement was a caress. It didn't matter if that was his chest against my back, his thighs pressing against mine, or the feel of his breath against the shell of my ear.

This man loved me. He loved me so much and he never tried to hide it. This was nothing more than him proving it. The lovemaking and the push towards Zane were all a part of that. This was how Reese reminded me that I was worth everything to him.

As his body began to move faster, driving me higher, I realized that while he was part of my everything, I could no longer say he was all of it. We were and we weren't a couple anymore. We were three, we might be four, and the only thing that scared me about that was the risk of failure.

“Don't ever leave me, Reese?” I panted, pushing back to take him a little harder.

He moved with me, toying with the sensitive spot under the head of my dick. “When I said forever, I meant it,” he swore. “All of us, Jack.”

I wasn't sure if he meant to shorten my name or just the timing of his thrust cut him off, but I felt it. My man filling my body, my name on his lips, and all the promises he was offering me. That one short little syllable brought them all together, and then the rush hit me faster than I expected.

“Fuck,” I gasped as my orgasm hit.

Reese kept going, kept pumping through me even as his lips kissed the back of my shoulder. “That’s my man,” he whispered. “Always mine. Forever mine. Eternally...” And then he sucked in a breath, burying himself in my ass. “... Ours,” he finished with a very satisfied sigh.

# CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

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When we met for the first ritual since our coven had been drained, I casually showed the Grimsons that picture of Syl hiding the spellbook. They were intrigued, but also distracted with the upcoming power this full moon would give us - which wasn't enough. Certainly not enough for the spell they really wanted, but it was a way to bring our coven back to power. And that picture was exactly what I needed to convince them I was doing everything they wanted.

I'd initially saved that image on my phone just to sneak a few peeks at her ass. Now, it had bought me a little more time. Granted, they were also pushing for more, so the next day, Sylvia and I sat down and decided which recipes would look the best - not to eat, but for magical purposes.

I found seven that looked magical to me. Considering I barely knew how to cook, and yet certain things still stood out? I was hoping that would be enough to convince Lucien this was the answer to his prayers.

Then Syl flipped to one of the diary entries. "Copy this one too," she said.

My eyes scanned the thing and I could see her genius. It was dated back in the 60s, but Margie was discussing how swapping out certain spices changed the power and results of a dish. Rosemary could wake someone up, but black pepper could cause anger. Combining them often had completely unexpected results.

So I got a good picture of that, taking them all on the kitchen counter. We checked for shadows, reflections, and anything else that might destroy our plan, and then called it good. Then that evening, I headed home and printed them all out on nice, glossy paper.

Knowing what I had made it easier to string the Grimsons along. Lucien texted often, asking me how it was going. I replied immediately sometimes and made him wait hours when I could. My excuse was that I didn't want Sylvia to see his contact on my phone if I was trying to convince her I wasn't her enemy.

Then, on Friday, I made a visit to the Grimsons with a folder full of those well-staged images. I had to admit, I was a little proud of myself for this one, and yet that feeling made me a little worried. There was no way it could be this easy to pull one over on them. They had to see through my charade, didn't they?

But when the butler led me into the office, it was Lucien sitting behind the desk. The man looked up with a tired expression and waved me to one of the chairs before him. Hopefully, the butler would get Kingsley next, but I might be on my own for this.

"I managed to get a few pictures of the book," I said, dropping the folder on the desk in front of his face.

Lucien opened it and began flipping through. "Recipes?" he asked, sounding disgusted.

"That's the magic Marjorie Maybrook used," I reminded him.

He tossed the entire folder to the side. "I can't use that!"

"And why the hell not?" Kingsley demanded as he marched into the room, much too spry for a man his age. "You're the one who wants the open bloodline. This is what you get, Lucien."

"How am I supposed to do anything with recipes?" Lucien demanded. "Do you honestly expect me to cook? And that

woman had spells. She threw a powder at us! That's the kind of magic I'm looking for!"

"Sylvia does not have a spellbook," I said. "I am trying to convince her to start one."

"Then how is she learning?" Kingsley asked.

I gestured at the folder. "May I?"

Lucien huffed and pushed the whole thing towards me. Leaning over the desk, I found the diary entry, and offered that to Kingsley. The man accepted the picture, then slowly walked towards a plush chair at the side, reading on his way.

"That's definitely Margie's handwriting," he said. "Is this also in the book, Zane?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "The front half is nothing but recipes, but the back part is dated like a diary or journal. I think she wrote down her thoughts on all of this, because that's like the second or third entry."

Kingsley just passed the page to Lucien. "It says this is how she learned, boy. If Margie, being as weak of a witch as she was, could manage to figure out how to make magic, then you should have no problem."

"What about her mother's spellbook?" Lucien asked. "Pearl, I think her name was?"

"She never kept one," Kingsley said. "Pearl never learned how to write. Women didn't, back then. Well, if her husband knew what was best, she didn't."

I had to fight not to grind my teeth at that. These two acted like being men made them somehow superior, when we all knew women inherited stronger magic. Wix were meant to make the next generation. The spares, in a way. The witches, however, were the real magic makers.

That was why the Grimsons had to resort to stealing power. That was what had led them to using wild things to enhance their abilities. Their greed for more was based in their sexism, and the pair of men before me were too stupid to even stop and think about that.

“So should I keep trying to get pictures of the spells in there?” I asked. “Sylvia is very protective of that book, and she keeps moving it around. I think she’s trying to hide it from me, but that cottage is not a large place. There’s only so many options to stash it away.”

“There has to be another book,” Lucien said.

“I can look,” I promised.

“And get the pictures,” Kingsley told me. “If this is the best Lucien can get, then it’s a lot better than nothing.”

“Yes, sir,” I agreed. “I can also get a picture of her work area, if that will help?”

“She has a work area?” Lucien asked.

I nodded. “A pantry of sorts. It’s filled with herbs, spices, and things like that. She has a list of the spices she still needs too.”

“And a list of what they do?” Kingsley asked.

I shook my head, refusing to mention the whiteboard Jack and Reese had put up to learn from. It had everything these two would need, and there was no way in hell I’d give that to them.

“She’s actually a rather shy woman who’s a little girly. She loves cooking and tries to feed me every time I come over to give her a little attention.”

“What about those contractors?” Lucien asked.

Damn it. I was hoping he would’ve completely forgotten about them. “They’re pretty much done with the house,” I said. “I’m sure they’ll be moving to another project soon.”

“And they haven’t caused any problems?” Lucien pressed.

Fuck! Somehow, I had to get them out of this. The question was how. Yeah, I was about to lie my ass off, but I needed it to make sense. It had to be believable.

“She said she made them dinner and helped them forget about what had happened.” I looked between the pair. “I didn’t know that was possible, but she said they weren’t going to

come back after we attacked, and she couldn't get anyone else to work on the house, so she just made them forget the whole day."

"So they don't remember magic at all?" Kingsley asked.

I shrugged. "They haven't said anything to me about it."

"Well, at least there's that." Kingsley held out his hand, clearly wanting the rest of the images Lucien had discarded so quickly. "What else did you get?"

"A cure for cancer, heart attack, and a few others," I said. "I picked by the titles, wanting to make sure I was getting what you needed, and these clearly sound like spells, not meals."

"Margie could definitely cook, I'll give her that," Kingsley said. "It's just a shame she wanted to be a spinster. The two of us could've made some very powerful children."

Which was just the opening I needed to tilt this discussion in a slightly different direction. Hopefully one that would make these two men forget all about Jack and Reese again.

"Speaking of that," I said. "Do children from witch to wix marriages really get more power? Is it a guarantee or just more likely? And how much more likely?"

Kingsley began to smile. "Are you finally thinking about settling down, my boy?"

I definitely did not like that man calling me his boy, but I smiled at him anyway. "Well, it has dawned on me that with great power comes great responsibility. I want Nancy's spot. I want to be the third in the coven. You keep telling me I need to have kids, and if that's what it takes, then I need a plan for this."

"No, you need a wife for that," Lucien said around a dry laugh.

I wanted to roll my eyes at the stupid joke, but resisted the urge. "It's just that it's a lot easier to sweep a foolish mundane woman off her feet with a few simple spells. That sort of shit would never work with a witch. I now have a sizable piece of

land, I can build a large house on it, and then convince a beautiful woman that it's hers to do with as she wants once she says 'I do.'"

"Have anyone in mind?" Kingsley asked.

"A few girls in town have shown an interest," I admitted. "Of course, I'd want to start with the prettiest, because if I have to make a brood of brats, I'd at least want it to be enjoyable, right?"

"There's that," Lucien agreed. "And I highly recommend the dumb ones. They don't fight you as hard."

"But do I need to marry a witch?" I asked again.

"No," Kingsley said. "My own wife was completely human. Not a hint of magic in her background, but she gave me five empowered children and only two useless ones. It's a numbers game, though, Zane. The more children you have, the more power you will get from it. Let your wife stay home and raise them. Rent an office and spend your time there so you don't have to listen to them screaming as infants. In the end, it'll be worth it."

"Okay," I said, nodding to show I'd heard him. "So will that prove how serious I am about this?"

"Yes," Kingsley said, his words sounding almost like a purr. "I think securing our last weak bloodline will impress me very well."

"Combined with my land, my finances, and my contributions to the coven..." I flicked a finger at the folder I'd brought. "I'd like to think you understand exactly how dedicated I am by now."

"Greedy," Lucien corrected.

"Is there really a difference?" I asked. "I want the power. Your father is the one who controls it. Helping him helps me, so it's the sort of thing that works out in the end, I'd think."

Kingsley just chuckled. "Have you even stopped to consider how Nancy would take being pushed down?"

“Probably poorly,” I said with a shrug. “It’s also your call.” Then I tipped my head slightly. “But I am the one who got into the witch’s house. I’m the one who’s smiling at that sniveling bimbo for hours at a time, waiting for her to use the bathroom or answer a phone call so I can snap a few more pictures of that book. I’m the one having to deal with that damned driveway of hers every time I go over there! My fucking car is going to need a new suspension from it.”

“And you’re helping your coven,” Lucien reminded me.

“I am,” I agreed. “But I definitely expect to get something from it. I’m the one in the enemy’s home, putting myself at risk to help you, Lucien. All I’ve ever asked for is a little more power. Just something to help me get away from telling these damned fortunes!”

“And you’ll get it,” Kingsley promised. “Get us the spellbook and we’ll make sure you’re taken care of. Get a few heirs so we never have to do this again?” He smiled. “I will make you a very happy wix.”

“That’s all I wanted to know,” I said, pushing my chair back. “Now if you two will excuse me, I smell like sugar. I need a very long, hot shower.”

“I’ll expect more next week,” Kingsley said as I headed for the doorway.

“And I will do everything in my power to get that,” I told him.

But as I turned up the hallway, I could hear the pair talking softly behind me.

“I told you he’d come around,” Kingsley said.

Lucien just scoffed. “This doesn’t help me at all. It’s nothing but recipes, Dad.”

“Then you will learn how to cook,” Kingsley told him. “I have no intention of dying any time soon, so you can either take what you’re given or I’ll put your sister in this spot.”

“I hate cooking,” Lucien grumbled.

“I don’t fucking care,” Kingsley told him. “All that matters is the magic, boy.”

Yeah, and that was what was causing the problems. To them, it had always been all about the magic. Not the people, not the results of the spells, but just the power they could funnel to themselves. They were so blinded by it that they wouldn’t see what I was really doing until it bit them all in the ass.

I just had to make sure Syl was ready first, and time was running out.



# CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

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The night was beautiful. The moon was a slim crescent in the sky and out here the stars were brighter than anywhere else I'd ever been. Sure, the trees blocked some of the view, but over the deck and my new patio furniture? The sight was amazing.

“So,” Reese was saying, “I have two jobs lined up for us once we're done with Syl's bathroom.”

“Oh, yeah?” Jackson asked. “Anything good?”

“Kitchen remodel in town and a garage conversion just outside city limits.”

“Which means permits won't be a hassle on the conversion,” Jackson said.

I just sighed. “It's gonna suck.”

Which made both men turn to look at me. “What is?” Reese asked.

“Not having the pair of you here all day, every day. I've kinda gotten spoiled.”

“Yeah, um, about that...” Jackson said.

But before he could finish the thought, the entire forest began to murmur, and loudly.

*He shouldn't be here now.*

*The wix!*

*Should we open the gate?*

My head whipped around, trying to chase the directions of the voices, but I knew better than that. Some of these trees in my head weren't visible from here. It also didn't seem to muffle their sound at all.

"Who's here?" I demanded.

"Syl?" Jackson asked.

I lifted a finger, begging him to wait.

*The wix is at the gate, my trusty oak finally said. He said to ask you if he can come in.*

"Yeah, let him in," I decided.

"Who?" Reese asked.

At the same time, Jackson said, "What?"

"Sounds like Zane's here," I explained.

*Zane...* one of the trees whispered, its voice tapering off.

I just shook my head at that, but I honestly had no clue why Zane would be here now. It had to be after ten. Granted, I hadn't exactly brought my phone out with me. The three of us had been enjoying a wonderfully relaxing evening together under the stars.

A beam from his headlights flashed across branches in front of the house. A swath of light moved across the leaves above us and then vanished. At the same time, the subtle sound of his car's engine shut off.

"We're out back!" I yelled, hoping it would carry.

And from around the front, I heard a laugh. Not a subtle one. Not a forced one. Nope, this was the kind of barked rush of amusement that burst free when something unexpected happened. Confused, I glanced over at the guys.

Jackson shrugged. Reese shook his head. Clearly they had no better idea of what was going on than I did, but we didn't have to wait long. Still chuckling, Zane made his way around the side of the house, pointing back towards the front when he saw us.

“So, the ivy...”

“Gives directions and answers yes or no questions?” Reese asked.

“It answers questions?” Zane sounded honestly surprised.

“The longer side is yes,” Reese explained. “On the right when you’re facing the house. The shorter side is no.”

“Well, it blocked off the stairs and ‘pointed’ around the side of the house,” Zane explained before gesturing at one of the empty chairs. “May I?”

Jackson used a foot to push one towards him in a clear invitation. “Why are you here?”

“Well, that’s part of the story,” Zane explained as he lowered himself down. Then he paused, leaning back and looking up. “Wow.”

“Stars are nice when you get out of the city,” Reese said.

“Looks just like they do out by the creek,” Zane said.

Jackson groaned and reached for his beer. “I’m in so much shit right now.”

“I knew you two used to go out there,” Reese assured him.

“And I guessed that was your spot,” I added.

But Zane turned to give Jackson one hell of a look. “You took *both* of them there?”

“Well, for Syl, it’s part of the forest, so the coven can’t get her,” Jackson said.

“Fair,” Zane relented. “But I thought it was our spot.”

“Was kinda ours first,” Reese said. “We just used to fish, not fuck.”

To keep from giggling at them, I reached for my own drink, which was “beer” of a sort. Root beer - with ice cream. I’d had a craving for a float, and I’d decided to indulge myself. After all, the summer wouldn’t last forever.

“Well,” Zane said, kicking his feet up on the table with a sly little smile. “I gave the photos to the Grimsons. Went over

like a lead balloon.”

“You knew about this?” Jackson asked.

“Completely planned,” I assured him. “He’s been teasing out information about a book I’m trying to hide from him. Poorly, I might add.”

“Hence the picture,” Reese said.

“Relax, Jack,” Zane said. “I’m not fucking over your girl. But Lucien is not impressed with what he calls ‘cooking magic.’ Seems the man wants to do what Syl can. He thinks we’re going to perform some amazing ritual and make him as powerful as her.”

“Are you?” I asked.

Zane scoffed. “They’re trying to plan it, but I have a feeling something just won’t work out. Nancy’s already pushing the weather so it will rain soon. That means the full moon should be clear and lovely for us.”

“You mean the full moon at the end of the month?” Reese asked. “Not the one that just passed?”

“Yep, it was supposed to have been the last one, but a certain witch sucked the coven dry of magic.” Zane waved that off. “Kingsley hasn’t even organized the ritual, so it might get put off again. Well, that’s what I’m hoping for, at least. Gives me a little more time.”

“To do what?” Jackson asked.

Zane turned to look at him. “Quick lesson on coven magic, Jack.” Then he drew a star shape in the air. “The pentagram has five sides. With six wixen, that’s one at each point and one in the center to get the focus of magic. With five, then you need someone at each point. With four?” He smiled.

“Not quite following,” I admitted.

“Our coven can work with five bloodlines represented,” Zane said. “With four, it’s handicapped severely. Sure, we can do the cardinal points, but that’s not as powerful. With three, it’s almost useless. Two? That’s just a pair of wixen hanging out.”

“Less magic,” Jackson realized. “Less power.”

“Yep,” Zane said. “And this spell Kingsley wants to do is going to take a *lot* of power. The original plan was for Lucien to inherit Margie’s land. Syl fucked that up. So, Kingsley decided he’d just induct her into the coven. She fucked that up too. Now, she’s claimed her power and still refuses to be a part of the coven, so he’s going to ‘cut’ the Maybrook line and replace it with Lucien.”

“But doesn’t that leave him without an heir?” Reese asked.

Zane rolled his head over to give Reese a tired - and arrogant - look. “Kingsley has like seven kids. Five have magical abilities. He has plenty of heirs. But! When Lucien saw the spells Margie had in her spellbook? I thought he was about to refuse the position!” He laughed.

“Wouldn’t Kingsley just put one of his other kids in then?” I asked.

Zane shook his head. “Nope. Seems he told Lucien that he *would* do this. Sounded a lot like an order. I mean, Kingsley’s been using magic to increase his health and extend his life. I think the old man hopes to make himself immortal by siphoning off as much magic as he can - but that’s beside the point. For Lucien, it means that if he wants to ever be in charge of his own magic, he needs to take this. He has to become the Maybrook. Granted, I’m sure they won’t call it that.”

“A nature witch,” Reese said. “Would he be able to control the forest?”

“He’d still have to bond with it,” I assured them. “Margie never did, but that’s part of why her power was so weak. I also don’t think she wanted to be a witch. Not after Kingsley made her help hurt her lover.”

Because I’d told the guys about Margie and her werewolf boyfriend. At first, they’d thought I’d been joking. They had no problem believing I was a witch, but werewolves? Still, all the facts seemed to support the stories Margie had written, and Zane said they existed, so I was leaning to this being true.

“But would he have any privileges?” Zane asked. “If Lucien’s magic is shifted to operate on nature, would the forest have to respect that?”

I paused to take a long sip of my root beer float, then turned to the forest. “I don’t know the answer to that. Do any of you?”

“Who?” Zane asked.

“Trees,” Reese said just as the forest answered.

*Replacing a bloodline has never been done.*

*There is no Maybrook. If there was, she would have power. That is not the same as a bond.*

“He,” I corrected. “The one they want to put in place is a man.”

*Being able to use magic from nature is not the same, the oak in front of the house finally said. This wix’s power would be the same as yours, yet not.*

“What does that mean?” I asked, lifting my voice a bit so it would carry that far.

*It means, the oak said, that you are the Holt. We are the Holt Forest. To a Maybrook, this is no different from any other forest. To a Holt, this is home.*

“Nice,” I breathed. “Thank you!”

A collection of murmurs assured me I’d been heard, and I turned back towards the guys. “Seems it’s my forest. If Lucien becomes a nature wix, then this place would be no different from a tree in town. It’s nature, sure, and it’s the source of his power in a way, but not in any special way like it is for me.”

“Why’s that?” Zane asked.

I took another sip of my float, realizing he’d come here to fill me in. He’d been teaching me. Over and over, this man had proven himself, and yet I was still hesitant to trust him completely. I was even on board with Jackson dating him again, but his ties to the coven made me feel like I should hide

my plans from him. His actions, on the other hand, said that was dumb.

So I decided to just lay it out there. “When I went to that dinner at Kingsley’s place and left? I was worried about screwing up the spell that protects Summerpoint. I started working to convince the forest that I’m on its side. Healing trees, showing I’m not interested in corrupted magic, right?”

“Is that what you think the coven is?”

“That’s what the forest thinks,” I clarified. “The coven has corrupted the agreement the wild things made with the first witches. My goal was to prove that the magic I’d inherited was still pure. I wanted to bond to the forest so I could ensure the protections on Summerpoint weren’t broken. If I claimed my power, then all six bloodlines still exist, even if I’m not locked into the coven.”

“Which makes Kingsley’s plan a little more complicated,” Zane realized.

I nodded. “And the night you all attacked? Yeah, the forest accepted me. I kinda got pissed and turned it loose. In the process, I sorta removed the restrictions the first Maybrook - or one of the first, I’m not honestly sure - put on it. And now the trees move, talk, open the gate, and live their own lives.”

“Are magical,” Reese said. “She told the forest it doesn’t have to submit to humans or wixen anymore.”

“I serve it,” I explained, “not the other way around.”

Zane murmured in thought. “Which is why you’re trying to save those wild things.”

“Yep,” I said.

“Well, our little trick with the spellbook seems to be working. Right about now, Kingsley’s convinced I can do no wrong. Lucien’s pissed about this - and that he’s about to take a big step down in abilities - but I’m quickly moving up in the coven. Most of it is thanks to you, Syl.”

“And you think that’s a good thing?” Jackson asked.

“A necessary thing,” Zane said.



Jackson huffed. “The same coven that forced you to join, and you’re fucking helping them?”

“Fucking them over, but sure.”

Jackson pushed his chair back hard. “Really? You should be doing everything in your power to be forgotten. Look at Dare! Look at Finn! They’re members of the founding families, but they keep to themselves. They don’t try to get noticed. They certainly stay the fuck away from the Grimsons!”

“And what good would that do?” Zane asked. “How the hell would I know what’s going on if I hid away in my apartment all day? If I pretend like I’m just a sniveling little fortune teller? How. Does. That. Help?”

“It keeps you safe,” Jackson said. “Fuck, it keeps Syl safe! But no, you always had to be in the spotlight, huh? Now you’re going to... what? Try to take over the coven? Try to be part of the leadership?”

“That’s exactly the plan,” Zane said.

“Fucking dumb plan,” Jackson snapped before pushing to his feet and storming towards the house. “Gonna get yourself killed and her too!”

“Jack!” Zane called after him.

But Jackson kept going. He flipped a hand back in a gesture that all but dismissed Zane’s concern without slowing. When he reached the screen door, he slammed it, proving just how pissed he was.

“And this,” Reese said, “is when you follow him, Zane.”

“Fuck,” Zane grumbled, but he stood, pausing to look at me first. “If the Grimsons trust me, they’ll tell me where the wild things are. *That’s* why I need to do this.”

I nodded. “Yeah. I figured it was something like that.” Then I flicked a finger towards the house. “I also suggest you don’t stop talking until he starts listening. First-floor bedroom’s not being used. It’s a good place to actually talk if you want privacy.”

Zane huffed out a breath like he was trying to laugh. “Sounds like you know him better than I do. Thanks.” And then he headed for the back door, sighing as he walked.

I just looked over at Reese. “You know that’s not about Zane moving up in the coven, right?”

“Kinda is,” Reese said. “The coven is why Zane dumped Jackson. To Jackson, that means Zane should resist the coven, but this is Zane. He’s trying to fuck it up instead.” He paused. “Syl...” Then he looked at me. “You have to understand - Zane does stupid shit. He always has.”

“And Jackson’s worried he’s doing it again,” I realized.

“Yeah,” Reese breathed. “I kinda am too.”

“But we all are,” I pointed out. “All of us are trying to fix this. It’s stupid. It could go badly. We might fuck this up more than we can fix, Reese. We also can’t do it alone.”

Reese just lifted his beer. “And that’s the thing. I think Zane’s trying to do it alone so you don’t have to.”

# CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

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JACKSON

I opened the fridge, intending to grab another beer, and heard the screen door close. Letting out a heavy sigh, I closed the fridge and braced for whoever was coming in to talk me down. Would it be Syl, wondering why I was so pissed about this? Reese, telling me I should hear him out first?

No, it was Zane.

Damn, he looked good. The man was dressed to impress, which was typical for his meetings with the Grimsons - or the coven in general. He wore a white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. The top button had been left open. His black slacks were tailored perfectly to his body. Even the man's fucking shoes were shiny and elegant.

But it was the look in those blue eyes that made me stand straighter and lift my chin. "What?" I demanded.

"You know exactly what," he said, moving deeper into the kitchen. "You're pissed because I'm actually helping, is that it?"

"I'm fucking pissed because you're throwing yourself in with the coven," I shot back. "When you left me, you said you'd never help them - but look at you now!"

"Not helping them," Zane said.

I just scoffed and turned away. "Right. Because moving up in the coven's hierarchy isn't going to give them any benefits, right?"

“They don’t know what I can do,” Zane said. “They have no idea that I can do anything but read tarot cards and tea leaves. They think I’m a pathetic little wix, just like my father. I’ve also convinced them I’m greedy.”

“You are,” I snarled.

He slammed his hand down on the table. “I’m stuck with them, Jack. What the fuck do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know!” I shot back. “I just don’t understand why you want them to respect you!”

Zane’s jaw tightened and he shoved a hand into his dark hair. “I have been trying to figure out how to reverse the spell that bound me. I can’t. Don’t you get that?”

“So ignore it.”

He threw his hands up in frustration. “It doesn’t work like that! You should know better. How many times could you ignore that oath we made, hm?”

“I could work around it,” I pointed out. “I figured out how to say things that were allowed which got the right meaning across. Founding families instead of wixen, as an example.”

“Which is exactly what I’m doing,” he said, storming towards me. “I’m using all the loopholes I can find. That’s why I talked to Syl about her dinner with the Grimsons while you were there. I couldn’t tell *you*, but I could tell her. A fucking loophole. I can train her. I can help her - which helps you!”

“And move right up in the process,” I said. “Zane, maybe she trusts you, but you made sure I knew I couldn’t. You reminded me of that over and over. *Now* you want me to trust you?”

“Yes!” he growled. “At least a little, Jack. Enough to know that I will never hurt you.”

God, those eyes of his. I could see the anguish in them. They were the one thing he could never quite control. His expressions were always what he wanted. His pose, his

clothes, and everything else about him was designed to fit the image he needed at the time. But those eyes?

They looked right into my heart.

“I want you to stay away from them,” I finally said, the words coming out soft. “I don’t want you to be there when we take the coven down.”

“But I have to be,” he countered.

“No,” I insisted, “you don’t!”

“Jack, I do.” He reached up to palm the side of my neck, shifting closer in the process. “I’m bound. It’s a spell. If I don’t go when asked, I’ll be summoned. That will force me, the same way the blood oath forced you to not say words. If I try to resist or push through it, the pain will be unimaginable. Pure torture. You know how I know?”

“Because you’ve tried,” I realized.

He nodded slowly. “I tried to resist. I tried to fight back. I failed. Once someone is inducted into the coven, there’s no going back. There’s no way around it. I’ve been trying for years, and I still haven’t found a way out.”

I ducked my head, letting out a heavy sigh. “But do you have to help them?”

He leaned in to press his brow against mine. “I’m not. Oh, I’m letting them think I am, but just look at the spellbook. Recipes, Jack. Lucien Grimson has never been in a kitchen in his life. He has servants for that. Before he could do so much as cure cancer, he’d have to figure out how to preheat an oven. He knows it too. That’s why he’s pissed. But all Kingsley sees is me hunting down the spellbook he wants so badly.”

“And the land?” I asked.

Zane chuckled. “Beautiful, wild land. I’ve been spending some time out there, tossing out random seeds. Some from trees around my apartment complex. Some from little wildflower packets. I talk to the grasses.”

“And the coven thinks it’s making you stronger?” I guessed.

“Because it is,” he said. “Freer, too. I’ve worked dozens of little spells to encourage the coven to forget about you and Reese. Well, to not think too hard about what you did that night. I’ve pushed my cards to encourage Nora to be smart about her little rebellions. I’ve been helping as much as I can, in the ways I can, without drawing any attention to it.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because you love all of them,” I said. “Your friends, your family, your lovers. I’m protecting you, Jack. I always have been. The only thing that has changed is that I’m now protecting your witch too - as much as I can.”

“Why?” I pressed.

He swallowed hard. “Because I will never have children. Oh, I’ve just told Kingsley I’m thinking about settling down, getting married, and all of that. It’s a lie. I’m not going to build a fancy house on that land. I’m not about to drag anyone else into my problems the way my father did with my mother.” Then his thumb traced the tendon down the side of my neck. “I want the Harkness line to die with me. That will hurt the coven more than anything else I can do. If we can prevent Lucien from taking the Maybrook spot, it will cripple them.”

I lifted my head, aware Zane was just a bit taller than me. “Because you expect us to kill you when we push back.”

He smiled, the expression a wry twist to his lips. “No. I don’t think Syl could kill anyone. She’s not that kind of a witch. Reese would never get over it. You? I think you could, but I think it would also destroy you.” His thumb moved again, the caress so gentle. “I think that in order to become a monster, a person has to suffer first. I’m here to make sure you never suffer.”

“But I did,” I reminded him. “When you left, do you think I celebrated? Do you honestly think I was ok?”

His hand stilled. His body tensed. Before me, Zane froze, those eyes of his jumping between each of mine. “Jack...”

“Oh, I know you were trying to protect me,” I assured him. “You just never stopped to ask what I wanted! You made the

decision. You ran off to deal with the problem. You were so sure the line between magical and real was one that no one else would ever see, even though we all know. Everyone in Summerpoint knows about magic, but you decided you were the only one who could save me, right?” Then I stepped closer, putting our faces mere inches apart. “But I can save my fucking self, Zane.”

“And I was a boy,” he reminded me. “A scared boy, still in the closet, thinking this curse of my birth had ruined everything. I didn’t leave because I was saving you. I left because I thought I was hurting you!”

“Your *leaving* hurt me!”

“And me!” He tried to pull away, withdrawing his hand. “You had Reese. You would be okay. Reese would figure it out and you’d get to be happy, Jack.” Then he gestured towards the kitchen windows. “They make you happy. Have I ever told you to stay away from her? No! Because you deserve to be fucking happy, and that’s why I’m here! It’s the only thing I’ve ever wanted, because if I can’t make myself happy, then at least I could make sure you - “

I grabbed both sides of his face and shoved my mouth against his, cutting him off.

Zane tensed like he was going to pull away, but he didn’t, so I kissed harder. My tongue traced the seam of his lips, begging. My fingers pushed back into his hair, holding him against me. Both of Zane’s hands were out, caught somewhere between him and me like he wasn’t sure what to do with them.

And then he gave in. One of his hands grabbed a handful of my hair. The other found my waist. His mouth parted and our tongues met. Hot. Hard. Frantic. We kissed in the kitchen as if time had never stopped between us. We kissed like we had a million years to make up for.

We kissed like we meant it.

“Jack...” he breathed against my mouth before claiming it again.



I tilted my head up, but his lips simply moved to my jaw, pressing through my beard. “Zane, this is bad.”

“Fuck if I care about bad,” he swore.

So I forced his mouth away from me. “I’m in love with them.”

He stepped into me, guiding me back. “Yeah, Reese made that very clear to me already.”

I retreated before him, trying to keep up with how fast this argument had just changed. “I don’t want to ruin what I have.”

“Then don’t,” he said, dropping his eyes to my mouth.

“Fuck you,” I growled, trying to stop, but Zane kept backing me up.

“I,” he said, still moving, “am going to find the wild things.” His eyes flicked up, then back to mine. “I’m going to make sure Sylvia knows how to free them. I’m going to fuck up the coven to help, knowing it will come back to bite me at some point.” He smiled, then reached around me to open the door to the first bedroom. “That’s why I want power, Jack. Because the greedier I am, the more they trust me. And you know what? I’m greedy for one single thing.”

“What?” I asked, intending to make it a demand and instead hearing the word come out as a breath.

But his answer wasn’t quite what I expected. “Protecting *your* coven. The right coven. The coven I should’ve been a part of.” And then he shoved me into the room.

I shuffled back two steps, simply because I was too shocked to resist. “What?”

So he stabbed a hand at the ground. “This place? It’s worth fucking fighting for. What the *hell* do you think I’ve been doing?”

“Raising your rank in the coven!”

“And that night?” I asked. “When everyone else was fighting, where was I, Jack? Where the *fuck* was I?”

“Putting a tarot card on the back window,” I realized.

“And shielding the goddamned wild thing!”

My breath stalled. “What?”

“I broke the blood oath for the power backlash. I used that to drain the rest of the coven, because we were linked! I was around the back of the house so I didn’t need to be a part of that chant. *That’s* why I confronted Reese. I went for him because I knew you could take care of yourself and I wouldn’t hurt him. If I had to, I’d knock him out safely. I’d keep him *safe* for you, because *I never stopped loving you!*”

“But you don’t love him.”

“No, I love you that much instead, and you know what? I kinda like that woman of yours too. From the first moment I saw her, I’ve wanted to protect her just as much as you. I kept her out of the coven. I have shielded her. The whole time, I’ve made it look like someone else’s fault, pushing Dare and Finn further from the Grimsons. Making tension in the coven. And right now, I’ve set my sights on Nancy. So if you want to be pissed about me plotting and planning to move up in that coven? Realize why. I’m doing it because I’m going to pull them apart from the fucking inside, just like I vowed to you.”

Then he stepped into the room, closing the door behind him. I reached over to flick on the lights, but the pair of us were stuck. Neither of us would break this tension again, and I was breathing too hard, a mixture of anger and surprise making me breathless. Well, and him.

Zane was just waiting. He always looked so calm and in control, but not right now. Passion was written in every line of his body. Anger, determination, and everything else along with it. He wasn’t backing down, but that was what I loved about him. This man had always pushed me. He’d made me better, stronger, and kinder in a way.

And I still loved him as much as I ever had.

# CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

---

“Fuck it,” I said, closing the distance between us. “You’re right.”

A smile flickered across his lips just before my mouth found them again, pressing him up against the door. He gasped, tilting his head back even as his hands found my waist. He pulled. I pushed, pinning him there as I kissed my way down his neck.

“We can’t do this, Jack,” he panted.

I just grabbed at his pretty white shirt and began to pull. “Oh, but that’s where you’re wrong.”

So he shoved, rolling me off him just to pin me against the wall. One of his hands went to my neck, forcing me to look at him. “You’re pissed because I left. Pissed because I came back. Pissed because I’m a wix. If we do this, you’ll be pissed because I gave in.”

I yanked the rest of his shirt free of his pants and then began unbuttoning it from the bottom, slowly making my way up. “Pissed because you’re still in that coven. Pissed because you aren’t jealous about Reese at all.”

He caught my hands, stopping them halfway up and making it almost impossible to keep undressing him. “Oh, I’m jealous. I also have one single good bone in my body, and it says he’s good for you. So is she.”

“Mm, she really is,” I agreed. “Pretty sure she’s got the hots for you too.”

His eyes narrowed. “Get your blood out of your dick, Jack.”

“No.” I got another button free. “See, we talked about this. We talk about all of it, because that’s how a relationship like this works. Reese wanted her, so I encouraged it. We worked it out. The three of us somehow managed to end up just right together - and then you show up.”

“To help, not get in the middle of things.”

“And you work too,” I said. “She stands up for you. She listens to you. You’re gentle with her, but you make her push her power, forcing her to grow in a way I never could. You’re careful with Reese, never making him feel like he’s in the way. You think I didn’t notice all of that?”

“When you weren’t looking at me?” he shot back.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Because I couldn’t without *this* happening.”

I could feel his chest rising and falling against my hands. The grip that had been stopping me from opening his shirt relaxed, and then his hand on my neck moved higher. When his fingers pressed against the back of my head, I started working on the next button.

“I shouldn’t do this,” he muttered.

“Oh, I think you should,” I said, taunting him. “Keeping me safe and happy, right?”

I released the last button and he shrugged off the shirt. “And not fucking things up for you,” he told me.

“But they’re the ones encouraging me.”

“Fuck it,” he growled before tugging at my shirt.

Unlike him, I wasn’t stupid enough to resist. I ducked out of the fabric, dropping my eyes to his chest as he tossed it away. Damn, Zane was a gorgeous man. His muscles were different from Reese’s, but just as defined. There were six hard lines across his abs, not eight. His biceps bulged as he moved his arms. His pecs were broad, flat, and perfectly tan, with no lines from a shirt in the sun.

“You always were a pretty boy,” I said, pushing him back.

He went, that smile of his making a brief appearance. “So I’m out of shit now, hm?”

“Pretty much,” I agreed before pushing him down on the bed.

But he caught me when I followed, rolling me so he was on top. “Does this mean you trust me again?”

I caught the back of his head, but paused. “Zane, I’ve always trusted you. It was me I didn’t trust.”

“For damned good reason,” he breathed before lowering his face to mine.

Damn, could he kiss. There was no shame, no hesitation, just pure desire. I loved the way his hands clung to me, gripping so hard. I couldn’t get enough of how hard his body felt pressed against mine like this.

Zane was nothing like Reese. He was sensual, seductive, and not at all hesitant. Reese was gentle, loving, and supportive. I needed them both. I always had. The problem was that I’d only ever been able to have one before.

But every brush of our lips was familiar. Every caress of our hands was like an old memory being rewritten. Every kiss, every press of our bodies, and all the heavy breaths were just like I remembered. Maybe our voices were deeper. Our bodies were definitely broader, harder, and much more experienced. None of that mattered, though, because I knew him in a way few others ever had.

“Please don’t let this push you away,” I begged, pulling back so I could see his face.

“I can’t,” he told me. “Jack, I tried to keep my distance. I even thought about stealing your witch to distract myself. I couldn’t. She was too close to you, and every time I saw you...”

I pulled him down beside me. “What?”

“I think about this,” he admitted. “About how much I want to touch you. About how much I miss you.”

“Yeah, I’ve missed you too,” I agreed as I leaned in to kiss him again.

But this time my hands dropped. His belt came free easily. When I reached for the button of his slacks, I felt his lips curl against mine, and then he slid a hand between us to pop open my jeans. My fucking dick was so hard the zipper was more than willing to slide lower. A tug opened his, and then I couldn’t help but reach inside. Hard, long, and so fucking hot, I could feel him through the fancy cotton of his underwear.

“Please tell me there’s lube in this room?” he asked.

I chuckled. “What do you think the chances are of that?”

Which made his blue eyes sparkle. “Mm, I do like the way you think.” And then he gestured.

I couldn’t describe the movement. It was a jumble of fingers and a bend of his wrist. Most likely some sigil or prophetic incantation thing. It also didn’t matter.

“Which side?” I asked.

“Chances are good it’s on your side.”

“Then get your fucking shoes off,” I told him as I turned to check the drawer over there.

Without moving, Zane kicked off first one shoe, then the other, the hard soles thumping loudly when they hit the floor. I opened the drawer to find a handy little bottle of lube beside what may have been one of Syl’s toys. How amazingly fortunate that she’d hide something like that in here.

But that was how divination magic worked. It pulled in the sorts of coincidences that were most likely. It was also why Zane was so good at manipulating people. He understood them. He had to if he wanted his magic to work.

“Condoms?” I asked.

“Not gonna get pregnant, Jack.”

“STIs, Zane.”

He laughed once. “I’m a fucking wix. Magic handles that.”

“Nice.” And then I pushed my pants off.

My underwear went with it. When I got to my ankles, I had to bend to get my socks and shoes off, which ruined the smooth look I’d been going for, but fuck it. This was happening and I wasn’t about to think too hard about it. If I did, I might change my mind - or he would.

“I think I prefer to be undressed,” Zane teased as he rolled onto his back.

So I dropped the lube beside his hip and moved over him. “Spoiled as ever, hm?”

“Oh, I’d like to be,” he said, lifting his ass so I could get both his pants and underwear off.

His dick sprang free, standing up and begging for attention. The shadowed trail below his belly button was more skin than hair. Waxed, probably, and yet I liked the way it blued his skin. And the man?

Seeing him stretched out on the bed below me was beautiful. His hair was a mess. His body was perfection. The veins that roped up his dick begged to be tormented, so I leaned in, running my tongue up his length.

“God...” Zane breathed.

“How many lovers have you had since me?” I asked before licking his length again.

“Didn’t count,” he gasped. “Fifty? Twenty? Pick a number.”

So I swirled my tongue around the tip. “How many made you think of me?”

“All of them,” he breathed, reaching up to grab the back of my head.

Oh, that was just how I liked it, so I let him fill my mouth. Zane pushed, driving me deeper, then relaxed so I could slide higher. He moaned, the sound soft like he was trying not to, but it worked for him.



“How many have you had?” he asked before letting go of my head.

I let his dick fall from my lips. “A few here and there.”

“And how many made you think of me?”

“All but two,” I promised before licking that sensitive spot just under the head of his dick.

“Good answer,” he said before pushing me back down again.

So I sucked. I bobbed across his length. I also ignored his hand when I wanted, doing my best to make this man come undone beneath me. When his thighs tensed around me, I knew I was doing something right, but he refused to beg.

Sliding a hand up his chest, I reached for his nipple, pinching the pebble of it as I worked him a little faster. Zane grabbed my arm, almost like he was begging me to stop, but held it there instead. Oh, it seemed my pretty boy hadn't changed at all.

But when I cupped his balls with my other hand, he was done. Flicking his nipple, massaging his balls, and sucking him off for all I was worth was all Zane could take. His hips flexed. His mouth fell open and his eyes closed. For a moment, he just took, accepting every single thing I wanted to give him until both of his hands clutched the back of my head and he lost control.

“Fuck!” he growled, clenching up just as warmth flooded the back of my mouth.

I swallowed, dragging my tongue across him as I backed off, but only so I could move over his body. “You know I'm not done,” I warned.

He simply spread his legs a little more. “I hope not.” And then he handed me the bottle of lube.

Pushing myself up to kneeling, I spread him open with my knees while opening the bottle. Slowly, I poured a handful of clear gel into my palm and then began working it onto my dick. His eyes followed, hanging on my hardness.

“How long since you’ve been with a guy?” I asked. “Do I need to be gentle?”

“No,” he promised. “I’m not a saint, Jack.”

“Good.” Tossing the bottle away, I pushed my dick down, lining myself up as I leaned forward.

Balls. Taint. Ah, there was the pucker of his ass. I could feel his dick against my belly and arm, but what I couldn’t ignore were his eyes. Half-lidded, drunk on desire, and locked on me. Filled with passion. This was how Zane should look. Like this, he was a very different man.

My man.

And then I pushed in, taking my time about it. His body stretched. The heat of him wrapped around me. I felt that first ring resist for only a moment, but the second was even tighter. I had a feeling he hadn’t been with a man in quite a while - or at least not on bottom.

“Too much?” I asked.

In answer, he caught the back of my head and pulled me down to kiss him. Our mouths crashed together too hard, but he didn’t seem to care. His tongue thrust between my teeth and his entire body relaxed. I pushed a little more, slipping all the way inside his body.

He groaned, not trying to hold it in this time.

“That’s a good boy,” I promised before sliding back a bit.

“You arrogant fucker,” he mumbled, reaching for my arm.

But I caught his hand, pinning it over his head and pushed back in slowly. “You’re the one who said you like to give in.”

“With you,” he breathed.

And our eyes met again. I kept rocking, pumping into his body, but I felt those words slide across my skin. With me. Just me. That was how I felt about Reese. It took the right person to make a man give in, and he was saying that person was me.

But it was also him. It had always been him - just not *only* him.

“I still love you,” I breathed, kissing him again.

“Jack...” His other hand wrapped around my back, holding me close.

And we rocked. He rolled his hips, grinding himself against my body and pushed me in deeper. I’d expected this to end up hard, wild, and frantic, but it wasn’t. Every touch mattered too much. Every breath he let out, I drank in. Every sigh of pleasure reminded me how to make him feel good, and that was all I wanted.

I loved him. Fuck, I didn’t want to love him, but I couldn’t stop, so I loved him harder. I kissed his neck, shoulder, and even across his collarbones as I pumped him higher. My fingers gripped his wrist so hard, forcing him to give in, because I never wanted to let him go again.

He felt amazing. Every long, lean line of him. Every perfectly sculpted muscle and demanding press against my body was what I needed. I was panting hard, struggling to hold myself in check, but he was driving me wild with his complete abandon, losing himself in pleasure beneath me.

Then his back arched. His ass began to clench. His thighs pressed against my hips, but his hand kept pulling, begging me not to stop. Forcing my eyes open, I saw his pressed tightly closed, his mouth parted in the most beautiful expression I could imagine.

“Jack...” he begged again. “Fuck, I love you too.”

And then he came. His entire body twisted with the force of it. Warmth hit my belly and chest, but I didn’t stop. I kept moving, chasing the rush of feeling him come undone around me. Again, then again, until I couldn’t think of anything but how amazing it was to have Zane in my arms one more time.

I groaned as I lost control, pushing myself as far into his body as I could as my balls emptied themselves inside him.

Zane finally pulled his arm free, wrapping both of them around my back, and I collapsed against his chest.

For a long moment, we both just breathed, touching each other completely. Legs, chests, and even my face buried in the side of his neck - it was like I couldn't get enough of him. Like I was trying to get my fix before the withdrawal kicked in.

"Hey?" he finally asked, making me lift my head. "You kicking me out now?"

"No," I promised as I finally slid from his body, moving to lie on the spot beside him. "I figure Syl won't mind if we borrow this room for the night."

"She told me to use it," he admitted. "And Reese told me to follow you."

"Yeah, that's why I love them," I admitted.

"Don't ever stop," he said, moving closer so he could rest his head on my shoulder. "They're good for you, Jack. They complete you."

"Is this where I'm supposed to start feeling guilty?" I asked.

He shook his head and wrapped an arm around my waist. "Nah. I think this is where you and I decide to sort our shit out."

"I'm cool with you hitting on her, you know."

He laughed. "I'm still in the coven, Jack. She's off-limits."

"Which means we need to get you out of the coven."

"Yeah," he breathed, hugging me a little closer. "Wouldn't that be nice?"

Which meant we had to. Somehow, Syl would find a way. She always did. I just wasn't quite sure how to ask her about it without making this incredibly awkward. Because while Zane might be my first lover, and I did still love him, I didn't love him most. There was no most.

There was just us, and he felt like he belonged here. Right here, with his head on my shoulder. Hopefully, forever.

# CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

---

Reese and I watched as Zane stepped into the house. The lights were on, and the expanse of windows across the back made it easy to see both men inside. Jackson closed the fridge and stood, turning to face Zane. The pair were both tense like they were ready to throw down.

“Please tell me they aren’t about to destroy the house?” I asked Reese.

He chuckled. “I make no promises, but I think they need this. It’s been a long time coming, Syl.”

“Yeah, but are we pushing too hard?”

“Nope,” he said, his eyes locked on the men gesturing like they were having a screaming match. “Jackson has never gotten over Zane. He needs to either get back with him or realize he doesn’t want to. Either way is fine with me, but sitting on the fence, pretending like there’s nothing between them?” He shook his head.

“Aren’t you jealous, though?” I asked.

“Why, are you?”

I had to actually think about that. “No, but I’m pretty sure it’s different for me.”

“Really?” he asked, finally looking away. “Why so?”

“Well, I’m the woman in this mess.”

“And?” he asked, turning to watch again.

I laughed softly, unsure how it could be any more obvious. “Um, because I can’t exactly do anything about any of you wanting a dick?”

“Not how that works,” he assured me. “That’s actually a pretty shitty myth that was spread about by people wanting to cheat or homophobes.”

“Huh?”

He grunted. “Um, having a desire for a certain type of body. Male or female. Nonbinary. Trans. Whatever. It doesn’t mean someone deserves that, Syl. No different than if Kingsley Grimson decided you were hot. Good for him, but you don’t owe him your body - or any other woman. That’s what I mean.”

“Well, yeah, but if you care about someone, you want them to have it all, right?”

“Right,” he agreed. “It’s just not a genital thing. I didn’t want Jackson to get with you because he likes pussy too. I wanted him to get with you because he likes you as a person, and because the three of us kinda were working out.”

“Okay?”

“And think about it,” he went on. “If I was a straight man, and I said I really like women, does that mean I get a second or third girl because one’s not enough? No! That’s all I’m saying. As a bisexual man with a preference for women, I was very happy in a relationship with Jackson for years. Just us.”

“But Jackson encouraged you to ask me out,” I reminded him.

“Because Jackson was raised by a polyamorous mother,” he reminded me. “Monogamy has never been his thing. That’s very different from sexuality.” Then he reached over to rub my knee. “Which brings us back to the original question. Are you jealous about Zane hitting on your other boyfriend?”

“I’m kinda not,” I admitted. “Which is a little weird. I mean, I figured that after Andrew cheated, I’d be creeped out about an open relationship, but instead it feels... I dunno, safer?”

“I can see that,” he said. “I was worried Jackson was trying to give me a hint that we were over. Took me a while to actually ask you out because of it.” He looked over and smiled, then back to where Zane and Jackson were now standing a lot closer. “When you love someone, you’re supposed to forget everyone else exists, right? One true love, and all that?”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “But I kinda like this.”

“Me too,” he said. “I like that Jackson doesn’t have to be everything. You’re different from him, in a good way. When I want to be domestic, you’re more than willing to make it fun. When he wants to work with power tools, I get that part too. I dunno, that’s making it too simple, but it works in my head.”

“I like that we balance each other,” I told him. “I also think Zane is easy to talk to. I can see why Jackson likes him.”

“Because he’s hot,” Reese said. “He’s confident, sure of what he wants, and doesn’t feel like he has to knock someone down to prove himself. He’s an arrogant ass at times, but he’s also usually right. Well, except about this.”

“What this?”

Reese flicked a finger towards the back of the house just as Jackson grabbed Zane’s face and kissed him hard. For a moment, I was sure Zane would pull away, but then he gave in, kissing back.

“That,” Reese said, sounding pleased.

“What if Jackson wants to leave us, though?” I asked. “I mean, I’m not jealous, but I am kinda insecure about that.”

“Same,” he agreed. “But here’s the thing. Jackson and I talked. When I’m scared, I’ve learned to lay it out there and let him know. I might not like the answer, but at least I’ll know, right?” He smiled at the pair of men making out in my kitchen. “And I realized that he loved Zane first. Well, sorta. He knew he *could* love Zane first. I was ‘straight’ back then. And you know what? Us getting together didn’t erase what they had. It doesn’t erase what you and I have. Sure, those two have more



history together than we do, but longer isn't the same as better."

"I like that," I decided just as Zane began guiding Jackson towards the little hall and out of sight. "I'm also okay with you hooking up with him, you know."

"Zane?" Reese asked.

"Mhm."

He laughed. "Yeah, I dunno."

"Why not?"

"I'm not saying no," he assured me. "I'm literally saying that I don't know. See..." He turned his chair to face me instead of the house. "For thirty years, I listened to my father talking about what made a 'real man.' A lot of that stuck. I know it's bullshit, but it's still in my mind like my own little insecurity."

"Oh, I completely get that," I said.

"And it made sex with a man harder," he said softly.

"Because of the assumptions?" I asked.

"Because I spent my adult life listening to horror stories from women. Charlotte's a bit of a feminist, you know. Well, her friends would talk about all the ways men could hurt them. Not all of them were intentional. So, the thought of, um, getting fucked? Being penetrated? I mean, part of me wanted it, but most of me was scared."

"Yeah, I'm just not into butt stuff," I said.

"I like it," he admitted. "I've also only done it with Jackson. For me, it's a very big trust thing."

"I can see that," I agreed.

He flashed me a smile. "Yeah, I guess you could. But when it comes to lovers? I'm not as... I dunno. I know what I want. And while I can see Zane's sexy, I'm not convinced he's what I want. I also don't see anything wrong with someone else wanting him." And he tipped his head at me.

“How about we see if those two can sort things out before worrying about anything else?” I suggested.

“All I’m saying,” Reese said, “is that I’m okay with it if you do decide to grab him in the middle of a fight and kiss the shit out of him. Think of this as advanced approval, I guess. I know Jackson’s fine with it too. I mean, just so it’s out there.”

“I’m pretty happy with my two boyfriends,” I said just as the light came on in the first-floor bedroom. “And looks like that might be working out.”

“Not yet,” Reese told me. “They’re standing by the door.”

So I leaned his way, just able to see Jackson’s shoulder from that angle. “Think they’re still fighting?”

“Probably,” he agreed. “I also think that’s the only way they’ll get it all out in the open.” Then he lifted his beer and swallowed the last of it. “And I’m out of a drink.”

“I’m not interrupting that,” I told him.

Reese laughed. “So we’ll be quiet? The door’s closed.”

“Deal,” I said, leaning forward to grab a pair of empty bottles off the table.

Reese collected the rest, because we’d been out here a bit, and then the pair of us headed for the house. Just as we reached the back door, I lifted a finger at Reese.

“House?” I asked softly. “Can you help us be quiet and not make anything squeak or bang?”

The screen door opened slightly, just enough for me to get my fingers around it. Taking that as a yes, we headed inside. Flower and the skunklets weren’t on the back porch, but for all I knew they could be out hunting bugs. They did that more now that the kids were older.

The door from the porch to the kitchen opened silently. When I headed to the kitchen to throw away the bottles, the cabinet door opened for me - and then closed after I gently placed the bottles inside. And even better, when we reached the stairs and started walking up, our footsteps were completely muffled.

The sound of men's voices in the closed bedroom, however, were easy to hear. They sounded raw, passionate, and like things were definitely heating up. Not wanting to spy on my boyfriend, I kept going until we were both in the bedroom.

"So," Reese said as he pulled his shirt off. "Does this mean I get to spend the night alone with you?"

"Yeah, but I kinda didn't turn out the rest of the lights," I reminded him.

"Got it," he said around a smile. "Hey, house? Can you turn off the lights? Well, not the first-floor bedroom, but the rest?"

And my room immediately went dark. I laughed, shoving a hand over my mouth to stifle it. "You weren't quite clear enough," I teased.

Reese just tossed his shirt away and stepped into me. "Or maybe the thought of being alone in the dark with you was my evil plan?" he asked.

I leaned into his chest. "Yeah?"

"Not really, no, but it sounded good," he said before stealing a quick kiss. "I'm just learning my way around all of your magic."

"And you're honestly okay with that?" I asked.

He nodded slowly. "I actually am. Syl, even if you weren't a witch, you'd still be magical to me. There's something about you I can't get enough of."

"Mm, I liked that," I said as I wrapped my arms around his neck. "And if our boyfriend's downstairs fucking his ex, does that mean I get to peel you out of your clothes?"

He smiled, pulling my hips closer to his. "I think I'm going to get you completely naked, kiss every inch of your skin, and take my time with you for once."

"Sounds like a promise," I said before leaning in.

He met me halfway and kissed me slowly. Damn, Reese knew exactly how to drive a woman crazy. His hands toyed

with the small of my back, tracing circles against my shirt. His tongue explored my mouth, claiming it, and worshipping it.

I melted into him. Being with these men was so easy, so amazing, and I always felt like I didn't deserve it - but I did. I deserved all of this, even if I'd have to constantly remind myself of that. They felt perfect, though, and as Reese guided me towards the foot of the bed, I hoped this thing with Zane wouldn't ruin any of it.

Then Reese pulled the tie from my hair and began carefully working the braid loose. The whole time, our mouths moved. I kissed his jaw, down his neck, and across his bare chest. He got my hair free and then slipped his hands around my waist, holding me there for a moment.

"I love that you're so small," he said before guiding my shirt up.

I didn't feel small. I felt like a curvy girl, like I could probably stand to lose a few pounds, eat less of my creations, and all of that. But when Reese said that, he made me feel like the most beautiful woman in the world.

It didn't matter that my skin was dark against his. It didn't matter that my hair had all these rules to it. It didn't even matter what number was printed on the inside of my jeans. When I was with him - or Jackson - I felt like a goddess. Like I'd become Gaia or Mother Earth. Like I could be sexy just the way I was, because that was how he would always see me.

"I love you," I breathed as I ducked out of my shirt.

"Good," he said as he reached for the button on my shorts. "Because I am so in love with you, Sylvia Holt. Don't you ever make me choose between you and Jackson, because I can't. Losing either one of you would break me."

"Me too," I agreed.

"And that is what makes you the perfect woman for us," he said, before kneeling to push my shorts down.

His lips trailed across my belly, kissing a path lower. His eyes glistened in the darkness as he looked up at me. The man was so sexy down there like that, and I could feel my body

responding. My pulse dropped lower, throbbing between my legs even though he was still wearing too much.

Then I stepped back. "I want to be on top."

"Oh, how could I say no to that?" he asked, standing just to get out of his pants. "For me, the view is amazing."

So I hopped up on the bed and moved higher. Reese followed, crawling his way up to claim a pillow and then rolling onto his back. Naked, the man looked even better. Jackson was sexy and strong. Zane was sexy and dangerous. Reese? He was sexy in the kind of way that felt like a safe place. Like where I could always run when I needed someone to hold me.

But when I leaned in to kiss my way down to his dick, he grabbed my side and pulled, all but forcing me to straddle him. "No sucking me off," he said as he guided me into position. "Because I'm not a young man anymore, and I only have so many tries in me each night."

"At least two," I countered.

"And I'm planning to use my second after you get me off like this," he said, easing me down.

The man filled me easily and I was more than ready for him. As he slid into my body, he held me there, forcing me to stretch around him before his hands finally released my waist, sliding higher.

"I have the most beautiful witch in any coven," he said before cupping my breasts. "And I feel like I can't get enough of you."

Which was when I began to rock. Damn, he felt good. Lifting myself higher, I slid partially off him just to push him back in. Like this, I could take him so deep, and I loved it. With each bounce, my breasts wanted to sway, but his hands held them, enjoying the fullness of them before his thumbs swept over my achingly hard nipples.

All I could do was throw my head back and enjoy that. If he wanted to watch, then I wasn't going to stop him. I just wanted to feel. Slowly at first, I rode this man the way that felt

best for me, angling him inside my body to be right where I wanted.

Then he took over. When I began moaning, I realized my voice wasn't the only one. There was another, deeper sound coming from the first floor. Fuck, I didn't care if they heard. Let them have their fun, because I was having mine.

And Reese made me enjoy every second of it. Planting his feet on the bed, he thrust upwards, making me rock with him. I dropped a hand to his amazing chest for balance, feeling those muscles flex each time he filled me, and we lost ourselves in the pleasure.

Over and over, we pressed our bodies as close together as it was possible to get. When I leaned forward to kiss him, he drank in my breath and devoured my mouth, but we never stopped moving. Our skin grew slick with exertion, hands sliding over bodies to consume it all.

This man was mine. Maybe not all mine, but I didn't care about that. I didn't want to own him. I wanted to be with him. I wanted to become a part of him, and one he would never give up. I wanted to show him just how easy it was for our love to be real. That just because all of this was amazing, that didn't make it fleeting.

I gasped. He groaned. Beneath us, the bed creaked in protest, but the sound was too soft to carry. All that mattered was the way my hips tilted to grind his length inside me, or how he exhaled as he filled me so deeply. My eyes closed as I traced the path of his hands down my back, and I sucked at the pulse in his neck, pounding hard against my lips.

Nothing else mattered. No one else could understand us. Not the pair of us, but all of us. Maybe this was magical. Maybe it was unrealistic, but it was mine. This was what I was fighting for, and as I pushed myself onto him again and again, my body was responding.

But when he let go of my breast to toy with my clit, I was done for. His fingers pressed, circled, and flicked in rhythm with our movements and I couldn't take anymore. I came,

sucking in a breath so hard it was loud in the room, and he didn't slow.

Every time he buried himself inside me prolonged the orgasm. Each thrust was like a promise, bringing us closer together. This was lovemaking. This was all I'd ever wanted from a partner, and now I had two of them who'd give it to me. Who made me feel inside and out as amazing as I'd ever hoped for.

Then Reese gasped, pulling my hips down as he found his own release. I felt him shudder beneath me, so held onto him, hugging his neck against the bed. I couldn't do more than pant, but it didn't matter. His arms slid around my back and his mouth kissed the hollow of my throat.

"Mm, I think this four person thing is working out better than I expected," he said as he finally let go of me.

I slid off him and dropped down to his side. "Yeah?"

He just crooked a finger, all but begging for me to come closer. "Yeah, it means I get to cuddle all night long." And when I curled up at his side, he kissed the top of my head. "But give me a second to catch my breath before you ask for round two."

I just pressed my face into his chest and giggled. "And here I was thinking round one made me a very happy girl."

"Witch," he corrected. "A happy witch, and that's my job as your familiar, remember."

"Oh, a fuckboy?" I teased.

"Sure," he laughed. "I can do that. I'm also going to see just how much of this bed we can mess up with only the pair of us."

"Reese, I like how you think," I told him before stretching higher to kiss his mouth. "That's why I'm keeping you. All the ways you think."

And the soft smile he gave me proved that was exactly what he needed to hear.

# CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

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I woke up the next morning, sprawled across the bed on my stomach. Reese's legs were tangled with mine and his arm was draped casually over my back. From the steady slowness of his breathing, he was also still dead asleep. Then again, he'd gone for three rounds last night, so the man probably deserved a little rest this morning.

Slipping out from under him, I headed to the bathroom to clean up. A quick shower rinsed off my body. My lotion made me smell pretty when I was done. Then I went to find clean clothes, doing my best not to open the drawers too loudly in the process.

Once I was presentable again, I headed downstairs and straight for the coffee. While that heated up, I pulled down a massive cup, knowing I'd need a little extra caffeine today - and movement caught my eye. I looked up, expecting it to be Gyth in the backyard. Instead, it was Zane. The man sat at the outdoor table with a glass of water before him.

Deciding I was a good witch, I grabbed another cup. When the first was done, I brewed the second, and then reached into the cabinet for the cinnamon. I didn't even put a dash in there. Just a few flakes. Enough to add some vitality and recovery. Then, while my own cup was filling, I found a spoon and stirred clockwise, whispering, "So let it be," three times.

For my own coffee, I just added cream and sugar, but Zane usually took his black. At least, every time I've seen him drink the stuff, he had. Then, carrying both cups, I headed for the back.

“House?” I begged.

The new French style doors opened for me and closed behind me. Even the screen door at the back of the porch became hands-free. As I stepped out, I was smiling at how useful - and amazing - that was even as I stepped lightly across the ground on my bare feet.

“Here’s a little witch’s brew for you,” I told Zane before passing him the cup. “Want company?”

“It’s your house,” he said, tipping his head at the chair beside me. “I was just trying not to wake anyone up.”

I eased myself down just as Zane took a sip of his coffee. Cradling my own, I leaned back, kicked my feet up on the chair beside me, and then sucked back a careful sip of my hot coffee. For a moment, Zane and I just enjoyed the peace of the morning. Then Zane sipped again.

“There’s magic in this,” he said, setting the cup down hard and glaring at me.

“Rejuvenation and vitality,” I said. “Figured it couldn’t hurt, might help, and seemed like a nice thing to do.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“A few grains of cinnamon,” I assured him. “That’s it.”

He looked confused as he reached for his cup again. “Why?”

“Because I’m pretty sure you and Jackson did not *talk* all night.” I paused for another sip of the sweet and creamy goodness I was holding. “And as a thank you for those cards.”

“Oh.” He took a larger drink, murmuring before he swallowed. “Yeah, I probably needed that.”

I chuckled. “Sounds like the pair of you threw each other around. Was that before or after the naked part?”

Once again, he set the coffee cup down - gently, this time - and then sighed. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Oh, you really should have,” I promised. “Reese and I think that’s the only way Jackson’s ever going to admit that

he's not over you."

"But I need him to be over me," he said. "Syl, you don't get it. I can't do this."

"Why not?" I looked over at him. "His boyfriend and girlfriend are telling you it's okay. So why can't you finally have a chance with the man you never stopped loving, Zane? Why can't you get that little piece of your heart back? Or give him another. I dunno what you want to do there, but why *can't* you?"

"Because I'm still in the coven," he said.

"We're not. We also know that." Then I smiled. "Plus, I'm getting pretty good at this whole subterfuge thing. See, you just seduced the witch last night. That's why your car didn't leave until this morning. And once I passed out, you managed to get quite a few more pictures from that book - until the contractors made noise, making you realize they were sleeping downstairs."

His eyes dropped to his hands. Slowly, he swirled the nail of his index finger across the side of his thumb as if thinking. I watched, giving him both the time and space to process that and getting the feeling that things between him and Jackson were a lot more complicated than I'd realized.

Finally, he said, "That'll work, but this can't happen again."

"Why?" I pressed. "Give me one good reason, Zane."

"Because I don't want to hurt Jack worse," he muttered softly.

"Then stop pushing him away," I said. "Talk to him. Explain things to him."

"I can't!" He slapped the table, making his cup jump. "Sorry."

I waved that off. "Why can't you?"

"Because of that damned coven," he grumbled.

"Give me more?"

Picking up his cup again, Zane leaned back and matched my pose. He even kicked his own bare feet up on one of the other empty chairs. We faced opposite directions, with the table between us, which basically meant we were almost facing each other.

“Magic works, Syl,” he said. “Wix or mundane, it works on us, and the binding spell for the coven is nothing but magic. If they call, I obey.”

“Which is why you’re trying to raise your rank,” I said, showing I’d been keeping up.

“To a point,” he admitted. “The problem is what you told me about Margie’s lover. They called, she helped in the ritual, and her boyfriend’s home burned. Now, if that was me and Jack? How do you think he’d feel about that? Would it be better or worse if we’re fucking again?”

“But are you?” I asked. “Fucking, I mean?”

“It was a mistake.”

“Zane...” I stared at him. “Are you fucking again?”

“Yes, we fucked,” he admitted. “No, we’re not fucking again. It was a one-time thing.”

“Then tell him that,” I said. “And you make it clear that the *only* reason it’s a one-time thing is because you’re scared the coven will use you against him. Bring up Margie’s story if you want.” I shrugged at that. “But I bet Jackson won’t care. He’s told you that we know what they’re doing. He’ll remind you how much you’re helping us - and all those little mouse bones you handed out.”

“Just one,” Zane said. “For his mom.”

“Which is one more than Margie made.” I lifted a brow. “And unlike those werewolves, our guys have a witch in their pocket.”

A deep, rough voice added, “And more.”

Zane jumped, surprised by the sound. I simply lifted my head and smiled as Gyth moved into sight. When he saw me

looking at the trees, Zane followed my eyes, then shoved to his feet and began backing up quickly.

“Fuck,” he breathed.

“He’s a friend,” I promised. “Zane, meet Gyth.”

“The Harkness,” Gyth said, lifting his hands palm up. “I come as a friend, wix, not as a punisher.”

“You can do that?” I asked.

“One of them killed my dad,” Zane said. “Yeah, they’re pretty fucking nasty when cornered.”

“And I’m not cornered,” Gyth promised. “In fact, I’m home, free, and well protected by the Holt.”

Which was what made Zane finally relax and look at me. “They really call you that, Syl?”

“All the forest does,” Gyth assured him.

“Kinda why we changed the gate,” I said, pointing to the chair Zane had just abandoned. “Sit. It’s okay. Gyth is pretty cool and he tends to only eat sticks.” Then I looked at Gyth. “Passing by or here for a reason?”

“For him,” Gyth said. “The wisteria hears and tells.”

Zane had just reached down to turn his chair, but paused, looking over at me in confusion. “What the fuck?”

“There’s a wisteria vine outside that bedroom you were in,” I explained. “It’s kinda magical too. I accidentally grew it.”

“It says the Harkness is in love,” Gyth announced. “His actions with the coven are not by choice, but by force. It says he has a name, and the trees have remembered it.”

“That’s a good thing,” I assured Zane. “They don’t really like most people in the coven.”

“Right,” Zane said as he finally sat. “So I’m not about to be pulled apart and disappeared out here, right?”

“Not today,” Gyth promised.

“Not unless you go after him,” I clarified. “We’re working hard to keep Gyth safe, because if we lose him, we lose all magic.”

“Which is why you want to free the other two,” Zane said, nodding to show he was keeping up. “Yep, but I’ve also heard about what those things can do. Trust me, the Grimsons have a lot of horror stories about the power of wild things.”

“Is that why you drink our blood?” Gyth asked.

Zane groaned and shoved his face into both hands. “Yeah, um, that’s hard to explain.”

So Gyth stepped onto the deck and sat. “I have time.”

“Look.” Zane glanced at me, then back to Gyth. “The blood of wild things increases power. A few drops in the wine before a ritual means the Grimsons can harvest more. The more they harvest, the more Kingsley can use to prolong his life. Anything extra goes to whatever little plot they’ve devised this time. Doesn’t matter if that’s fucking over someone who was rude, making more money, or any other whim they have.”

“But you drink it,” Gyth said.

“We all do!” Zane insisted. “In the wine is a spell to prevent us from talking about coven business outside the coven. It’s why I can’t come here and tell Syl about the conversations over dinner unless she was there. And yes, I drink it - because if I don’t, they’ll force me to. They’ll suspect that I’m not the undyingly loyal little sycophant they want me to be.”

“But why do you want to be loyal?” Gyth asked.

“Because men in power only talk to the ones they trust,” he said. “And if I want to protect the people I care about, then I need to know enough to stay a step ahead.”

Gyth nodded. “That is a good answer. Sylvia can also make you a protection to negate the wine.” He tilted his strange head slightly. “But it will not remove the power of my brothers.”

“Why?” Zane asked. “Why are you helping me, wild thing?”

And Gyth’s strange lips curled into a smile. “Because plants hear more than you can imagine. You also treat my witch well, and that matters to me. You have helped her where I failed, but I have helped her where you cannot. Together, we are working nicely.”

Zane’s head whipped back around to me. “I thought you were learning magic from your familiar!”

“I am,” I said. “And Gyth. A little of both, plus you. I mean, why limit myself, right? Take what works, discard the rest, and find my own style of witchcraft?”

“You’re...” He looked completely stunned, which I’d never seen him do before. “From... him?”

“Where better to learn magic than from magic?” Gyth asked. Then he smiled. “It is the intention that matters most, Harkness. Xilen would want me to tell you that. Magic is less about the steps and more about what’s inside your chest, beating to get out. Consider that when you make your plans.”

“Don’t scare him, Gyth,” I said. “And who is Xilen?”

“My brother,” Gyth explained. “He is not alive, but not quite dead. I smell him on you, Zane.”

“The one they’re bleeding,” Zane breathed.

Gyth nodded. “The one you’re bleeding to *death*.”

“I’m trying!” Zane insisted. “I’m hoping this shit with the spellbook will be enough for me to find out where they are.”

“And then?” Gyth asked.

Zane reached for his coffee. “Then I tell Syl. They can stop me. They have control of me. If they see it coming, they will destroy me before I can do anything to the coven, but Syl? She’s strong. She’s powerful enough to get the wild things out, and I know that. It’s why I keep telling the Grimsons she’s just a stupid girl who wants to be loved. Just some bimbo who’s willing to giggle and cook for me.”

“And they buy that?” I asked.

He nodded. “Lucien flat-out told me that the best wife is the stupid one. Those two? They think the worst of women, and I just don’t get it! We’re wixen! Women have the power. Women were meant to lead the bloodlines. Wix are just here to make a few backups.”

“And help,” Gyth added. “Wix have magic because everyone needs help. Because we made an agreement, and that included the sons as well as the daughters. We did not trust the men because we saw what they could do, so we made them weaker. We limited their ability to hurt us, or so we thought.”

“And you fucked up,” Zane realized.

Gyth looked up, his goatlike eyes a soft brown in the morning light. “Did we? Or can we trust you, Zane Harkness?”

“You can’t trust me,” he said, “but I’m trying to help anyway.”

“Then maybe we did not fuck up,” Gyth said before pushing to his feet. “The coffee will help you sit easier so you will not need to explain it. My witch is a good one.” And then he walked back into the trees.

I just ducked my head and laughed. “And now I know who was on bottom last night.”

“Fuck off,” Zane said, but his next sip of coffee was a lot bigger.



# CHAPTER FIFTY

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The next week, I tried to avoid Sylvia's place. It didn't work. Not only were Syl and Reese texting me to ask what was going on, but Kingsley Grimson wanted to know when he could expect more spells. So, giving in, I went back.

The problem was keeping my distance from Jack. Fuck, the feel of his arms around me? The way he'd been so gentle and loving? The memories of his kisses? Every time I looked over at him, I found myself smiling like an idiot - and they all noticed.

But fucking that man was a one-time mistake. It couldn't happen again, because I would not betray him like that. Sadly, ignoring it was not quite the "done thing" in this house. Nope, Syl sent me down to the cellar to find her dill flakes, only for Jack to be there adjusting the temperature of her chest freezer.

So we talked. There was no way around it. When I explained to him that it couldn't happen again, he agreed. When he said he didn't want to mess up his perfect relationship with those two, I promised I understood. On the surface, it all sounded so easy.

It wasn't.

Every time we passed each other in that little house, I could feel the hairs stand up on my arms. I also noticed the devious little smiles Reese tossed my way all the time. And then there was Syl.

I'd barely been able to taste the cinnamon in my coffee that morning, but I'd felt the magic. She hadn't tried to hide it, and she'd done it as an act of kindness. And yet, feeling her power in my body that day had shifted something.

It was as personal as feeling her body wrapped around me. It was as intimate as what Jack and I had done. To me, that one little act of kindness was the sort of thing I'd never experienced before - at least from one of the wixen. But to her, it was just there, always, drawing my eyes to the curls in her hair, the swell of her hips, and those amazing lips that smiled so easily.

No, she wasn't "traditionally" attractive. That would've required her to lose about fifty pounds and spend all day working out. Her face was pretty, but not the type of stunning expected in models. She was cute, and she pulled it off in a way that made the woman inside shine as much as the one outside.

I was also getting used to her darker skin. It was no longer "strange" or "exotic" to my eyes. Not that either of those were a good thing, but Summerpoint had always been a very white town. Seeing someone different, who carried herself so easily, did make her stand out. It also had started making her feel a lot more normal in an odd way. A lot more like something that truly belonged here.

Racism. Yeah, I probably had a bit of it. I was trying to work through that, but it was hard when the people around me wanted to draw lines between us and *everyone* else. Rich, poor, of different religions, races, or anything else. Hell, look at how much the Grimsons hated women! But I was trying - and doing my best to keep it to myself, because I honestly liked this woman.

I liked all of it. The Holt Forest was quickly becoming my own little sanctuary. And for the next few weeks, I gathered more photos of that book, more proof of Margie's magic, and more tidbits to make the coven trust me. We'd gone over every possible thing the Grimsons could ask, just so I'd have a safe answer.

And in that gap between the new moon and the next full one, I was summoned to the mansion. But this time, I was prepared.

It was a Friday evening, which seemed to be the Grimsons' favorite day to host others. I had a feeling their staff was required to work late that night. I also didn't care. With my printouts of Margie's spellbook in hand and my tarot deck fully charged, I parked my car over by their fountain.

Then I tapped my deck, thinking hard about how I intended for today to be the day I finally learned what I needed. Subtle magic. The type that wouldn't stand out. That was what I wanted, but it also had to *work*.

The Justice card peeked out from the edge of the others. Pulling it out, I carefully placed the thing in my pocket. Technically, it was used to represent cause and effect, but also truth. Tonight, I wanted both of those. I wanted all my previous actions to finally get me the one thing I needed: the location of the wild things.

Only then did I get out and stride casually to the front door. It opened just as I lifted my hand to knock, revealing the butler smiling on the other side.

"The Grimsons are expecting you," he said, gesturing for me to follow as he led me into the fancy dining room.

There, in the center of the table, was a decanted bottle of dark red wine.

"Sit," Kingsley ordered, gesturing to a chair in the middle of the long table.

I took it, then held up the folder I was carrying. "Who wants these?"

"I do," Kingsley said, gesturing for me to slide them over.

I pushed, but they didn't make it. Instead, one of the staff intercepted it to carry it the rest of the way to Kingsley. For a long moment, the man read the spells and diary entries, making random murmurs in between.

But while he did that, Lucien took over. “We’re doing the ritual this time.”

“Oh?” I asked. “The normal ritual, or yours?”

“Mine,” the man said with a pleased sound. “I’ve decided to take the name Blackwood. My wife and children will all have theirs changed accordingly.”

“That’s not going to be cheap,” I muttered.

“And things worth doing well don’t need to be,” Lucien assured me. “But I want my book.”

“She’ll notice if I take it,” I countered.

“So?”

Kingsley just lifted a hand. “We do not need that woman disturbing your ascension, Lucien. Zane can get the book after you have your power.”

“In fact,” I bragged, “I’ve been over there enough that the house lets me in.”

Lucien gave me a confused look. “You already said she let you cross the salt line.”

“Not the salt,” I assured him. “The front door. It locks and unlocks as it pleases. The entire cottage appears to be spelled to assist the witch. If her hands are full, the doors open and close around her. If it’s late, the stairs stop creaking. The house, Lucien, is what I’m talking about, and it opens the front door for me now.”

“So she wouldn’t even need to know you’re there,” Kingsley said proudly. “Good job, boy.”

Yeah, I still hated it when he called me that, but I smiled at him anyway. I also hoped my little comment would make them realize the house itself was one more line of defense for Sylvia. Probably not. Still, I knew it would work, just like I knew the trees, ivy, and even the damned driveway were all there to protect her.

But that wouldn’t help me right now. If this ritual was going to be done in just under a week, then I needed to figure

out where the wild things were - and fast! Without them, Lucien wouldn't be able to get his power, would he? And even if he did, the forest would be more prepared to fight back.

Reaching into the pocket of my suit coat, I casually stroked the only card I had on me. I needed it to wake up and start working. I had to make tonight's visit worthwhile, and this wasn't going anywhere. That meant it was time to push.

"So," I said, leaning back as I was poured a glass of wine. Then, I set both of my hands on the table. "The Blue Moon is next Wednesday. I'm assuming we'll have a meeting the night before, like always?"

"Yes," Lucien said. "The coven will need to have more power than ever before."

"And wine will be served?" I asked.

"As always," Lucien agreed.

Kingsley finally closed the folder and held it up. A servant stepped forward to take that from him, and a flick of Kingsley's finger made it clear it should be taken to Lucien. While the young woman walked down the length of the table, I turned my focus to the head of our coven.

"Is that what you wanted, sir?"

"It is definitely Margie's," he agreed. "I simply didn't know she hated me that much back then. Strange how her opinion changed after a few decades, hm?"

"Well, a woman can only be alone so long before she needs some affection, right? They are simple things," I said.

Which made Kingsley smile. "Yes, my boy, they are." Then he tipped his head at the glass before me. "Have a drink, Zane."

I reached for it, admiring the color as I lifted it to my lips. Damn, I hoped this worked. Syl had given me a packet of chai spices for a tea to drink before I came here. It was supposed to negate all inhibiting magic. My own spells would be fine, but Syl's concoction was designed to prevent magic from working on me.

So I drank. The wine was strong and bitter. I wasn't impressed with the vintage, but I had a feeling it was more to keep the servants from talking than anything else. After all, the Grimsons talked openly before them and yet their secrets were never spread.

"What do you think?" Lucien asked.

I made a noise and took another obvious drink. "It's not the best you've served. Floral, but lacks the sweetness I prefer. It tastes almost like box wine."

Kingsley began to chuckle. "I do think we've corrupted your palate, Zane. What you're tasting is the hint of wild thing in there."

Which was why the wine was so dark, I realized. This was *filled* with blood, not just a few drops in the crystal carafe. It seemed the Grimsons were enhancing their power regularly, not only during the coven meetings. Or maybe this was simply to keep them ahead of the rest before the next big meeting?

"So should I consider this glass a reward?" I asked, sipping again.

Kingsley's lips curled into a cold smile. "I suppose you could. That, or it's a test. Tell me, have you learned anything from that colored witch in the time you've been there?"

"Quite a bit," I said, ignoring the rudeness of his description. Kingsley probably didn't even know that term was outdated. "It seems her magic is nothing like Margie's. Where the former Maybrook cooked and had minimal power, Sylvia Holt is more inventive."

"Inventive how?" Lucien asked.

"She uses those jars," I said, knowing they were aware of that. "The spices she fills them with aren't blended for eating, but for magic. It's like a flour bomb or a paintball of sorts - but magical."

"How does she choose what to mix?" Lucien demanded.

I groaned. "It seems her familiar is helping her with that."

“Her what?” Kingsley snapped. “You never mentioned a familiar!”

“Because the thing is a skunk,” I said. “The same one that sprayed us when we attacked. Skunks aren’t exactly comfortable guests, so it’s not typically around. However, when I stayed that night with her, she snuck out to speak with it.”

“Oh, she did?” Lucien asked.

I nodded. “The conversation was one-sided, but Sylvia was asking about pepper - cayenne, I think? - and various herbs. Thyme, rosemary, basil, oregano, and more. Those are the ones I know well enough to remember.”

“So she simply throws spices together?” Kingsley asked.

“It seems she has some method, but she says it’s what feels right,” I admitted. “She says she never makes a spell the same way twice. I’m not sure if that’s helpful at all, but I’m trying to get her to explain it. I’ve even been showing her how tea leaves and coffee grounds can be read to make her feel more at ease.”

“And what does her future say?” Lucien asked.

I laughed once. “It says she’s an outsider, that she will never belong, and that her love life has limited options,” I told them, making that up on the spot. “I’ve seen quite a few celestial symbols, which mean magic, but that’s to be expected. All wixen have those. Otherwise, not much.”

“Is she going to cause problems?” Kingsley asked.

“I’ve seen nothing either way,” I admitted. “But you should know her future is bland. That tends to mean murky. Often, that’s because a person is in a state of flux, needing to make a decision before the rest will sort itself out.”

“Well, then make sure she stays in flux,” Kingsley said as he pushed to his feet. “And to do that, let’s make sure you finally have the power you’ve been craving, Zane.”



# CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

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I quickly finished my wine, hoping my enthusiasm for it would help convince these two that I was concerned about nothing else, then stood. Lucien sighed, pushed his plate away, and joined his father and me. Kingsley then led us towards a part of the house I'd never been in before.

That wasn't surprising. This place was massive. I'd seen Hollywood celebrities with smaller houses! But as we walked through the marble-floored halls, Kingsley led and Lucien fell in behind me. Neither talked, and something about this felt overly serious.

Eventually, we stopped at a boring door. On the other side of that was a set of stairs leading downward. The three of us descended, still in our imposed order, until we reached a basement that looked more like a white version of a dungeon. Our steps rang out down here, echoing back on the stone walls and ceiling - and it gave me the creeps.

But halfway down the first hall, there was an alcove with a large door set in it. Completely cliché, if I was honest, which was why I wasn't surprised at all when Kingsley stepped up to open it. He used a key, not any of the modern technology that would secure it better, but I was willing to count this as a good thing.

And then we stepped inside. I felt the line of magic as I passed through it. Clearly, that had to be some form of protection. A strong one, from the feel of it.

I was thinking about that as we turned a corner, so it took me a moment to realize the chrome boxes weren't just minimalistic furniture. No, they were made of bars, and inside something moved.

My feet stalled. My head snapped up and I was sure my eyes went wide. Both of those boxes - or cages - were filled. My mind could barely even process what I was seeing, but they were definitely creatures. Strange, warped ones.

The first looked like some kind of deer that was all wrong. A rack of antlers stood out on its head, but its body was shaped more like a human's. Like someone hunched over, on their knees, and cramped too much to be comfortable.

Slowly, my eyes slid to the other. That one I could only describe as not being a wolf. It had long black-and-silver hair, just like a wolf would. Its face was shaped in a similar style, but it also had the strange angles that were too close to human - but not quite.

"Shit," I breathed.

"Wild things," Lucien said, slapping my shoulder as he passed. "You wanted power, Zane? Well, this is where it comes from. These things are pure magic."

Yeah, I knew that. I'd also learned it didn't work quite the way these men believed. Wild things weren't simply magic. They were the soul of the forest, created to share magic. Without them, wixen would no longer exist in Summerpoint - which was why Syl wanted to get them out of here.

But to do that, we'd need to get through that spell at the door. Worse, breaking it might even alert the Grimsons that it was being tampered with, which meant getting in here again would need to happen fast. In and out, no fucking around. Yeah, that wasn't going to be easy.

The not-wolf was watching me intently.

"I'm going to guess they aren't friendly," I said as I followed the Grimsons.

"No, they'll gladly rip your arm off if you get too close," Lucien told me smugly. "We lost a servant that way."

Of course they had. Figured. Life was replaceable for these men. They wouldn't care about their employee's family or loved ones. All that mattered was that the Grimsons hadn't been hurt in the process.

"So how do you bleed them?" I asked.

Lucien simply walked to a counter along the side and picked up a long metal pole. "Carefully," he said.

Then he shoved the pole into the not-wolf's cage. The wild thing began to growl and struggle, trying to avoid it, but his efforts were futile. Each time he picked up a leg, it made things easier for Lucien. The banging was loud, and the struggle of the creature was intense, but eventually Lucien snagged a back leg in the noose at the end, proving his tool was little more than what animal control used on a feral dog.

"And pull it out," Kingsley said, finding a glass beaker of sorts. A measuring cup? I wasn't sure, but it looked scientific, had lines marked on the side, but the top was wide.

Lucien pulled. The wild thing pulled back, but it didn't have the space to move properly. Within seconds, its back leg was between the bars and braced with the noose. While Lucien held that, Kingsley walked forward and sliced at the creature's leg with a golden ritual knife.

Blood began to spill. Belatedly, the old man pushed the glass container under it, letting the life force of the magical being flow into it. It didn't congeal like blood, though. It was also darker, yet still red, and convinced me these things were very unhealthy.

"Here," I said, easing closer. "Let me hold that for you, sir."

"That's a good boy," Kingsley said as he passed me the cup.

The not-wolf turned, its yellow eyes landing on me again. With Lucien so close, I had to be careful, but there was no way I'd let this thing bleed freely. It probably didn't have much left! So, I closed my eyes and imagined a sigil for healing. I pushed at the signs and shapes for recovery. My magic might

not be very effective this way, but I could at least minimize the damage.

The wolf smiled for two seconds before lifting its upper lips and snarling at me.

“Oh-ho!” Lucien said. “I think this one hates you, Zane.”

“So long as it fuels the coven, right?” I asked.

But I meant Syl’s coven, not Kingsley’s. I meant the natural one that got its power from the forest. I meant proper magic, not this bastardized and corrupted shit. Because this was worse than I’d imagined!

These two took some kind of sick pleasure in the pain they were causing. They acted as if they deserved the power that was made in the wild things’ bodies! They had been twisting the magic we’d all been raised to respect, reaching for more and more until they had no limits left. Not magical ones, not decency, and not even civility!

Maybe Syl’s wild thing was right. Gyth had said men were too violent to be trusted. We were too dangerous to have as much power as women. We had brawn. Witches had magic. In the end, it evened out, and I’d much rather go back to telling simple fortunes than continue with... this!

But the blood was slowing. The gash was closing. The not-wolf was still snarling, and yet I had a feeling my spell had helped at least a little. Mostly because of the noises Kingsley was making behind me.

“The damned thing’s almost dry!” he grumbled, marching over to take the container from my hands. “That’s half as much as normal!”

“We have been bleeding that one more than the other,” Lucien pointed out.

“Because we need the other for your ritual,” Kingsley said.

“What?” I asked. “How will you use it in the ritual? If you let it out, it’ll kill all of us.”

“Which is why we’re not going to let it out,” Kingsley assured me. “No, we’ll take it in the cage. When the magic is

at its peak, I'll sacrifice that one. It should be the boost we need to reset the bloodlines from Sylvia to Lucien.”

“Which means this isn't a simple spell,” I said, turning my back on the wild things as if they didn't matter.

The truth was that I couldn't handle seeing their eyes. There was too much intelligence in them. The one in the forest had talked. He had a name: Gyth. One of these two was named Xilen. I hated that I didn't know both of their names, but it wouldn't change anything.

No, that was up to me, and right now my greatest fear was that Syl's fancy chai spices wouldn't be enough to overcome the spell I'd sucked back in that wine. Worse, I could feel the rush of the wild thing blood flowing through me as my body absorbed it.

Potent magic. Horrible magic. Potentially ruinous magic.

I wanted to tell the wild things I was sorry, but I couldn't. Not with the Grimsons watching me. Not with them waiting for me to fuck up and expose myself. I was here to figure out how to free these things, and if I had to sell my soul in the process, then it was already too damaged to worry about protecting.

Our coven was corrupted. Our magic was an abomination! All of this was wrong, but I had a feeling that only the Grimsons and Nancy Redmoon had any idea what made us one of the most powerful covens in North America. It certainly wasn't our honesty.

It was stolen. All of our power had been harvested in the worst way. As Kingsley swirled the dark fluid in his glass beaker, my stomach turned. Drinking blood wasn't high on my list of things to do normally. Now that I'd seen the creatures it had come from?

This was easier when it was little more than a few drops in an entire decanter of wine. I could convince myself the blood I was swallowing was no different than what I consumed with a piece of meat. But that? The way the fluid stained the sides,

the viscous cling of it to the glass, and the way Kingsley was smiling at it as if he desired his next high?

I hated the man more than ever before.

“So,” I asked, “is that for Tuesday’s dinner, then?”

“No,” Kingsley said. “This is for myself and my son. And now that you have seen the things and know how to drain them, we won’t have to do it anymore.”

“My father is getting a little old to be struggling with animals,” Lucien added.

Kingsley simply chuckled. “I’m not so sure about that, boy. But once you become the Blackwood, you’ll be able to enjoy the same benefits I do. Maybe we’ll reach three hundred, hm?”

“Sounds like you aren’t shooting high enough, Dad,” Lucien joked.

“Just think of the spells our coven will be able to learn with someone around to keep the knowledge,” I said, moving even closer to Kingsley. “Here’s to your very long life, sir.”

“But not yours, Zane?”

I chuckled. “Did you forget that I plan to become the third in this coven? I know I still have work to do before I’m granted such privileges, but I have the years ahead of me to do that.”

“And this,” Kingsley said as he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and turned me to the exit, “is why I think you’re going to do very well with us, Zane. Lucien, let it go and lock up?”

“Yes, Father,” Lucien said.

With the blood-filled container in his left hand and his right arm around me, Kingsley Grimson guided me out of the room and into the hall. Once again, I felt that magical force as we crossed the threshold.

“Protective spell?” I asked.

“Of course,” Kingsley said. “We can’t risk those things getting out.”

“Or anyone getting in,” I pointed out.

“Or that,” Kingsley agreed, lifting the glass container to his lips and sipping directly out of it. “Care for a taste?” And he offered it to me.

I couldn’t refuse. I knew that. If I was truly as power-hungry as I’d claimed, then this was the offer I would’ve been waiting for. So, giving the man a sly smile, I took the container and sniffed at it. Bitter. Pungent. Like decaying leaves and rotting grass. It was not a pleasant smell at all, but I still tilted the thing and sucked back a paltry swallow.

Immediately, my feet stopped and a rush of magic hit me. It made my head spin. My body grew warm. The power from straight blood was almost overwhelming, and I could feel it burning open my magical pathways to their fullest extent.

“Breathe,” Kingsley said. “It’s potent, but breathe - and then take a real drink, Zane. The taste gets better as you get used to it.”

Nodding, and partially bent over, I tilted the container again, and this time swallowed an entire mouthful like a shot of tequila. I did my best not to taste it, yet get as much in me as possible.

The blood burned on the way down. My ears were ringing. The magic was so intense I swore I could smell the colors around us. I could hear the light. My entire world was trembling as it tried to reorient itself, and I refused to collapse the way I wanted.

“Wow,” I breathed, offering the container back.

“And that’s just a taste of what I have to offer my most loyal wixen,” Kingsley promised. “That’s what’s keeping me alive, Zane. If you continue to help me keep my idiot of a son in line, then third might not be all you can expect.”

I looked up, still breathing hard from the rush of that. “Second?”



And Kingsley smiled. “Lucien’s useful, but he’s an idiot. Making him a hedge witch will suit him well. No need for aspirations. No concern about what comes next. But you, Zane? A divination wix? Well, the future is where your power lies, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir,” I said, pushing myself upright again. “It is.”

“And that’s what I’m going to need to destroy that fucking bitch in the forest. Making Lucien the Blackwood is only the first step, not the last one.”

“Then you can count on me, sir.”

“Yes,” Kingsley purred softly. “I’m starting to see that I can. Good job with the book, son. Let’s see how your newly fueled power will help me in this ritual, hm?”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to put you back in your rightful position, sir,” I lied. “It’s the only way our coven will continue to be safe.”

“I knew you’d see things my way,” Kingsley said, leading me on. “I think you’re going to be a lot more useful than I expected.”

# CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

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Curled up on my living room couch, I was engrossed in the sexy werewolf romance story I'd picked out of Margie's collection. The super-hot alpha wolf had just ripped his shirt off and was storming towards the human woman, trying to explain how she was his mate whether she liked it or not. Okay, a little rapey, but this book wasn't exactly modern.

And then my front door burst open. I yelped, jumping in place. Lupe swung. And the man who'd just stormed in? Zane stumbled a step from the cactus attack, but just kept coming, pushing at the door absentmindedly behind him.

"Syl..." he gasped, grunting before looking down at his leg. "Fucking Lupe! If you're going to get involved, then at least call everyone."

Which had me pulling out my phone. "Call who?" I asked.

"The forest, the trees, the fucking flowers and insects. I don't know! Your skunks and Gyth, definitely. Everyone, Syl, because I know what the Grimsons are doing."

"Shit," I breathed before quickly typing out a text to Jackson and Reese.

**Syl:**

Zane just stormed in and says he needs everyone. He knows something and is freaking out a bit. Like worried freaking, not pissed freaking, so now I'm worried. Can you come back over?

**Reese:**

OMW. Give us 15.

So I tossed my phone on the coffee table and pointed to the space across from me. “Zane, sit. Your leg has to be killing you.” And then I stood. “Beer? Tweezers? Anything else?”

“Beer,” he agreed. “Maybe that will wash the taste of this shit out of my mouth.”

Then he flopped back against the cushions, letting his eyes close before he pushed the heels of his hands into them. In all the time I’d known this man, I’d never seen him act this way. It was honestly freaking me the fuck out, but I figured we could do damage control first.

After twisting the top off a bottle of beer, I passed that to him and then jogged upstairs for my good tweezers. While I was searching for those, I heard the chittering of skunks downstairs as Flower’s family arrived. Clearly, Lupe had alerted “everyone,” just like he’d been told.

But when I made it back down to the first floor, Twig was on Zane’s lap, sniffing at the cactus needles in his fancy slacks. Then the little skunklet - who wasn’t that little anymore - tugged at one and... Was he chewing?

“Don’t eat those,” I said before passing the tweezers to Zane. “Sorry about Lupe. He’s a little overprotective.”

*I guard the house,* Lupe said, sounding like he was sulking.

“And Zane keeps getting hit by you.”

*Because he keeps storming in,* Lupe pointed out. *He startled me. I defended you. I’m a good house plant.*

“Yes, you are,” I told my cactus, mostly because there was no point in arguing with him.

But Zane was trying to get Twig to stop nibbling on the cactus needles. “Bud, I’m pretty sure those can’t be good for you. Let me pluck them out,” he said.

*I'm helping!* Twig insisted. *That's what familiars do!*

“What?” I asked.

But Zane's mouth had fallen open. “Is that what you hear? Is the skunk talking to me?”

*I'm Twig*, he said. *I'm the biggest, so I get to be your familiar.*

“No,” Zane told him, stopping that hard. “You're just a kid, Twig. I don't care if you're almost as big as your mother. You're like, what, three months old?”

*Almost six*, Flower said, but Zane didn't act like he heard that part at all, so I repeated it.

“Six months is not long enough to decide your future, bud,” Zane told the skunklet. “Sorry, Twig. Besides, I don't need a familiar.”

*But I'm helping!* Twig insisted.

“You are, and you're still a forest critter. I'm a divination wix. That means cities. To be my familiar, you'd have to live in a city, so it's just not gonna work. No deal.”

I just wagged my finger between him and the skunks. “You can hear them?”

“Just the one,” he said before leaning over and grabbing his beer again. “Fuck, it's been one hell of a night.”

“How so?” I asked.

He tilted the bottle and took a long drink. I watched as his throat bobbed repeatedly and the fluid in the bottle began to vanish. Finally, after a satisfied gasp, he set the half-finished beer down on the side table and bent to pull out the rest of the cactus hairs.

“I saw them.”

“The Grimsons?” I asked.

“The wild things.”

My breath rushed out just as the back door opened and a gentle breeze filled the main area. Twisting, I watched Gyth

slip in, his eyes jumping from Zane to me then to the skunks. The strange creature paused for a moment as if assessing things, and then carefully closed the door behind him.

“What happened?” he asked.

“He saw your brothers,” I explained.

“And it’s bad,” Zane added. “They’re in the Grimsons’ basement. Well, Kingsley’s. The room definitely has nothing natural in it, it’s surrounded by stone, and there’s a spell to keep things out.”

Gyth’s head snapped up, and then he moved closer. “The others are here.”

“So I might as well tell this one time,” Zane said as he continued to pluck Lupe’s needles from his leg.

It didn’t take long before I saw the lights from the guy’s truck. Then again, I was looking out the window this time, not sucked into a somewhat sexist romance novel.

“House?” I begged.

The front door opened, and a moment later, the pair walked in, looking almost as well-dressed as Zane. I let my eyes run across them, deciding I liked the suit look on those two, and then paused.

“Were you on a date?”

“Sorta,” Jackson said. “More of a couples thing so the people in town who don’t need to think too hard won’t think about you, Syl.”

“Or their connection to you,” Zane pointed out. “Safer that way.”

“Right.” I just flopped back. “Ok, in summary, Zane saw the wild things, we know where they are, and that’s all I’ve gotten. Well, except for Twig deciding he’s a big skunk now and Lupe being slightly too aggressive.”

“Good job, Lupe,” Reese said before heading into the kitchen. “Beer, Jackson? Wine, Syl?”

“Soda,” I decided. “It is not an alcoholic kind of night for me.”

“And I’m pretty sure I never want to see red wine again,” Zane grumbled.

There was a little shuffling while everyone sorted themselves out. Zane got the last of Lupe’s needles from his leg, and then we all - Gyth included - sat down on the couches, facing each other.

“I was summoned tonight,” Zane explained, looking around to show he knew we were all watching him. “Syl, I think your chai spices worked, because I’m still talking about this, and I drank the wine. Fuck, I drank the wine.”

“What’s with the wine?” Reese asked. “Isn’t that a normal thing at these?”

“No, this wasn’t a full coven dinner,” Zane said. “It was Kingsley, Lucien, and me. I handed over the last batch of pictures Syl and I put together. Mostly journal stuff, but a few recipes as well. Yeah, Kingsley was happy about that.” Then he paused. “Wait, I forgot to mention that I sorta...” And he pulled a card from his jacket pocket.

“Justice,” Jackson said, reading the card.

“I worked a little spell in the hopes that I’d be shown the wild things. Well, it worked,” Zane said. “First, they gave me a glass of wine and all but ordered me to drink it. I did, but it was bitter, not like the normal quality they serve. Just as I finished it, the pair let me know it was filled with wild thing blood.” He held out his hand which was almost vibrating. “Quite the rush, let me tell you. Do not recommend.”

“It will increase your power,” Gyth said. “So will training, but that is why they want to drink us.”

“Yeah, figured that out,” Zane said. “Because after the wine, I got taken down to the basement. There’s a massive workroom with some pretty hefty cages. Steel type, like the sort of thing they’d transport lions in. One of the wild things was not-wolf. The other was not-deer.”

“Shit, that’s why we haven’t seen it,” Reese breathed. “I didn’t even think about that. I just figured Gyth changed shape.”

“No, that is my brother, Yatir. The black one is my brother Xilen.”

“Black?” I asked, curious now.

“Like a wolf, not a person,” Zane clarified. “Covered in like black and silver hair. Yellow eyes. The other was deer-colored. I dunno, like light brown. Tan? Fawn? Whatever you want to call it, but it had these serious antlers on its head which prevented it from really looking from side to side.”

“We’ve gotta get them out,” I breathed.

“Syl, they bled the wolf one.” Zane leaned forward, dangling his beer between his knees. “Lucien used one of those poles like animal control has? Yeah, and he pulled its leg out of the cage. Kingsley cut it, and then collected the blood in like a glass thing. Like a science thing. A beaker, maybe?”

“There’s no way they can take much more of that,” I breathed.

“No,” Zane agreed. “But I tried to heal him. Well, at least to close the wound faster. It’s not really my area, but speeding up the effects of a thing are, so that’s kinda what I did.” He waved that off. “But they said they’re going to sacrifice the other one.”

“What?!” Jackson snapped.

“That is what they do,” Gyth said much too calmly. “They do not realize that in their attempt to cheat magic, they are killing it.”

“But to *kill* it?” Reese asked. “Him, I guess, since you call him a brother. I mean, fuck. We have to stop this.”

My eyes were still on Zane. “When?”

“The full moon,” he said. “Wednesday. Not-deer will be sacrificed so that Lucien can become the Blackwood. That’s the name he’s taking. A day or so after, I’m supposed to steal Margie’s spellbook.”



“They can have the damned book,” I snapped. “I don’t give a shit about that. But killing the wild thing? What the hell are they thinking?”

“That it’s pure magic,” Zane said.

“Which is true,” Gyth told us. “We are the soul of the forest. We are the tie between the power that is made and the power that is used. If my brother is sacrificed in the center of their ritual, the release of magic will make it easy for the Maybrook line to be removed and this new one to take its place. It is in the grimoire, Sylvia.”

“Yeah, kinda didn’t tell Zane about that,” I admitted.

“He cannot read it, so it does not matter,” Gyth said. “I also do not think he will steal it. The trees say that he did not like the taste of my brother’s blood. He didn’t even care about the magic that flowed in his veins afterwards.”

“Because that’s fucking gross!” Zane snapped.

“Wait, what?” Reese wanted to know.

“Kingsley took a drink of the straight blood,” he said. “Then he passed it to me so I could do the same. At the same time, he’s telling me I could easily become second in the coven because Lucien’s a fucking idiot, basically. And no, I don’t believe that, but I do believe Kingsley will do anything he has to so he can stay alive and powerful for as long as possible. The man’s gotta be pushing ninety!”

“Not quite,” I said. “He was in high school in the sixties, so he’s not that old.”

“Still!” Zane snapped. “We have to get those things out, and I have no fucking clue how. There’s this magical barrier on the doorway. I could feel it pass over me.”

“So we negate that magic,” I said.

Zane just shook his head in disbelief. “Like it’s going to be that easy.”

“But what if it is?” I asked. “What if we can make it that easy?” And I looked to Gyth for a little support here. “Why can’t I make a jar spell to hide us all from magic?”

“Syl, it won’t be that easy,” Jackson said. “I mean, the spell is a good idea, but I have a feeling there’s more to it than that.”

“There is,” Zane said. “These two have been locked away and tortured. Wild things will kill when released if they think they’re in danger. So we can’t just let them out. Also, the Grimsons will be watching that place like hawks before the ceremony.”

“Which is the perfect time to do it,” I realized.

“What?” Jackson asked.

“When the coven does a ritual, who’s at the house?”

And Zane began chuckling. “No one,” he said. “Even the staff is with us, setting up the post-ritual refreshments to revive everyone from the drain.”

I just began nodding. “Ok, so that sounds like it’ll work, but we need a way to convince the wild things we’re friends, and to help them survive the shit that’s about to go down.”

“I can help you make something they can eat,” Gyth offered.

*And we will talk to the birds, Flower said. They can look over the area.*

So I relayed that to everyone and added, “Plus, Erika’s research got me some blueprints of the mansion. Zane can mark which room, and we’ll figure this out from there. But we’re going to need a way to get something to those wild things between now and then, otherwise this mess might be more than their weakened bodies can take.”

Jackson just pointed to Zane. “He told Kingsley he’s thinking about dating. Think one of the girls would be willing to brave that?”

Reese groaned. “Fuck. You know Nora would.”

“Not a good idea,” Zane said.

But I was smiling. “I think we’re going to have a big planning session tomorrow, and yes, Nora is a great idea. Plus,

she's been wanting to help.”

“Nora is good,” Gyth said. “The Harkness will let her help.”

Zane just tilted his head back and groaned. “Fuck!”

# CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

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JACKSON

We sat and talked for a while longer, but there was really nothing more to decide without a lot of research and planning first. Eventually, Syl asked the skunks if they'd help her figure out a spell to make someone invisible to magic. Gyth said he would devise a food that would revitalize his brothers long enough to save them. Reese stood and started cleaning up the empty bottles and mess that we'd all made.

That was when Zane took his leave. He said he couldn't stay too long or he might be noticed. Yet when he headed outside, I followed, stopping him in the driveway.

"Zane?"

He turned, the moonlight making his skin look pale and his hair so dark. "I'll figure this out, Jack," he promised.

"It's you I'm worried about," I said. "You drank their blood? You were alone down there with the Grimsons? Zane, what happens if you fuck up? Will they kill you?"

"Maybe after Lucien becomes this Blackwood. Not before then. They need my magic." And yet the lack of expression on his face made it clear there was something big he was leaving out.

"And?" I pressed, moving closer.

But he took a step back. "Don't do this, Jack. We can't."

"They can force you, can't they?" I asked.

“They already do,” he assured me. “But if I offer first, I have more control. See, that’s the part you’ve never understood. If I seem eager, they don’t push. If I’m enthusiastic about my coven, they give me more leeway. If I want to be free, I have to be the best fucking wix that coven has ever seen, and you know what? I’m a damned good wix.”

“I know,” I promised, reaching out to clasp his shoulder. “And I’m still worried about you.”

“Worry about Sylvia,” he said. “Fuck, worry about Nora! You three are talking about sending a completely mundane woman into that house the night before the biggest ritual we’ve *ever* done? Dumb fucking idea, Jack,”

“Which means it might even work,” I said. “Besides, it’s Nora. You know her. You’re the one who told Kingsley you’re thinking about settling down, and Nora has a reputation for being willing to jump on just about any dick.”

“Isn’t she into your brother?” he asked.

“My nonbinary, asexual brother?” I laughed once. “Yeah, but it’s a little complicated. They’re sorta like platonic life partners, I guess? I dunno if it’s that serious yet, but they are definitely doing a thing, and Nora’s still fucking everyone she...” I trailed off. “Fuck, I’m an idiot.”

“What?” Zane asked.

“She’s aromantic.”

“Right,” Zane said. “Don’t know what that means. Not sure how it applies.”

I just waved it away. “Doesn’t matter. All I’m saying is she’s a huge fan of hookup culture, not interested in settling down with one fuck partner, and she’s cute.”

“She is,” Zane agreed.

“And she’s single.”

“Uh huh.”

I smiled. “And you go to the coffee shop all the time. So ask Kingsley if you can bring a date, because I *know* Nora will

be all-in for this. She's been wanting to help Syl since your coven attacked the first time. This? It's the moment she's been waiting for."

"Fine," Zane said. "Now give me a damned good reason to tell them why I came over here tonight?"

"Because you don't have a damned clue how to use your phone? Or maybe you left it when you were summoned?"

"Good enough," Zane said, taking a step back.

"I don't like this," I said before he could get too far.

Zane just huffed and flung an arm out. "Shit, *I* don't like this. I'm used to their shit, and I didn't see this coming. Killing a damned wild thing?"

"How the fuck are we going to break one out and save the one being used for the ritual?" I asked.

He reached up to push his hair back. "Yeah, I think I'll handle the ritual one. Syl can get the other free."

"How are you handling it?" I pressed.

Zane just smiled in that fake way he had. The lack of spark in his eyes told on him. "Well, when they're set free, those damned things can make quite the mess, hm?"

"Bullshit," I said. "There's no way you'd get its cage open with the entire coven there."

"What the fuck do you want me to say?" he demanded.

"That you can delay things," I begged. "I dunno, that we'll find a way for Syl to break the one out of the basement and maybe that can disrupt the ritual. Didn't you say there was a spell? Won't Kingsley know if it's fucked with?"

"And then what?" Zane asked. "An entire coven of assholes fucked-up on wild thing blood, swimming in more magic than you can imagine, and they all go after *her*?"

"Shit," I breathed. "This isn't going to be as easy as she's making it sound, is it?"

“No,” Zane admitted. “This is going to be fucking impossible, Jack. We’ll be lucky if we don’t all get killed trying to free those things.”

“Yeah.” I walked past him to lean my ass against the door of his fancy little silver car. “So Reese and I need to go.”

“No, what you need to do is stay here,” Zane told me. “Stay away from the coven, Jack. Stay nice and safe and far away from all this fucking magic.”

“Not leaving my witch,” I told him. “Hell, I’d be even happier if I didn’t have to leave my wix either.”

“Not your wix,” he corrected. “We talked about this.”

“Just saying that I’d fight for you too,” I said. “Jesus, Zane. Haven’t you figured that out yet? Maybe I don’t have magic. Maybe I’m not special like you, but I don’t give a shit. Sylvia doesn’t either. She’s perfectly happy with me and Reese, so why can’t you see that we’re not all helpless idiots just because we weren’t born with fancy abilities?”

“It’s not that,” he said, moving closer. “I’m worried about you, ok? Shit, I’m worried about Reese. Syl? She’s a witch. They’re going to come after her, no matter what she does. If we can get even one of these things free, then she’ll have twice the power to push them back. You? They tend not to think about you two.”

“Because of you,” I realized. “What did you do?”

“A few spells,” he admitted.

“So do a few more!” I insisted. “Shit, that thing you did to get Syl here, can’t you make something like that for this mess? I dunno, a good luck charm, or making all the right options work out?”

“I’m not a good luck wix,” he growled.

“You know what I mean,” I insisted. “Pick the right future.”

“I can’t fucking see our future!” he snapped. “I told you, I can’t read mine anymore, and hers? It’s a fucking mess.”



“Why?” I breathed.

He moved closer and pushed back a lock of hair that had fallen out of my ponytail. “I think it’s because there’s a decision to be made. I think something big is coming, and depending on what your witch does, it will change both of our futures. I think her power is strong enough that it’s interfering with mine, and that scares the shit out of me.”

“She’s that impressive?” I asked.

He chuckled dryly. “Jack, if my power is like a lighter turned all the way up, she’s an atomic bomb. That woman embraced the forest. She’s pulling from centuries of untapped magic and willing nature. She made fucking *friends* with the trees! So yeah, she’s a little impressive, and don’t you dare tell her that, because I want her to be *careful*.”

“Promise,” I said. “But what about you? What about not-deer? How can you keep them from sacrificing the thing?”

“I don’t know,” he breathed.

“So guess.”

He flapped his arms at his side. “I kill a member of the coven?”

“Ok, that would do it,” I agreed, “and then get you killed in the process. How about no? What happens if you don’t show up?”

“Not an option,” he said. “Remember that whole pain and suffering conversation?”

“But would the pain and suffering be worth it to delay it?” I asked. “I dunno, maybe knock you out so you wouldn’t notice?”

Zane canted his head. “Maybe.”

“So something to think about,” I told him. “Because we’re not going to leave you out to get fucked, Zane. You’ve helped too much.”

“And no matter what,” he pointed out, “the coven is not going to be happy with me after this.”

“So we get you out of the coven?” I guessed.

He just laughed. “Ok, how? I’ve been trying, but if you have a good idea, I’m all ears.”

“So what are you planning to do?” I asked. “Because you didn’t say shit when you walked out of there, which means you have some damned idea of how to fuck things up. You gonna make someone fumble a few lines?”

“Won’t buy enough time.”

“So what?” I pressed. “What the fuck are you doing, Zane?”

He leaned in, looking right in my eyes. “I’m finally going to get my revenge, Jack. I’ve been waiting for this, and I can’t think of a better time to fuck them up. Like I said, the more powerful I get, the easier it will be to fuck them from the inside. Well, you know what? This is the inside.”

“What are you doing?” I asked again.

“With five bloodlines,” he said, his voice cold and hard, “the coven is handicapped. We’re limping along, basically. With four, the coven can barely function.” Then he smiled. “With three, they’re fucked. See, you, Reese, and Sylvia might not be able to kill someone, but I fucking can.”

“And what will that do to you?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I think it’ll feel pretty good. After all, Kingsley not only killed my father, but he took you from me. He has toyed with me like a damned puppet on a string for far too long, and that old man needs to die.”

“How?” I asked. “How can you kill Kingsley Grimson and not have the cops all over you?”

“Disappear him,” he said. “Magic, Jack. It’s all about the magic. Besides, it’s not like I have anything else to worry about. This? It’s been my life’s goal. I’ve obsessed over finding a way to rip this coven apart since they inducted me. Well, this just moved my timeline up.”

“And you think you’re going to be destroyed in the process,” I realized.

“I’ll get her wild thing free somehow,” he assured me. “But let me have my revenge, Jack. It’s all I have left.”

“No!” I hissed, grabbing his arm. “It’s not! You have me! Can’t you fucking see that? Shit, you could have her too! You have us, and we’re willing to stand with you. We’ll figure out a way to get you out. You do not need to throw everything away just to prove how badass you are!”

Zane cupped the side of my face. “Which is why we’re meeting tomorrow, Jack. Tonight, I’m going to think all the way around this problem, but know I’m not going to let Lucien become the next hedge witch. I just won’t.”

“The forest will protect you,” I breathed, catching his hand. “Zane, if it all goes bad, the forest will stand with you.”

“No, it won’t,” he said. “I’m a member of the wrong coven, Jack. I’ve done too many horrible things since I joined them. The forest protects her, as it should.”

“I’ll protect you!” I insisted. “I’ll go with you.”

He just gave me a tired look. “Yeah, that’s not going to fly with the coven.”

“Something!” I insisted.

A little smile flickered across his lips. “God, I fucking love you. I never once stopped, but in all my best dreams, I never could’ve imagined this, you know? You, Reese, and a witch I don’t hate. I tried to imagine what happiness would look like a thousand times, and it always came back to those nights at the creek. That was the best I ever had.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” I said.

He just leaned in and pressed his lips to mine in a fleeting kiss. “Worry about your witch, Jack. Even if we lose one wild thing, this will still be a win.”

“And losing you wouldn’t be,” I countered.

He reached around my hip and opened the door to his car. “You have to have something before you can lose it.” Then he tipped his head at the house. “So go have that. The pair of you

need to make sure that woman knows exactly how special she is to you.”

I moved, letting him open the door the rest of the way. “You are coming back tomorrow, right?”

“We have planning to do,” he agreed.

But there was something sad in his eyes when he looked at me. Something old and tired and resigned. Something that made my guts twist in fear, because that was not the look of a wix planning to destroy the world. It was the look of a man who’d realized defeat was the most likely option.

# CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

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Jackson and Reese stayed the night. The next morning, I began inviting everyone to come over and help us figure this out. Erika, Beth, and Nora knew enough that they might have good ideas. A text to Zane reminded him that he was supposed to “spend time with me.” Which seemed safe, in case the Grimsons looked at his messages.

Half an hour later, Nora texted back, asking if she could drag Jayden along with her. I said sure, and even offered snacks if it would make them want to hang out more. She sent me back a laughing face and said it was all good.

But snacks were a good idea. With this many people, they sure wouldn't hurt and would give us all something to do with our hands. So, I began making up some sliced meats, cheeses, and crackers. I added a few vegetable spreads in case someone was vegetarian, and fruit options for the vegans. I honestly had no clue if any of my friends fell in either category, but since we'd had both options on the Fourth of July, I wanted to play it safe.

In all of that, I mixed in spices for focus, brilliance, and joy.

Around one in the afternoon, they began showing up. The trees chuckled with amusement as the cars lined up to drive in. What surprised me the most was Zane. The man didn't drive himself this time. Instead, he rode with Jayden and Nora.

The house welcomed everyone with an open door. Lupe waved as people passed - which was a hell of a lot better than

smacking them! The trees rustled in the breeze, bending to shade the windows of the house, and my little cottage filled up quickly.

“And I think we’re taking this out back,” Nora said, grabbing a platter of munchies. “Syl, can you ask the bugs to give us peace?”

“Sure,” I said, reaching into the fridge for the pitcher of tea I’d made.

Jackson grabbed sodas, Reese claimed the fruit, and we all made our way out back just as Gyth decided to join us. The four skunks chattered at him in greeting, and we all found a nice place to sit. For the skunks, that was the floor. For Gyth?

“Figured this might fit you,” Zane said as he walked out with a canvas camp chair. “Extra wide, a place for a drink, and should hold enough weight that you won’t break anything.” And then he set it up beside the other chairs at the table.

“Thank you, Zane,” Gyth said before carefully lowering himself into it. “I find that your devices are much more comfortable than they look. I still like mattresses.”

“You need a little cottage of your own,” I teased.

He shook his head. “Inside feels too tight. Outside is better, but mattresses do not do well outside.”

“Hammocks,” Erika suggested. “They’re pretty comfy too.”

“Oh, I’m going to be in town next week, I’ll pick a few up,” Beth said excitedly.

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure that isn’t why we’re here,” Jayden said. “Nora said bad magic. Someone want to fill the rest of us in?”

So I started explaining about the missing wild things, what they were, and that we’d found where they were being kept. The problem was how to get them out. Zane added a few more details. Gyth told us that his brothers would have been cut off from information for years. And in the end, we basically spilled it all.

“Damn,” Jayden breathed. “Okay, so what’s the game plan?”

“Step one,” I told them, “is to get those two revitalized enough to make a run for it when we can get them out.”

“Which means a dinner date with Zane,” Reese added. “We need a woman willing to play the part of his girlfriend.”

“Me!” Nora said, thrusting her hand up. “I’m girlfriend material.”

“You really aren’t,” Jayden teased. “But you’d look good dressed up.”

“Don’t hit on my sister-in-law,” Reese teased.

“Don’t hit on my brother-thing,” Jackson told Nora.

Which made Erika giggle. “So is this a thing now?”

“It’s...” Jayden looked at Nora.

“A thing,” Nora agreed. “Friends. That’s a safe word.”

Zane looked over at Jayden. “Partners works too. Doesn’t define things, doesn’t matter if anyone else likes it, and still claims her a bit.”

“I like partners,” Jayden said.

So Nora bobbed her head. “Partners.”

“And still doesn’t address the magic problem,” Beth said. “So Nora plays Zane’s girlfriend. Then what?”

“Then I tell the coven I’m thinking about settling down and looking for the right woman to spend my life with,” Zane explained. “Nora swoons a bit like some bimbo who’s fucking me for my money.”

“Totally into this so far,” Nora said.

“It’s also cocktail attire, which means a dress.” He flashed her a devious grin.

“Oh, I have dresses,” Nora promised. “And bimbo is easy, but why am I being a bimbo?”



“Because idiots don’t worry too much about magic,” Zane explained. “You will also be expected to drink the wine.”

“Which I can deal with,” I offered. “If the chai spices worked, you both will just need a glass before you go.”

“Easy enough,” Zane agreed.

“And we will need something for my brothers to eat,” Gyth said. “If it is inside them, it cannot be easily taken from them.”

“Candy?” I asked, because that seemed like an easy way to fill something full of magic.

“Little, so it can be swallowed like a pill,” Beth suggested. “I just don’t know what would make a wild thing strong again.”

“Sunlight,” Gyth said. “Old wood. Leaves. A fresh breeze.”

“Sugar,” Erika added. “Carbonation, because that helps plants. So use a clear soda to mix it?”

“Might work,” I agreed when Gyth nodded.

“It is the intention that matters most,” Gyth reminded me. “Intend for them to be strong, and they will become strong.”

“Ok,” I muttered. “And then?”

“The issue will be getting it to them,” Zane explained. “These parties are somewhat dull. A lot of mingling, showing off, and a fancy dinner. We discuss the schedule for the following night, let our partners know they’re helping, and then head home.”

“Yeah, I didn’t make it to the end,” I admitted.

But Nora was looking at Zane as if some evil idea was forming in her head. “At the Grimsons’, right?”

“Yeah?”

“Kingsley’s mansion?” she pressed.

“The same.”

Which made Beth giggle. “The rich fucker who never lets normals into his house?” she asked. “If Nora’s a bimbo, then wouldn’t she be overwhelmed?”

“I’m thinking more Instagram influencer,” Nora said. “Take pictures of everything, post all of them, and get lost in a few ‘safe’ halls first because I’m trying to show how cool I am because I was invited.”

“Which also helps my cause,” Zane said. “I’ve been telling the Grimsons that finding a decent woman isn’t as easy anymore.” He lifted his hand as the other three women at the table scoffed. “I’m trying to keep them from dragging anyone else into this shit. I know it’s bullshit.”

“Least there’s that,” Erika said.

“But we’re going to need some protections,” I said. “My issue is that the coven probably knows about all my little jars.”

“Oh! Epoxy beads!” Beth said. “Ok, don’t judge, but I’m kinda doing this craft thing lately, right? And I have the stuff for making like resin with flower petals in it and shit. I was going to make Erika a ring.”

“Aw, really?” Erika asked.

“But the same thing could work for my spells!” I realized. “Like a jar, but not.”

“And I can have not only anti-magic jewelry, but also an entire pocket full of this wild thing rejuvenation candy,” Nora said. “The more they eat, the better, but if I’m caught, it won’t look as weird as one piece.”

“Good idea,” Jackson said.

Reese just leaned back and pushed his hand over his mouth. “Okay, so that’s a lot of prep, and this has to happen Tuesday night.”

“Wednesday is the real problem,” Zane said. “If, and I’m stressing that if, we can get your candy to the things on Tuesday, that buys us time. Wednesday will not be easy, though.”

“How so?” Erika asked.

I leaned forward. “Okay, so we have the coven of wixen in the Grimson pasture. The staff from the house will be setting up outside for refreshments. That means the house - mansion - should be empty, right?”

“And locked,” Zane said. “I’m sure it will have some type of security.”

“Lockpicks?” Jayden suggested.

I gave him an exasperated look. “I don’t know how to use them!”

“Me either,” Jackson said. “But I can probably do the credit card thing on a door.”

“No, this is on me,” Zane said. “I’ll work a spell to have the staff forget to lock it. A little herbal sachet will do, I think.”

“Nice,” I said, because that was crossing into my area of expertise.

He flashed me a smile. “I have some uses. Pretty much any version of fortune magic you’ve heard of is in my repertoire, from evil eye gestures to my beloved tarot cards.”

“And mouse bones,” Reese said.

“Definitely hexes,” Zane agreed. “I think I’m going to start trying voodoo dolls next, although they don’t really work like that.”

*We can keep watch, Flower offered. If we watch the ritual from the safety of the trees, we can report when they are coming back.*

“Or when they’re all outside,” I said, nodding to show I liked that before explaining it to the rest.

“The trick is going to be getting the one inside and then the one outside,” Jackson said, looking across the table at Zane.

“I’ll delay as long as possible.”

“Not good enough,” Beth said. “Gyth? Can your brothers ride in a car?”

“I do not know,” he admitted. “Can, yes. Will? That is harder.”

“They’ve kinda been locked away for years,” I reminded the crew. “Since long before I got here. Wixen have hurt them. People are dangerous. These two will probably not be anything like Gyth.”

“So make them a token,” Jayden suggested, turning to look at Gyth. “Some way to show they’re working for you, big guy.”

Gyth began to smile and his eyes slid over to Zane. “I know just the thing.”

“Do we get to know?” Reese asked.

“Blood,” Gyth explained. “Not inside, but outside. A drop on your clothes. They will smell it. They will know I sent you. That you did not drink it will say more than you know.”

“And I’m already in shit with them because of that,” Zane explained.

“I will touch you anyway,” Gyth said. “It is important.”

“But how are we going to save the one outside?” Erika pressed. “Everyone keeps stopping about the time we get to that.”

“Yeah,” I admitted. “That’s the problem. It’s going to be in the middle of the coven.”

“And that’s a lot of magic,” Zane explained. “For this ritual, they will all be powered up as much as possible. Kingsley wants to make Lucien the new version of Sylvia. He needs a massive amount of magic for this to work.”

*But it is outside,* Flower said.

“I know that,” I told her.

She flicked her tail in annoyance. *It is outside. It means the outside can help.*

“I don’t know what that means,” I explained.

*Skunks, birds, and more, Flower said. We can help save our forest too. Let us help you, Sylvia?*

“Do you think you can slow down the ritual long enough for me to get the first one out and come for the other?” I asked, starting to hope.

“Forgot to translate,” Jackson mumbled at me.

I just held up a finger, my eyes on Flower.

She looked at her kids, then back to me. *You are a nature witch. We are nature. We will find a way to help.*

So I told the rest what she'd said, ending with, “And I'm not sure if that will be enough, but does anyone have a better idea?”

“No, not really,” Nora admitted. “I mean, Zane's going to be in the middle of this too, right?”

“With the coven,” he said, looking at the faces across from him. “That's what you all need to understand. I was inducted into that coven. Once the ritual starts, I am no longer on your side. I'm their puppet.”

“No, that's bullshit,” Jayden said.

Zane simply shrugged. “Maybe, but it's how it works. That's what happens when one is bound to the leader. We serve them. Like it or not, we all serve them.”

“And that leader?” I said. “It's Kingsley Grimson. He will not give Zane the chance to help. He'd rather kill all of them than lose the magic that is keeping him alive.”

“Then maybe we need to look at killing them all,” Nora said. “At least *that* would finally end this.”

“Disappearing,” Jackson corrected. “If they disappear, the town will forget to ask questions. If they die, then we're all going to spend the rest of our lives in jail.”

“Yeah, but you're forgetting one thing,” Erika pointed out. “We still have two witches on our side.”

“Wixen,” Zane corrected. “I still have a dick.”

“Not if you aren’t fighting the Grimsons,” Jayden said. “Sounds to me like that’s the sort of thing a pussy would do.”

Over half the table turned to give them a dirty look. “Really?” I asked.

Jayden just lifted a hand at me, their eyes locked on Zane as they smiled coldly. “Pick a side, bad boy.”

“He has!” I snapped.

Jayden just continued to stare. “Zane?”

Zane leaned forward, getting closer to Jackson’s little brother. “You think I haven’t?”

“I think you’re doing the same shit you always have,” Jayden snapped. “You say one thing, do another, and then push the blame onto someone else. I think you’ve fucked with my brother long enough that I don’t trust you like everyone else here does. I also think that if you want to change my mind, that is completely in your power, oh mystical *wix*.”

Zane huffed in dry amusement. “Then maybe you should convince your brother I’m bad for him.”

“Kinda been trying,” Jayden admitted. “I also don’t see anything wrong with disappearing you before I take you home.”

“Which doesn’t help us at all,” I pointed out.

“No, but it might help Jackson,” Jayden said.

“Enough,” Reese grumbled. “Zane’s proven himself. You haven’t, Jayden. So if you want to sit at the table with the big kids, maybe start thinking about how the fuck we’re going to free that last wild thing, hm? And leave Zane alone. The man’s my friend.”

Which made Jayden look over at Reese with a shocked expression. “Really?”

“Really,” Reese said. “See, I know what magic has done to him. I also know exactly what he’s risking just by being here, so shove all your little-brother attitude up your ass, apologize, and eat some fucking snacks.”

Zane pushed the tray towards the younger person. “I’ll figure out a way to keep it alive, Jayden. Happy?”

“Am now,” Jayden said, reaching for the veggie dip. “Still think Reese and Syl are better for Jackson, though.”

“Me too,” Zane agreed. “Me fucking too.”

# CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

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I wasn't too surprised that Jayden hated Zane. They'd been there when Jackson had his heart broken, so Jayden had seen even more than I had. That they'd held onto it for this long? Well, that was what siblings did, right? But it wasn't helping us now. What we needed was to prepare.

So that evening, the crew headed down to the cellar. There, Nora began organizing everyone to make something a lot like an assembly line for Syl's spells. Attack spells went in red candy jars. Protection spells went in blue ones, and the green were used for anything else.

It took mere minutes for the ladies and Jayden to figure out a system. At the same time, Syl was wandering back upstairs to start the candy for Gyth's brothers. He gathered the supplies, she was designing the recipe, and I felt like I was very much in the way.

Zane and Jackson stayed out back talking for a while. From what I could see, it looked serious, so I wasn't about to disturb that, but when everyone left for the night - with the crew planning to come back tomorrow and finish - I had to ask.

"It's nothing," Jackson promised.

I watched him for a long moment. "Is it? Or are you just worried about telling me?"

Which made the man I loved sigh and drop his head. "Reese, he's not telling me something. I don't know what he's

not telling me, but it gives me a very bad feeling. Thus, I got nothing.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, “I can see that. Want me to try?”

Jackson laughed once. “Pretty sure that won’t work any better than my attempts. No, let it go. We’ll just have Nora keep an eye on him.”

“It kinda feels self-destructive,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, hence me worrying,” Jackson said.

But there wasn’t anything we could do about that. If Zane wouldn’t tell us, he wouldn’t. We couldn’t simply stop this whole thing to force it out of him. Lucien would be the winner if that happened. The entire plan we’d spent the afternoon figuring out would fall apart without Zane’s help. We couldn’t pressure him to open up, because Zane knew exactly how to smile and shrug things off or give a satisfying answer that was complete bullshit.

In other words, we had to trust him - and it was hard.

Sunday started early. Beth had her epoxy jewelry supplies. Nora had brought more sugar - since that was running out. Erika and Jayden were there for extra hands and moral support. Gyth was gone, but the kitchen smelled like someone had poured too much sugar in some herbal tea. Evidently, that was the wild thing candy cooling on the table.

“When did you finish that?” I asked Syl as I looked over the hardening drops of wood-filled candy.

She didn’t even slow, hurrying past me to grab a sponge and wipe off the counter. “Around dawn. I slept like crap, then woke up and realized what it needed.”

“Do I even want to know?” I asked.

She laughed as she turned for the cellar. “Probably not. Butterfly wings, Reese. The candy needed butterfly wings for some hope.”

And then she was gone. The clanging and banging, however, weren’t. That was loud. From the thumps of the chest freezer lid opening and closing a million times to the

rattle of what sounded like pots and pans, I could tell the crew was busy. Unfortunately, I didn't know how to make this any easier on her.

So I followed her down. There, I saw the most amazing sight I could imagine. To the left, Beth had set up a card table with her epoxy stuff. To the right and around the corner was Syl's spice area. In the middle was Jayden with cardboard boxes.

Erika pulled out a set of four candy jars. Depending on the color, Nora dished up four sets of spices in tiny measuring-spoon-looking things. Those were passed to Syl, who had a funnel. She dumped the spices in, breathed out her incantation of "So let it be," and then sealed the top with wax from a candle that she lit with her mind. Then, once the wax was cooled enough, Jayden arranged that set of jars in a box and carried them back to the chest freezer for storage.

It was organized. It was orderly. It was the craziest form of communal magic that I could imagine, and Syl was making it all possible thanks to her friends saving most of her time and energy in the preparation. I only had one concern.

"Syl?" I asked. "Are you pulling too much magic for one day?"

She turned to me with a smile, then headed over towards Beth's table. "No, Zane showed me how to use the forest's magic first. It's more like making myself into a garden hose. I pull from there, then put it into stuff here. I mean, I'm still going to feel it, but that's why I want to finish today, so I can have some time to recover."

"Okay," I said, shifting so I could see what they were doing with the epoxy crafts.

"Okay, a necklace pendant," Syl said, pointing at a silicone mold. "I'll use that for the anti-magic necklaces. Will all of you wear one?"

"Gonna pass on that," Jayden said. "Not really into things around my neck, and it's a little further into the gendered spectrum than I like."

“Bracelet of beads?” Syl asked next.

They nodded. “I’m good with that. Just not too flowery? Like, bugs and flowers I’m down with, but it’s a balance, and I’m still kinda working it out.”

“I can work with that,” Syl said. “Nora’s necklace needs to be the most specific.” She paused for a moment, thinking hard. Then her eyes jumped up to meet mine. “Reese, is there any way you can find some things for me?”

“I can try...” I offered.

She nodded, clearly distracted with her thoughts. “I need beetle wings. The type of beetle doesn’t matter, but they need to be iridescent. I’d say dragonfly, but that’s too big. I’m pretty sure there are a ton of dead beetles outside somewhere.” Then she chewed on her lower lip. “And dandelion seeds. One flower should be enough, if it’s full. I just need one per bead or pendant. Also some small leaves.” And she held up her fingers to show me just how small - very.

“I’ll find something that will work,” I promised, turning for the stairs.

And then Syl raised her voice. “Jackson! I need...” She paused, looking around her and tapping each of her fingers like she was counting. “Twenty of Lupe’s needles!”

From the first floor, Jackson called back. “We’ll get ‘em!”

“What else?” I asked her.

Standing there in the middle of her cellar, Syl’s brow furrowed. “I don’t know.”

“Which is okay,” I assured her. “But what springs into that amazing mind of yours? What is your gut thinking you might need to use?”

“Ties to the forest,” she said softly. “But I don’t know what would count as that.”

“Maybe things *from* the forest?” I suggested. “A pebble, a piece of bark, or even a bit of lichen?”

“Lichen!” she breathed, latching onto that. “Yes! Funguses. Is that a word? Never mind, you know what I mean. And if you see something that might work, just grab it too?”

“Promise,” I said before stepping into her, cupping both sides of her face, and kissing her quickly. “You got this, witch. Use your helpers. That’s why we’re here.”

She leaned into me, relaxing into my touch. “That’s exactly what I needed to hear, because we have a lot of stuff to make.”

“And plenty of time,” I said, tracing my thumb across her cheek. “Make magic, beautiful. I’ll get your weird shit.”

A smile took over her lips, then she stole one last kiss from me and headed for the next batch of candy jars. Yeah, this was going to take its toll on her, but I had a feeling my witch would be able to handle it. Fuck, at least I hoped she could.

Because this was serious.

Jogging upstairs, I repeated to myself all the things she’d asked for so I wouldn’t forget. Beetle wings - or just dead beetles - along with a seeded dandelion or two, lichen, some tiny leaves, and anything else that caught my eye. In other words, I was about to ask the forest to help me out a bit.

When I reached the first floor, Jackson had a little glass jar and a set of tweezers. The man was kneeling before Lupe, having the cactus turn so he could pull some from various places. The cactus gestured to where, and then Jackson added another little cactus needle to his growing collection.

I headed into the kitchen to get a fistful of resealable sandwich bags. With those in one pocket, I changed direction, aiming for the front door. Jackson was still plucking needles, giving Lupe the chance to recover in between.

“I’m headed out to the forest,” I said as I made my way around them. “Got a list of nature shit to pick up.”

“Phone?” Jackson asked.

I patted my pocket. “Yep.”

“Okay, if she adds anything else, I’ll text you. How’s the cellar?”

“Organized.” I lifted a brow. “It’s working. I’m a little worried that it might be working too well. She’s going to be wiped out after this.”

“Bubble bath, massage, and a long sleep,” Jackson decided. “I think we’re spending another night here.”

“We need to bring up moving in again,” I said.

“I didn’t exactly get to bring it up the first time I tried,” he shot back. “But no, you’re right. Maybe tonight when she’s relaxed? Let her know we want to help?”

“And see if she’s even okay with it.” Then I bent to kiss the top of his head. “But I need to get this so she can finish. I’ll be out a bit, I think. It’s not an easy list.”

“Call if you need help.”

But as I slipped outside, I said over my shoulder, “I’m going to take a skunk, I think.” Then I yelled, “Skunks? I need a volunteer!”

A chirp greeted me a moment later, and Fern was doing that cute little run-hop thing towards me. I waited, then pointed out towards the forest.

“I need to get some stuff for Syl, and it might be easier to spot from down there. Willing to walk around with me and play my bodyguard?”

She squeaked again and nodded, so we set out. The lichen was easy. It grew on all the trees. I added that to one of the bags, then put it in my other pocket. The whole time, I repeated out loud Syl’s list, just to make sure Fern knew and I didn’t forget any of it.

Then, *Reese! Here! I found a beetle!*

My feet stopped so hard I nearly fell onto my face. The voice was feminine. No, more than that, it sounded girly and young. I was also very sure that it was Fern’s.

“Fern?” I asked, slowly looking over at her.

She bounced, shoving her forelegs at the item she was trying to point at. *Here!*

“Fern, are you talking to me?”

Her little head looked up - right at me - and she nodded. *I found a beetle!*

So I hurried over to check. Sure enough, she'd found a dead little bug, so that went in a bag, but it didn't stop the million questions that were now running through my mind.

“When did you become able to talk to me?” I asked.

She flicked her tail up and trotted off deeper into the woods. *Not long now. Mom says it's because we're growing up. Once we're adults, we're allowed to decide if we want to be familiars or not.*

“Uh... familiars?”

*Twig says he's going to be Zane's, and Sprig tried to ask Jackson, but he got shy. So, I'm going to be your familiar, because you're the strongest of them all.*

“Fern, I'm not a wix,” I reminded her.

*So? There's nothing that says I can't be a familiar's familiar. Besides, look how good we work together?* Then she paused. *Two beetles.* And her little nose tipped up at me. *Zane may have magic, and Jackson can lift more, but you? You can lift a lot and carry the invisible stuff like burdens. That makes you stronger than everyone but Sylvia!*

“Kid, that comment just made me decide you're right,” I decided. “I also like that it means you're not going to grow up and forget about us.”

*I could never forget about you. You're mine now.* And off she went again.

The whole time we picked bugs, flowers, and random bits of nature from the forest, Fern continued explaining to me how Sprig really wanted the same thing with Jackson, but he was scared he was too small and weak. If Jackson rejected him, Sprig didn't know what he'd do.

I had to reassure her that Jackson wouldn't. No, we loved the little skunklets like part of the crazy magical family we had out here. And the whole time, my pockets were growing full. In truth, so was my mind. Could familiars even have familiars? Didn't I need magic for that? And how the *fuck* was Fern making it possible for me to hear her?

Never mind that this was what Syl had been listening to for so long that it was normal to her now. Oddly, it made me feel just a bit closer to her, having experienced the smallest part of her nature magic. But would it be enough?

Would any of this be enough?

Breaking a pair of wild things out from Kingsley Grimson's mansion wasn't a little prank. It wasn't "no big deal." This was the sort of thing that got people killed - and I was scared Syl would be the one I lost. She was too new, too good, too miraculous to be real. She'd brought me and Jackson closer, a thing I hadn't thought possible, and now Jackson seemed to be working things out with Zane.

Syl was everything I hadn't realized I needed, and if I lost her, I couldn't imagine how much that would hurt. I tried to push it away, but with every bug, rock, fungus, and tiny leaf that I gathered, I thought of her all over again.

But Fern had made a very nice lap. Just as my bags were full, she squeaked and hurried ahead, making me realize we were only a few yards from the cottage. I followed slower, smiling at her excited little giggles in my head.

*I'm going to tell Mom!* she bragged, and then was gone.

Which was when Zane's car door opened, making me realize he'd just arrived as well. I jumped, nearly dropping the half-dozen Ziplock bags I was holding.

"Shit, you scared me," I said.

He chuckled and headed over with his hands out. "Sorry. I just didn't want to run over Fern."

"Seems she's my familiar now," I told him.



“Don’t do that,” he warned. “Reese, if anything happens to you, they hurt more through the bond. That’s what familiars are.”

“Which is why you don’t want one?” I asked.

He opened his mouth to reply, but paused. “Yeah. We’ll go with that.”

“Then what?” I demanded. “What the fuck are you hiding, because Jackson and I know there’s something. He said you won’t tell him, but here we are, still trying to trust you anyway.”

Zane pushed out a heavy breath. “I’m hiding that I’m scared, okay? I’m fucking scared shitless! Not for me. For you, Jack, Nora, and every other idiot in that house who thinks this is ‘cool.’ I’m fucking terrified that what Syl is asking me to do is going to get her killed too! I’m scared, Reese, because this is the most serious spell the coven has ever worked, and Syl’s acting like everything will be just hunky dory.”

“She’s not,” I promised. “She’s currently making an arsenal. She’s creating protections for everyone else. She’s trying to think of everything with a smile on her face so she can protect them, because she believes that magic is for others.”

“Stupid girl,” Zane grumbled.

“And you said she’s strong enough that this might work,” I reminded him.

Slowly, he lifted his eyes, hitting me with the unreal-blue shade of them. “She is and it might,” he said. “But winning doesn’t mean we won’t take losses.” Then he licked his lips. “Reese, someone’s going to die.”

“Don’t think like that,” I told him.

He just smiled at me sadly. “But I have to, because I’m the one who can protect them. Me, Reese. Just me. She can save magic; I can save the rest of you. I’m also here because I’m going to do everything in my power to make sure this has a happy ending.”

# CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

---

My dinner date started early. After putting on one of my favorite suits - minus the tie, of course - I headed over to Nora's place to pick her up. There, Sylvia, Reese, and Jack were waiting. They were the ones who greeted me. I was passed a cup of chai tea and then handed a necklace made of three black and gold beads on a leather "chain."

"What's this?" I asked.

Syl touched the beads, naming each one. "Anti-skunk stink. Magical immunity, which specifies harmful spells." Then she smiled for a split second. "And the one in the center is protection from harmful intentions."

"And the beads?" I asked as I clasped the thing behind my neck. "Who made those?"

"Well, Beth showed me she had colors and gold foil. Black just seemed like your style. Also makes it harder to see the cactus spines and beetle wings."

Once the necklace was on, I shifted it under my shirt. "You do good work, witch."

I swore her cheeks turned a half-shade darker. Not pink, but a very nice bronze that she could pull off without shame. I also liked the way her green eyes sparkled. It seemed Syl wasn't used to being complimented on her magic. I'd have to keep that in mind.

And then Nora came out of her room. I wasn't the only man who paused to appreciate the view, either. All of us did,

because the red dress this girl had picked out? Holy shit, was she stunning!

Everything was tight. Her cleavage was impossibly good. Her hair was pinned up, but with loose pieces around her face that dragged my eyes right back to her boobs. Hell, even her lips and nails matched!

This was not the girl I knew. This was not the shit-talking, brilliant, and driven woman who all but ran the local coffee shop. This wasn't even the lady who'd stepped up to help Syl when she needed it - and everyone else who ever asked. Nope, this version of Nora was definitely a bimbo sex kitten.

"I'm going to get in so much trouble," I groaned.

Nora just patted Jack's shoulder as she passed. "Nope, because this is meaningless, Zane. I'm just after you for your money. So, I'm probably going to end up kissing you tonight, I will definitely fawn, flirt, and make the Grimsons think we're definitely fornicating."

"Nice alliteration," I teased, and yet my eyes jumped to Syl for no reason at all.

She was grinning. "Enjoy it while you can, Zane. I hear Jayden might be the one getting her real affection." Then she winked. "But if it fucks over the Grimsons, I don't think Jackson will be jealous at all."

"I didn't say shit!" Jack groaned.

Reese just wrapped his arm around Jack's shoulders. "You didn't have to, babe. We all know you'd 'do' that, and I don't mean the one in red."

Which made Syl giggle before she stepped up with one more thing. "Gyth's gift." And then she placed a drop of blood from a glass tube under my collar and at the hem of Nora's dress. Both places they'd never be noticed, even if the fluid barely stained the black or red fabric.

"Ok," she breathed. "Nora, you have the candy?"

"In my purse," Nora promised.

“Good. Then you two go have a nice date,” she told us. “If things go bad...”

“I’ll text a 9-1-1 to one of you,” Nora promised. “But it’s good. We got this.” She turned, lifting the resin pendant on her necklace. “I’m so safe from magic right now that it isn’t even funny.”

Then we left. Like a gentleman, I escorted Nora around to the passenger side and helped her down into my car. She smiled in a way that made me a little nervous. The kind of smile most men would die to get from a woman who looked like she did right now. And yet, when I got us on the road, I decided I needed to clarify a few things.

“I am not about to take advantage of this situation,” I told her. “You’re doing Syl and me a favor. That’s all this is.”

“Don’t be a fucking idiot,” Nora said. “Kingsley Grimson needs to believe that what we have is real.” She twisted in her seat to look at me. “Zane, there is one thing a man like you wants from a woman like this. Sex. Lots of it. So, for tonight, let’s come to an agreement.”

“I don’t think I like your negotiating terms,” I grumbled.

But she kept going, ignoring me. “You are a pig. I’m a slut. We’re going to play our parts perfectly, because Xilen’s and Yatir’s lives are on the line. That means it’s okay. Shove your tongue down my throat, Zane. Do not fucking hesitate, or the Grimsons will become suspicious.”

“And if it’s more than that?” I asked. “No. I’m not okay with this. I agreed because Syl’s right, but I’m not going to take advantage of you for fucking magic!”

She sighed so hard it was almost a groan. “Drama class, bud. You play the part of a straight man. I play the part of a desperate woman. If that straight man and that desperate woman end up doing things, then it’s the characters. End of story.” Then she straightened back up and chuckled. “Syl’s the one who suggested it, so you know.”

“Uh...” I was now officially tongue-tied.

“She said to let her know if you kiss well or suck a woman’s face off. Jackson has never cared if you were with women. He’s just embarrassed that I know about you two fucking the other night.” Then she jerked her chin at me. “So who’s stopping you - and if you say Reese, I’m going to lose twenty bucks.”

That was enough to make me laugh, even as I turned onto the old country road that would eventually take us to the Grimsons. For a little too long, I tried not to answer, but she kept looking at me. Never mind that we were trapped together in a car and I knew this woman wouldn’t give up until I answered.

“Syl,” I breathed.

“Knew it!” she said. “But because you’re a good guy, I’m going to tell them you said Jackson, okay?”

I looked over, my mouth partly open in surprise. “What?”

“The bet,” she explained.

“No, the knowing it part.”

“Oh.” Nora flapped a hand at me. One covered in more resin jewelry, along with some real stuff. “You always look at her like you’re hungry. I just figured her cooking isn’t *that* good.”

“It’s pretty good,” I countered.

“And it’s not that kind of hungry,” she said. “Zane, I think you like having a witch around who can understand you. I think you love Jackson. I think you and Reese are sorting things out. All of that is great, but you definitely have a bit of a crush on Syl. I mean, I don’t blame you. She’s fucking amazing, and the three of them? That’s like Candyland for the horny.”

All I could do was laugh, but we were here. Slowly, I turned into the drive, taking enough time so I could warn her, “Do not mention any of their names tonight, okay? I have some spells working, and that might make them less effective.”

“Gonna do some tarot on me?” she asked. “Maybe a little ‘good fortune’ or ‘survives the worst’ type of thing?”

I parked the car, then dug into my suit pocket. Pulling out my deck of tarot cards, I passed them to her. “Think about getting home after this party, Nora. Imagine it. Envision it. And when you’re ready, cut the deck.”

Nodding, she closed her eyes and gently traced the many edges in the deck. I watched as she breathed slowly, clearly obeying my directions. After only a few seconds, she split the deck and offered both halves to me.

“Perfect,” I told her before shuffling the deck three times. When that was done, I thumped the bottom edge of the whole thing, and a single card jumped out at the top. Extracting it, I offered it to her. “Put that in your purse for the night?”

The card was the Star. It symbolized hope, a good future, and peace. I couldn’t imagine a better outcome for Nora than what that card represented.

Smiling to myself, I exited the car, then jogged around to get her door. Offering my hand, I helped Nora up and then pulled her close against my side. She was right. I needed to put on my best act tonight. That meant I needed to seduce this woman in full sight of the entire coven.

Her heels were tall, making her only a few inches shorter than me. Her dress was skin-fucking-tight. When my hand slid over her hip, I couldn’t feel a panty line. Confused, I leaned in towards her ear.

“Please tell me you have something on under that?”

“Shapewear,” she promised. “Sorry, bud. Totally covered.”

“Good to know.”

And then we reached the door. Like always, the butler opened it, but he paused when his eyes landed on Nora.

“Sir?”

“My date,” I told him. “Kingsley’s expecting her.”

“And who should I tell him you’re here with?”

“Nora Whitaker,” I said. “Oh, and let him know that I appreciate Lucien’s suggestion?”

“Yes, sir,” the butler said before stepping back and letting us in.

“Oh. My. Gawd!” Nora breathed, letting her eyes go wide as she looked around. “This place is like a museum, Zane. You said it was nice, but...” She tried to pull away, staring up at the chandeliers.

“Baby,” I said around a laugh, “don’t embarrass me.” Catching her hand, I kept her from going too far.

Nora “allowed” me to pull her back, using the momentum to flop up against my chest. “I love this suit, Zane.” Then she sucked in a breath. “And you’re wearing my present?” Her fingers tapped the necklace to make it clear what she was talking about.

“Just for you,” I assured her. “Now let me introduce you to the rest of the founding families, hm?”

“Can we get a picture first?” she asked. “I think that painting is a real one!”

Well, it was definitely real. I wasn’t sure if it was by anyone famous enough to be known, but I was sure it’d be expensive. Still, I moved in front of it, leaned in, and Nora snapped a very trite selfie of us as a couple. I had a bad feeling that would get used against me later in life.

Then I escorted her to the sitting room. She hung on my arm, her head swiveling as we passed any and everything. Furniture, statues, or even alcoves became the most amazing thing *ever*, and the whole time she rattled on about how rich the Grimsons must be.

“And I’m almost as rich,” I reminded her just as we stepped into the room with the rest of the coven.

Conversation immediately crashed to a halt. All eyes turned to see the mundane woman at my side. A few, like Nancy Redmoon, glared at me without trying to hide their judgment. Others, like Dare, let their eyes run over Nora’s sexy body like they were thinking about stealing her away.



“Nora, these are the founding families,” I introduced. “Everyone, this is my girlfriend, Nora Whitaker.”

“Don’t you work at the coffee shop?” Mari Spellman asked.

“I do,” Nora mumbled. “I’m currently the manager. I’m hoping to use that to move into a career within the next few years.” Then she looked at me and smiled. “Maybe.”

“Maybe,” I agreed. “Or maybe you’ll be helping me run my business.” Then I guided her forward, right into the middle of the room.

Because the last thing I wanted was for the pair of us to look intimidated by their judgment. I would not be ashamed of the woman I “intended” to make my wife. She was hot, desperate, and slutty. That was how I needed to think about her. A good piece of ass to produce the magical little brood that would carry on my last name and family power.

“Is there dancing at these things?” she asked.

“No, baby. Dinner and conversation.”

She pouted, making it look very sexy. “Zane...”

“You said you wanted to come,” I reminded her.

“Yeah, but I wanted to see the house!”

So I sighed. “Okay. We’ll walk a bit before dinner’s served.”

“And maybe you can pose for me?” She gave me a look that had my blood moving downwards even though I knew this was an act. “Please?”

“You will have to make it up to me,” I taunted.

She merely licked those red lips. “Promise.”

And with that, we had our opening. Even better, the other members of the coven didn’t seem bothered at all when I led her back out of the room and up a random hall. No, they looked relieved. Too bad for them, I knew this mundane woman hanging on my arm was ten times the person any of them could ever hope to be.

I just didn't have a damned clue how we'd get into the room with the wild things.

# CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

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We headed up a hall. Nora made me pose over and over, giggling loudly enough that we had to be heard by the staff and guests. Next, she headed the other way, saying she couldn't believe the rugs. Those had more pictures taken of them.

Just when I was sure we'd have to take a break in order to make dinner, she shoved me against the wall, kissed the corner of my mouth - leaving her red lipstick behind - and then took off. I'd whispered to her which door led downstairs. When that was the one she ran to, telling me I should "catch her if I can," I wasn't surprised at all.

Instead, I cursed a blue streak. "Nora!" I hissed. "This is someone's home and you are embarrassing me!" But I followed.

Once we were on the other side of the door, however, we both ran. Time was short. We'd be missed if we were gone for too long. And then there was the big problem I still hadn't solved: the lock on the door.

"Where?" she asked once we were in the basement.

"Big door off to the right," I told her, pointing to make it clear which one I meant. "Nora, it's locked. I don't have the key."

She just looked at me and grinned. "No magic for that, hm?"

"Not with a spell on the fucking door," I hissed.

“Good thing Jayden planned ahead.” Then she trotted up to the door, her heels clicking a little too loudly, and began digging in her purse.

When she pulled out something that looked like a gun, I was confused. But this wasn't an actual weapon. It was silver, with a long metal piece on the end and a trigger. A little more digging around and she extracted a bent piece of metal.

“So, nerds are sexy,” she said as she shoved that bent piece of metal into the door. “They learn things like how to pick locks because their D&D character is a rogue.” And then she inserted the metal strip above the first piece and began clicking the trigger. It didn't take long before the lock clicked and she swiveled the attachments to open the door.

“All of a sudden I agree with you about nerds,” I assured her. “Let's just hope Syl's spells work.”

“Stay,” she said. “Keep an eye out. If anyone comes, I can act like I was putting myself together around the corner.”

“Okay,” I agreed, but I didn't like it.

I liked it even less when she waltzed inside and began talking to the caged wild things. “Xilen? Yatir? Your brother Gythiom sent me. I have food made by his forest witch.”

“The Maybrook?” the one who resembled a deer asked.

Nora chuckled. “Sorta. She's the Holt now, and she refuses to join this coven. We're all trying to break you out, but you need to be stronger.”

Reaching into her purse, she pulled out a Ziplock bag filled with thumbnail-sized pieces of hard candy. They were brown, so they didn't exactly look appealing, and yet when she opened the bag, both creatures began to sniff the air obviously.

“Hold out your hand?” she asked Yatir, the deer-like one. “And I've been told you might be angry and want to hurt me, but I'd really appreciate it if you don't.”

“You smell like Gythiom,” Yatir told her.

“He put a drop of blood on my dress,” she said. “Like proof that I'm not drinking him. I mean, not that it would

matter, since I don't have magic, but yeah." The whole time, she was filling not-deer's palm with pieces of candy. "Eat as much of that as you can, ok?"

"And me?" Xilen asked.

"The rest is for you," Nora assured him. "The spell is supposed to bring the power of the forest back to you in some part, if I understand it correctly."

"It's working!" Yatir said, which meant he must've eaten some, even if I couldn't see that from this angle.

So Nora filled Xilen's hand with as much as he could hold. "Zane's helping me too. He got me down here. I mean, he's a part of the coven, but he never wanted to be, so if you two could not kill him when we get you out of here, that'd be great."

"I have no interest in killing the Harkness," the wolf-like one, Xilen, said. His voice was rough, almost growly, but when I turned to look in the room again, his eyes were aimed right at me. "I know he healed me. I also know he drank of me."

"If he didn't, they'd kill him," Nora said. "Now eat that. I don't want to get caught."

The sound of crunching was loud. So was the rustling of plastic. I had a feeling that Nora was giving these two all the candy, even though a piece or two should've been enough. Still, I was getting twitchy, because the minutes were passing and we would be missed.

"Nora!" I hissed. "Time to go!"

"We'll be back tomorrow," Nora promised before the clack of her heels assured me she was heading back.

"Lock that too," I said.

She paused to reach around the inside, flicked something, and then pulled the door closed silently. Fuck, but I hoped Syl's spell kept the protection one from even detecting her. I hoped the candy would work to rejuvenate those things. I also really hoped we wouldn't get caught down here.

“We need to be seen,” I reminded her.

So she took off running, or as well as she could in her hot little dress and heels. Up the steps, around the corner - and then, just before we reached the doorway, I heard the handle turn.

Nora didn't even hesitate. She shoved my back against the wall, slammed her mouth over mine, and then pushed her tongue in as far as she could. The woman's leg hooked on the back of my knee, her hand pushed my wrist against the wall, and her entire body was crushed up against the length of mine.

So I decided to just go with it. I kissed her back. She moaned, my hand slid up her ribs, and my mouth destroyed her lipstick. I heard the door open. I also didn't care. I kept kissing, and she matched me, making it some kind of competition.

Her hips ground against mine. Her thigh was so fucking close to my dick. I couldn't get my hand on her breast, but only because she was pinning me against this wall in a way that was quite a bit hotter than I wanted to admit.

Then a man laughed. “Breathe, Zane.” It was Lucien.

I pushed Nora back just enough to be able to turn my head. “Sorry. Seems my girl thinks your dad's place is sexy.”

“Oh my god!” Nora gasped, digging in her purse for her phone again. “So I have pictures of all the art we passed, and I made Zane pose by it, because my Instagram followers will probably be looking at him, not the cool shit - ” She sucked in a breath. “Sorry. Stuff.”

I grunted as if she'd embarrassed me again. “Baby, what did I say about manners?”

“The founding families are cultured,” she mumbled. “I know, Zane, but I've never been anywhere this nice before!”

“Then let us spoil you with dinner,” Lucien said, offering her his arm. “Although you may want to touch up your lips first.” He smiled. “There's a powder room at the end of the hall, Miss Whitaker.”

“Oh, crap. Am I a mess, Zane?”

“A little bit,” I said as I pulled out my own pocket square and began to wipe at my face.

Lucien led her up the hall. I followed a pace behind, making a production of putting myself back together. But when Nora slipped into the powder room, I wasn't surprised at all when Lucien turned to face me.

“What was that?” he asked.

“She wanted to fuck in a broom closet,” I explained, keeping my voice down. “I told her that wasn't one, but she didn't care. She said we should do it right here, because that would be one hell of a story for her friends.”

“Uh huh...” Lucien nodded like he was trying to make sense of that.

“I did try to explain that my generation's women are nothing like yours,” I pointed out.

“But she's cute,” he countered. “She also seems to care more about your money than anything else.”

“And wants kids,” I said with a smile. “Trust me, I have no intention of limiting my options, but I have been listening. An office? A wife at home? This sounds like something I can work with so we're never in this situation again.”

“Good,” Lucien said. “Just make sure she drinks the wine, Zane?”

“Oh, she loves wine,” I promised. “I made sure to tell her just how expensive it is.”

Lucien chuckled just as Nora walked out of the powder room with her makeup once again perfect. “Sorry, gentlemen,” she said, claiming my arm. “This place just makes me feel like a pretty little princess. I may have gotten a little carried away.”

“Oh, I remember being young and in love,” Lucien assured her. “How long have you and Zane been together anyway?”

“Officially?” she asked. “Not long. I mean, we've known each other since high school, and we've gone out a few times,



but as his girlfriend?” She looked at me and smiled adoringly.

“I asked her out at the beginning of the month,” I said. “We clicked. I like to think that maybe she’s even serious about me.”

“Oh, I’ve had a crush on you for longer than you can imagine,” Nora promised.

And that was how we entered the dining hall. Almost everyone else was seated and doing their best to ignore us. Kingsley, however, was looking straight at Lucien with a brow raised.

“I see you tracked them down,” he said blandly.

“We had to make a detour for Miss Whitaker to retouch her lipstick,” Lucien explained. Then he gestured to the seat to his right. “Nora, would you like a glass of wine?”

“Yes, please. Thank you!” she breathed.

So Lucien lifted a hand and gestured. That got all the servants moving. Wine began making its way around. From the other side, meals were being handed out. Beside me, Nora was looking around with big eyes like she’d never seen this sort of thing before. Then again, she probably hadn’t.

“So,” Kingsley said, looking around the table. “Tomorrow night, we have one of our biggest events ever. As all of your...” His eyes moved to Nora. “...families know, it is our responsibility to take this seriously. So, make merry tonight. The wine is extra special to mark this occasion.”

Nancy huffed, making it clear she wasn’t impressed. “So, Zane, what convinced you to show off your new girlfriend *tonight*?”

“There’s been some concern about my line of the founding families,” I told her. “I just wanted to make it clear that I *am* dating, and I’m hoping that Nora might just be the girl for me.”

“Oh, you think so?” Nancy asked, glaring at me.

“As opposed to your...” I used my fork to count the line of men beside her. “Three? We all have to bring our partners in

eventually.”

And beside me, Nora was drinking the wine like some uncouth girl who worked in a coffee shop. She gulped at it, sucking back half the glass before setting it down again. Almost immediately, a server stepped in to top it up.

Nancy saw. She smiled. She also gave me one last warning look, which made me think she'd been told I was trying to take her spot in the coven. Well, let her wonder. Let her try to figure out the game I was playing, because none of these fools would see this one coming.

And when I lifted my own wine and sipped, I realized there was quite a bit of wild thing bitterness in it. Tomorrow was going to be dangerous. This entire coven would be fueled by more magical power than ever before.

I just had to figure out how I was supposed to hold that back. We'd fed the wild things. We knew where they were. All that was left was to stop the sacrifice.

Smiling as if I was having a good time, I looked over at Nora. “Is it all you hoped?”

“Thank you,” she told me. “I may not know which fork goes for what, Zane, but I promise I'm going to learn everything I have to.”

I nodded, knowing she wasn't talking about table manners. “You're doing good, baby. Next time will be even easier, right?”

Her eyes jumped up to meet mine. “I hope so.”

Yeah, we were definitely not talking about dinner. I was also starting to think I'd been wrong about including mundanes in our plan. It seemed Nora could teach me a thing or two about bullshitting others. She was actually the *perfect* date for this.

Except for the fact that the founding families now knew her name.

# CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

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SYLVIA

I sat on my couch firing off text messages to Erika, Beth, and Jayden. Reese was behind me, with one arm around my waist, his chest holding up my back, and his own phone in his other hand. Jackson lay sprawled out on the other sofa, holding his phone over his face as he added comments to the group chat.

**Sylvia:**

It's almost midnight. How long do these things usually last?

**Beth:**

You think we'd know? We're not even supposed to know they exist!

**Erika:**

Yeah, but if it's a dinner and drinking, then longer means it's going well, right?

**Jackson:**

Or Nora fucked up, they got busted, and shit's hitting the fan?

**Reese:**

Nora said she'd send a 911 text.

**Jayden:**

IF she gets a chance.

**Sylvia:**

Maybe those two headed back to Zane's to make out? Nora did look really good tonight.

**Jayden:**

She said she was wearing the red. I like that dress.

**Erika:**

You like anything she's in. You think she's pretty!

**Jayden:**

So? She is!

**Reese:**

Which still doesn't help any of us know if they're in shit.

**Beth:**

I'm going to assume no, just because I'm an optimist.

**Erika:**

Yeah, but this is the founding families.

**Jayden:**

Fuck 'em. Nora knows how to run.

**Jackson:**

Not sure if she can outrun magic.

**Sylvia:**

I put enough anti-magical stuff on her that she should have a chance.

And then my phone rang. I yelped, almost dropping it, but the name on the screen - Zane - had me swiping as quickly as I could.

“Zane?” I asked.

“Yeah, you’re on speaker,” he told me. “We just got back to my place.”

“They’re back,” I told the guys, and both immediately started typing. “Ok, I’m putting you on speaker, Zane.”

“Got some guys there, huh?” he asked just as his voice shifted from my ear to the speaker.

“So is everything ok?” Jackson asked.

“We’re good!” Nora called from the background. “I’m kinda drunk. Fuck, I drank so much wine. That shit is pretty good, though.”

“Your version,” Zane grumbled. “The non-magical get wine with the spell to prevent talking about our dinners. I had to drink more wild thing blood. I fucking feel like I’m hyped up on too much coffee.”

“So work a spell,” I told him. “One to improve our chances tomorrow.”

“With Nora - ” He paused to chuckle. “Right. Nora won’t care.”

“Kinda would be cool to see how you do your magic,” she said.

“Kinky,” Reese teased. “Sounds like you two are going to have a good night.”

“Well, that’s what we want the Grimsons to think,” Zane said. “So, Nora’s staying here tonight. In the guest room, so don’t you three start getting ideas.”

“He has the biggest apartment,” Nora said. “Oh, Syl? What spell do I need to badger him to work?”

“I have no idea,” I told her. “Something for screwing up their big spell? Delaying it? Making things work out?”

“I’m still not a good luck wix,” Zane grumbled. “The future is different from luck.”

“Yeah, but you can push for the outcome you want,” I reminded him. “I mean, you brought me here.”

The whole time, Jackson was typing on his own phone. “I’m telling the rest of the crew that you’re both good. Erika wants to know about the wild things.”

“We got all the candy to them,” Nora said. “Half for not-deer and half for not-wolf. They ate it, so now we just hope it makes them strong enough to bust them out. Oh!” She moved closer to the phone, her voice getting louder. “They were willing to talk to me, so Gyth’s blood worked. I explained to them that we’re going to try to bust them out, and they seemed okay with that. Civil even.”

“Those things aren’t going to be civil,” Zane warned. “They’re literally wild.”

“We just need them to be tolerable enough to get them back to the forest,” I assured him. “That’s it. Although it sounds like Erika, Jayden, and Beth all want to help.”

“Bad idea,” Zane said.

“I actually agree,” Nora told me. “The fewer people we have to sneak around, the less chance of us getting noticed. I think this is for us, although having them ‘on call’ for a pickup might not be a bad idea.”

“Relaying,” Jackson said.

But Reese had another question. “So the coven didn’t suspect anything?”

“Nope,” Nora giggled. “I mean, I took a shit-ton of pictures so I’ll be able to find my way back to the staircase, but they think I’m a stupid little slut who wants to have public sex.”

“Okay?” I asked, having a feeling there was a story there.

“We were in the stairwell that led to the basement,” Zane said. “On our way up after giving the wild things the candy. I also have to say that Nora with a lockpick is kinda badass.”

“Jayden thought it might be useful,” she explained.

Jackson groaned. “They’re still into that? I thought it was a teen phase!”

“Still have the gear and know how to use it,” Nora said. “But when we were almost out, Lucien was at the door, so I kinda shoved Zane against the wall and dry-humped him a bit.”

“Leaving lipstick all over me,” Zane said around a chuckle. “And that was enough for Lucien to decide she’s the real deal. Well, he also thinks she’s an idiot, I’m going to cheat on her, and women in my generation are difficult.”

“But he was nice to me all night at dinner,” Nora said. “Kept refilling my wine too, but I expected that. I fawned over him a bit, and how important he is in town, and then flirted with Zane a little too obviously.”

“Like some white trash gold digger,” Zane said. “She walked the line perfectly. Nancy Redmoon gave me death glares all night, but I think that’s because she knows I’m trying to replace her. Dare kept looking at Nora’s cleavage, and Finn went out of his way to be nice to her. So, yeah, I think we pulled this off.”

“And *boring!*” Nora said. “Wow, even knowing about magic and their double-talk, it was still boring. However, I can say that sunset is our go time tomorrow. What do I need to wear, Syl? Like sneaky clothes? Something boring?”

“Pockets,” I told her. “Cargo pants seem to work for me.”

“Running shoes,” Reese added.

“All the charms, jewelry, and everything else Syl made,” Jackson said.

“And I’m keeping my necklace, Syl. Hopefully that might buy us a little more time. Just know that once this ritual starts,



it's going to move fast. If you want to get Yatir out of there, there won't be time to dawdle with Xilen in the basement."

"Yeah," I breathed. "No pressure, right?"

"All the pressure," Zane corrected. "Syl, one of them might die. Xilen is the safest to save. If you have to abandon Yatir, then do. Don't risk something stupid, because the forest needs you as much as it needs these wild things!"

"I know," I promised. "But I'm hoping we can do both and take the coven down while we're at it. I'm really hoping the wild things will help, which might be enough for me to get you out."

"And we both know that isn't likely," he reminded me. "Now, I'm going to go have a long, hot shower, then crawl in bed and pass out."

"Magic first," Nora told him.

"I'm going to work a massive spell with this extra power, then do all of that," Zane corrected. "Alone. Without my annoying house guest."

"You need sleep too!" Nora told us. "Tomorrow's a big day, guys. Rest up, rejuvenate your magic, and whatever else you crazy wixen do. Night!"

"Night!" We all replied as the call ended.

Letting out a sigh, I leaned back and shoved my hair out of my face. "Okay, so they're fine. Why do I still feel so anxious?"

"Because we're not done," Reese pointed out. "Tomorrow is a big day, Syl. Make or break. It's exactly the kind of thing you should be anxious about."

"Yeah," I agreed.

"But speaking of that," Jackson said, glancing over at Reese. "I kinda wanted to ask you something, Syl."

"Okay?"

He opened his mouth, paused, and then shifted in his seat. Twice, he looked at Reese before fidgeting again, but neither

guy was saying anything. They were doing that silent conversation thing between them again.

“What?” I pressed.

“Well,” Reese finally said, “you remember how we didn’t move in a while back? We just sorta stayed here to help out?”

“Yeah?” I was still confused.

Jackson breathed out a little nervous laugh. “I was wondering if us moving in is ever going to be in the cards.”

“You’d want to move in here?” I asked, looking between them. “But my place is small and I barely even get internet!”

“And we’re always here,” Reese reminded me. “The bathroom is basically done. We’re just fucking around to drag it out now so we have an excuse to keep coming over.”

“But if we moved in,” Jackson told me, “we could spend our nights here and do our job during the day. And I like it here.”

“Plus, you need to be in the forest,” Reese added. “And so does Fern, who’s now my familiar.”

“Sprig asked me,” Jackson said. “I told him I’d decide after the wild things are free. Reese said that’s safer.”

“So we have skunky reasons to stay too,” Reese said. “But mostly we just like this thing with all three of us. Hell, even when we go home, we always end up talking about you.”

“And there is another bedroom,” Jackson said. “So if you want alone time, you can kick us out.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” I begged. “Guys, when are you wanting to move in?”

And once again, they fell silent. That was their nerves, and if I was honest, I *liked* that they got nervous about this sort of thing. They didn’t assume I would need them here. They hoped, and they asked, but they didn’t push their way in. They made me feel like I was still in control somehow.

“We figured we’d move in when you’re ready,” Jackson finally said. “See, Jayden’s moving back to Summerpoint.

They asked about renting a room from me. Nora's apartment lease is about to be up. She's been talking about rooming with Jayden. So if Reese and I are here, I can lease my house to them. Mom will still have someone around to take care of her, and we'll still have the shop for all the tools we don't use regularly."

"And we kinda thought that maybe after this whole ordeal with the wild things, it might be a good time," Reese said.

"So, like, this weekend?" I asked, looking between them.

"I mean, since we're not really moving furniture," Jackson said, "it's entirely up to you."

"I like this weekend," I decided, feeling my lips split into a grin. "And yes! I've missed you both not being here all the time. Those few weeks spoiled me, so I'd love to have you both living here. I just didn't think you'd want to be stuck in the forest with me!"

"I kinda like the forest now," Reese said.

"It's always been one of my favorite places," Jackson agreed. "So yeah. I think this weekend will be perfect."

"You'll need places for your clothes, though," I warned them. "Dressers, closet space. I mean, it's not a big house."

"We'll figure it out," Jackson promised. "But it's a big upgrade from a drawer to a key. You sure about this, Syl?"

"I am," I promised. "I love both of you. I feel so comfortable with both of you. And, as much as I never thought I'd say this, I actually need both of you. Not because I can't do it on my own, but because you two make me happy. This, all of this, makes me happy. So yeah, I'd love to take this thing of ours to the next step."

"Good," Reese said, leaning forward to kiss the side of my neck. "Because we feel the same about you. But for tonight, my witch, you need to rest. I can think of one very good way to do that."

"I'll start the bubble bath," Jackson said before pushing to his feet. "Then a massage. Then we're going to make sure you

get a good seven hours of sleep.”

“Because this is how you should be treated,” Reese told me. “We’re your familiars, and we are going to pamper you completely.”

I let him help me to my feet. “I think I can definitely get used to this, but I’m telling you, sleep isn’t going to be easy. I’m like a kid before Christmas. My mind is going a million miles an hour.”

“I have a few tricks,” Reese promised. “Jackson has more. You will sleep, Syl. And tomorrow, we will win. Everything else can wait until after that.”

# CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

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The next morning, I got started early. No, not because there was that much to do, but simply because I was so anxious, I couldn't sleep. For my entire life, I'd tried to be the good girl. I'd done everything possible to make people around me happy. I'd bent over backwards to be pleasing and polite.

And now I was about to start a war.

For a woman who hated confrontation, this was so far from my normal that it made me feel like I wanted to hurl. Although it was different when someone else was being hurt. I could ignore it when someone pissed me off or hurt my feelings. I could even pick myself up if the pain was physical. But the wild things' *lives* were at stake.

That took this to a whole new level of necessary. So, what I needed to do was prepare for battle. I was torn between carrying too much and slowing us down, or not having enough when we needed it. Hoping to find a happy spot in the middle, I decided my old college backpack could work. I also had a canvas shopping bag. Combined, that meant Jackson and Reese would be able to carry spells. And on impulse, I told Nora to bring a bag she could run with.

I was in the process of rummaging through my closet for that backpack when the trees began to whisper. *Zane is here. He is sad.*

Sad? What?

But I kept looking for the backpack, pausing only to warn Lupe, “Don’t hit him when he comes in, okay?”

*I wave now, Lupe assured me. It makes you happier.*

“You can slap people who aren’t guests,” I said. “But with the trees letting us know who’s here, you aren’t going to get a lot of chances to be an attack cactus.”

*It’s okay, Lupe assured me. I think I like being a listening cactus more. I’m glad the guys finally asked about moving in. They’ve wanted to for a while.*

“Yeah, I’m kinda happy about that too,” I told him just as the front door opened.

*Zane is here!* the ivy called out in its multifaceted voice.

“Thanks, ivy!” I called back. “And thanks, house.”

“Yeah. Thanks, house,” Zane said as he walked in and closed the door behind him. “And you are just the witch I wanted to see.”

“Okay?” I almost stood, but my eye landed on a black strap that had to be it. Pulling out the aged backpack, I then pushed to my feet and turned to face him. “Is there already a problem?”

“Kinda,” he admitted. “Look, when you came up with this idea, there were a few holes. I was sure it couldn’t work, but then Nora just popped out a damned lock pick gun!”

“Yeah, that was Jayden’s idea,” I said, waving for him to follow me down to the cellar. “The guys are still passed out.”

“Gotcha.”

Together, we made our way downstairs, and I headed right for the freezer. It didn’t matter who had what bag. They were going to need all of these spells, right? If we spread it out, that shouldn’t slow us down too bad.

“What are you doing?” Zane asked.

“Weapons,” I told him. “These things work when thrown - by anyone.”

His eyes widened, and then he began to nod. “Yeah, okay. Then I guess you’re a lot more prepared than I expected.” He laughed once. “Look, I came to talk you out of letting Jack and Reese go.”

“Kinda need them,” I countered. “Xilen’s going to be weak. Nora and I won’t be strong enough if he has to be carried.”

“And Nora,” he added. “Syl, leave the normies out of this. It’s not their fight.”

“It kinda is,” I shot back. “See, that’s the part you don’t get. For your entire life, you’ve been sheltered from this because you’re in the coven. No one talks to you about it. You never heard them whispering or guessing about what really happened. They knew better, because *you* were part of the problem.”

“Okay, I can see that,” he relented.

“But you’re not the one who had to worry about being disappeared or brain-damaged for a shitty haircut. You’re not the one who had to defend against political, financial, and magical threats. Zane, this *is* the town’s problem, and it always has been. You’ve just convinced yourself they’re all morons because they can’t throw tarot cards around!”

“Well, technically they can,” he pointed out. “Won’t have the same effect, but you know what I mean.”

I just sighed. “Zane...”

He lifted a hand, stopping me there. “Syl, I hear you. I believe you. Hell, I’ve seen it in action here! Beth, Erika, Jayden, and Nora helping you with magic? That shouldn’t work! Don’t you get that? You’ve changed all the rules I’ve been taught, and then you make it look amazing in the process.”

“Because it is,” I assured him. “Magic doesn’t have to be bad, Zane. There’s no reason we can’t be the superheroes, right? What if, instead of taking all the time, wixen decided to use their power to give?”



“And what exactly would someone like Finn Undergrove give?” he asked. “The guy talks to the dead.”

I simply lifted a brow. “So you’re saying you wouldn’t want to talk to your dad?”

His entire body rocked in place as that idea hit him. “Fuck,” he breathed.

I nodded. “Why does it have to be a secret, Zane? There’s a spell to remove bigotry, so the people here aren’t scared of us.” I laughed. “And trust me, that’s freaky as shit in a way.”

“How so?”

I just gestured to my face. “Do you know how many times I’ve been somewhere and gotten *no* microaggressions? Never - until I got here. Now do you see why I like Summerpoint so much? Why I want to protect this place? Why I think magic might just be a good thing?”

“Yeah, but in order to do that, we have to save Yatir too,” he said. “And Syl, that’s one of those little things I didn’t think all the way through.”

“What do you mean?”

He pulled in a breath, then stepped closer as he let it out. “The coven will head to the pasture. There will be a bit of chit-chat and posturing. There always is. Kingsley will call the meeting to order, we will all take our places on the pre-made pentagram, and then the ritual will start.”

“Okay?” I still wasn’t following.

“And in that fifteen, maybe twenty minutes, you need to get inside the mansion, down to the basement, break out Xilen, and then cause a distraction so I can get Yatir out.”

“Shit,” I breathed as I saw what he was saying. “There’s not enough time.”

“Right. There’s also too much distance. Plus, the real problem here is that in order to stop Yatir’s sacrifice, you, Sylvia, have to risk your life, and that’s a bad fucking idea.”

“No,” I decided. “Zane, it’s no different than when all of you came here to attack me.”

“Except it’s not your forest,” he pointed out. “That’s Grimson land. It won’t fuel you.”

“But I didn’t have the forest fueling me the first time,” I countered. “I also made all of these.” I gestured to the chest freezer. “I’m pretty sure they’d make a bit of a dent in the coven.”

“What spells?” he asked.

I smiled. “I have a few magic-sucking. I’ve got some silence spells. There’s a shit-ton of pain and blurred vision stuff, just because that takes less power. Um, we’ve got some shields in the green ones, and some fog and hiding stuff in the blue ones.”

He nodded. “Okay. So how long do you think this is going to take?”

“I dunno,” I admitted. “You’re the one who was down there.”

“Half an hour,” he guessed. “Nora and I got down there and back in fifteen minutes. It’ll probably take another fifteen to get Xilen out. Take a crowbar or something to break the lock.”

“Lock spell,” I said, moving to my spices.

But Zane caught my arm. “No, you have strong men. It’s just a cage. Use them, Syl. Save your magic for when it matters.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “What kind of lock?”

“Padlock,” he said. “Seriously, these things are in dog kennels. I mean, they’re really stout ones, like something you’d see at a zoo, and the padlocks are the good kind, but that’s all it is.”

Pushing out a breath, I scrubbed at my face. “Then Nora can get Xilen out, right? I mean, once we have him outside, he should be able to run?”

“I have no clue,” Zane admitted.

Which made me groan. “How far away is the ritual from the back of the house?”

“Sorta within sight,” he said. “I mean, they have bushes and shit that block the first floor, but someone on the second-floor balcony could watch without binoculars.”

“Good to know,” I agreed before starting to pack more jars into the backpack. “Zane? I’m kinda freaking out a bit. I’ve never done anything like this before. Shit, I barely even speed!”

He clasped my shoulder and moved closer behind my back. “But you have, Syl. You did this when we came to get your wild thing. You fucked us up - badly.”

I chuckled once. “I kinda did, huh?”

“You did,” he promised. “Then you somehow made everything better. And trust me, when you showed up on my doorstep, I did not think this was going to happen.”

“Me either,” I admitted, turning to face him. “Reese said Jackson was into you. He asked me how I’d feel if you two started dating again, and all I could think about was you trying to touch my hair after I said no.”

He ducked his head. “Yeah, that was for the people watching.”

“I know that now,” I admitted. “Back then, I just thought you were a prick.”

“Kinda am.”

But I grabbed his arm, making him look at me. “You kinda aren’t. You risked everything to train me, Zane. You’re also good to them.”

“Them?”

“Reese and Jackson,” I clarified. “I mean, I don’t know what’s up with you and Reese, but it seems to be friendly. If it’s more, well, I have a feeling Jackson wouldn’t mind at all.”

“And now I’m fucking blushing,” Zane grumbled as he turned away. “Shit. Um, I don’t think Reese is into me. Well, I don’t really think Reese is into a lot of guys.”

“He said it’s a trust thing.”

Zane nodded. “I can see that. He also probably thinks I’m a top. Most do.” Then he shoved a hand over his mouth. “I’m so not.”

“Okay, that’s cute,” I told him.

He tossed his hands in the air. “Damn it, Syl. How much harder are you going to make this, huh?”

“What this?”

He gestured to the backpack, the freezer, and all the spices. “This. We’re about to do the dumbest fucking thing I can think of, I have to figure out how to slow down Kingsley from starting this thing so you can get there, and you’re just being so damned sweet. All I’m going to be doing is worrying about you.”

“I’m not that sweet,” I assured him.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he said. “You are sweet. You’re just not stupid. A lot of people confuse the two, but knowing your worth isn’t the same as being a bitch.”

“Yeah. Thanks.” But an idea popped into my head. “Zane? What if you take the book?”

“Margie’s spellbook?”

I nodded. “Say you had the chance.”

“That’s not going to slow him down enough.”

I groaned - then realized that wasn’t the only book. “The grimoire,” I breathed.

“What?”

“We found this book,” I explained. “It’s like the Voynich manuscript. It’s written in a language I’ve never seen anywhere else, has pictures of plants and people all over it,

and it's old. Gyth says it's the contract between the wild things and the coven."

"Holy shit," Zane breathed. "No, I'm not giving them that."

"But what if you have a picture from it?" I asked. "Something to say I'm hiding a second book?"

Which made him smile. "Yeah, that might just buy you a good ten minutes. Let's see where it is."

He turned for the stairs. I moved to follow, but before he even reached the corner, Zane paused.

"Fuck it," he breathed, turning around just to storm back into my face.

His hands clasped both sides of my jaw. His body moved me until my back was against the wall. Then his mouth followed. Zane Harkness kissed me hard, almost desperately, and I forgot to resist.

My hands hit his chest, finding the flat planes of his muscles under his shirt. His hips pressed against mine, revealing a bulge that was quickly getting harder. And our mouths? They moved.

Tongues tangled, lips caressed, and our breath came out panting. Each time I exhaled, he drank it in. Every time he moaned, I swallowed the sound. Every bit of fear, anxiety, and insecurity fueled the passion between us, and we burned it out on each others' lips.

Until he finally pulled back and looked deep into my eyes. "I've wanted to do that for a long time, but I didn't want to make problems. Now, I have nothing left to lose."

Then he turned and jogged up the stairs, leaving me standing there, touching my kiss-bruised lips.

# CHAPTER SIXTY

---

The night wasn't exactly dark. With the full moon filling the sky, it felt like we had a spotlight on us as Jackson parked his truck outside the Grimsons' property. I looked over my friends, making sure everyone had their beads on, bags full, and all the supplies we might need.

It was go time.

"Right up to the front door like we're supposed to be here," Nora said. "Zane said all the staff should be outside, but there's a lot of people working here."

"And I don't know if they'll let us in," Reese said.

"If not, then what?" I asked.

"Then we wing it," Jackson said as we marched up the long and arching driveway.

In the distance, I could hear voices. That convinced me everyone was already outside, but the sun had just dropped below the horizon, so they shouldn't have started yet. Never mind the distractions I'd given Zane to keep Kingsley entertained for even longer.

"Do we even try to knock?" Nora asked as we reached the front door.

Reese grabbed the handle and turned it, saying, "No." But the knob didn't turn.

It was locked. Fuck!

“Guess that smell-good thing didn’t work,” Nora muttered as she dug into her bag. “I’m kinda starting to feel like a pro at this, you know.”

“I’m just glad you know how to do that,” I told her, keeping my voice down.

She inserted a metal pick of sorts, then the gun-looking thing, and began to pull the trigger. It popped a few times, but eventually she managed to turn her metal pick - and the door unlocked.

“Score,” Jackson whispered.

Then Nora gently opened the door, pushing it only a crack. The four of us stood there for a moment, listening. I paused and looked at us, aware we didn’t exactly look like thieves. The guys were in jeans and t-shirts. Nora and I were in tees and cargo pants. Maybe, if we got caught, I could say I was here for the Grimsons?

I wasn’t sure, but with the silence on the other side, the coast seemed clear. Not surprisingly, it was Jackson who went in first. Nora followed, with me behind her, and Reese brought up the rear. My heart was pounding, though.

Never in my life would I have imagined breaking into someone’s house, let alone a mansion! This was insane. Hell, even magic felt a little more realistic than this! I made web pages and helped sell flowers! I was not really the high-risk kind of person.

But this was for something bigger than me. So, with Nora pointing out directions, we walked through the house like we belonged there. My eyes kept scanning the ceiling for cameras or other security devices, but there didn’t seem to be anything like that. Ugly paintings in gold frames, marble sculptures that were a bit too cliché, and other forms of art, sure. Security? Nonexistent.

Then again, that made a strange sort of sense. Cameras meant proof. The wine kept people from *talking* about what happened here. Copying a video and showing it? I was pretty



sure the wine wouldn't prevent such a thing. So if there was no proof, then there could be no exposure of magic.

Yeah, I hoped that would work out in my favor.

The mansion was huge. We walked past at least four rooms before Nora found the hall she wanted. Checking the pictures on her phone, she judged against the art on the walls, deciding where to turn based on which side of the painting Zane was standing.

I had to admit, I was a little impressed with her spy skills. Zane had mentioned she was good at this, but holy shit. Without Nora, there was no way this would work!

Soon enough, we found the right doorway. Behind that, the stairs led downwards. This time, I moved ahead of Nora, just in case one of the Grimsons was still down here. Jackson refused to let me push ahead of him, though. When I looked like I was about to complain, he held a finger to his lips, pointing out that sounds carried in this stone hellscape.

When we finally reached the bottom, Nora pointed straight ahead, then to the right. I was confused at first, but as we walked, I realized that really was a recessed door over there. I also couldn't hear a single thing. No voices, no steps besides ours, and no growling of any forest monsters.

"Ok," I whispered as we reached the door. "Zane said there's a protection spell on this."

"The necklace got me through last time," Nora said. "But he waited here. Maybe the spell alerts if a wixen walks through?"

"No idea," I said. "Should I wait or help you break that thing out?"

Jackson simply pulled out a short crowbar from his canvas bag of spell jars. "I think I got this," he promised. "You stay here."

"Keep watch for anyone coming," Nora said as she pulled out her lock picking tools again.

This was creepy. First, because we were in someone else's place without permission. Second, because we were breaking and entering. Third? Yeah, it just felt like something that should be in a movie, not real life. But when the door clicked and swung open, Jackson, Nora, and Reese hurried inside.

"You came!"

The voice was rough and deep. Not quite as deep as Gyth's, but definitely not the sound a human would make. That had to be Xilen, the not-wolf.

"Yeah, we're going to get you out," Nora told him. "This is Jackson. That's Reese. Sylvia is guarding the door, and she's a witch."

"The Maybrook?" Xilen asked.

"The Holt," Reese told him. "The forest accepted her and is now the Holt Forest. You've been down here a while."

"Years," Xilen said.

Then Jackson yelped and started cursing. "Fuck. There's a spell on the lock. It just zapped the hell out of me."

"Fuck," Reese groaned. "Okay, let me try?"

"It hurts," Jackson warned.

"And we gotta get that thing out of there," Nora said. "C'mon, guys. Can you push through it?"

"Yah!" Reese gasped. "Shit. That's not going to work. We're going to need to do something else."

"What's wrong?" I asked, leaning so I could see them.

The trio was standing around a very large metal cage. The thing inside was covered in blackish hair, just like Zane had said. The problem was that the lock on the door was still in one piece.

"Nora, can you pick that?" I asked.

"Maybe?" she said, reaching down to grab the lock.

"What the fuck?" Jackson asked. "I touched it and it shocked the shit out of me."

“I got it through the crowbar,” Reese said.

“Then give me the damned crowbar!” Nora demanded.

I checked the hall quickly, then leaned so I could watch. Taking the crowbar from Reese’s hands, Nora put it into the lock, then heaved her entire weight against it. Nothing happened. Not surprising, since locks weren’t exactly easy to break that way, but she wasn’t about to give up.

Nora shoved again, then again. Finally, Jackson heaved his shoulder into her body, and the sound of metal cracking could be heard.

“It’s open,” Reese said.

“And it didn’t shock me if I’m only touching her,” Jackson said.

“Okay, get him out,” I hissed. “Zane isn’t sure how long he’s going to be able to delay the ritual out there, and Yatir is going to be sacrificed!”

“Nora, pull the lock,” Jackson said.

“Working on it!” she snapped before I heard metal hitting the ground.

Glancing back, I saw them swing open a door on the long side of the cage. Xilen almost fell out of it. Both Jackson and Reese lunged forward to grab him, offering the wild thing as much help as he’d take. And yet, the beast simply lay there for a moment.

Slowly, he stretched out his hind leg. Then the other. Next, he rolled onto his stomach and then pushed himself up. Not onto two feet, though. Evidently, Xilen really was not-wolf. The wild thing had obvious hands, a chest like a human, and still walked on four legs like a wolf.

“Need help?” Reese asked.

“It has been long since I have been able to walk,” Xilen replied. “The body will remember.”

“Yeah, and stairs are going to suck,” Nora said as she headed back towards me. “Syl, can you tell if the magical

thing is going off?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I can’t feel anything.”

“Oh.” And she moved to my side.

Jackson was only a step behind her, but he slammed into an invisible wall, and hard. That gave Reese the chance to stop, but Xilen’s head jumped up and the wild thing’s eyes flared.

“What the fuck?” Jackson asked as he reached out, pressing his hand against the barrier.

And I could see it. His palm flattened like he was pushing on glass. From my side, there was nothing between us, and yet his body still reacting like there was.

Carefully, Xilen reached a hand forward. So did Reese. Both of them stopped at the same place, proving this wasn’t some elaborate joke. Not that I could think of why they’d do that, but something had them locked inside the doorway. The barrier was right at the threshold.

“Shit,” I breathed. “It’s like a salt line.”

“But there’s no salt,” Reese pointed out.

“No, but Nora isn’t magical. She crossed just fine. It’s you three.”

“I’m not exactly magical,” Jackson reminded me.

“Familiars are magical,” Xilen said. “You are bound to the witch. You cannot cross salt or spells that hold things such as us in.”

“Yeah, fuck that,” I grumbled, reaching for the jars in my pockets. “Xilen, tell me what you can about this spell?”

“It is a protection spell,” he said. “It is made to hold unwanted things in place. The magic is defensive, created by a small ritual.”

“What do you three feel when you touch it?” I pressed.

“Like a wall,” Reese said. “No pain or shocking like the lock. Just a solid surface between us.”

I nodded and began picking at the wax on one of my blue jars. “Nora, do you have one of those silence jars?”

“Yep, got a few,” she said, pulling out a green one. “Need me to open it?”

“Yeah,” I said before pouring the spices in my blue jar into my palm. What didn’t fit, I dumped onto the floor. “Add the spices to my hand?” I begged.

“Okay...” she sounded confused.

“Red pepper for impact,” I said. “Sugar for not making a scene. Flour to make it stick, and salt to make it burn through. Mint for effectiveness, and nutmeg for power.” I did my best to mix all the listed spices in my hand and then pour them back in my candy jar.

It wasn’t pretty, and half of it spilled on the floor, but enough got in there. Sadly, I didn’t have any wax to seal this properly, but I already knew that didn’t matter. My magic-sucking spell hadn’t had any.

So, closing my eyes, I pushed all of my intention into the candy jar I was holding and imagined the wall between us disintegrating. This protection spell was no match for my magic. It would not keep my lovers from me. It also wouldn’t hold the source of magic hostage. My magic was stronger. My magic would easily destroy this paltry mess.

“So let it be,” I whispered, and then I threw the jar right at the ground where the barrier seemed to be. “Try it!”

Jackson pushed his hand, and it went right through. “Go,” he said, pushing Xilen and Reese before him. “We don’t know how long that will open it or if the Grimsons will know.”

“And it’s time to get out of here,” I told the group. “Guys, help Xilen. Stairs are going to suck. Nora, lead!”

Nora immediately rushed ahead, jogging only fast enough to show us all which way to go. Xilen was staggering, but it seemed like the movement was getting easier the more he did it. Jackson and Reese hovered beside him, giving him something to brace against as he needed it.

And yeah, the stairs did suck. Xilen couldn't climb nearly as fast as he could walk, so the guys reached down and draped the wild thing's arms over their shoulders. Carrying him like a man, they hurried up the stairs right behind me.

"Sorry," Reese kept saying. "We just want to get you out of here."

"I need outside," Xilen said. "Outside will make me stronger."

"That's where we're trying to go," Jackson assured him.

At the top of the stairs, Nora cracked the door, checking the hall, and then waved that it was safe to go. The four of us - now five with the wild thing - didn't even slow down. The house was quiet. So far, things seemed to be working perfectly. All we had to do was make it back to the front door and -

We reached the end of the hall and almost turned into the chest of a woman. She was dressed in the suit-like attire of all the Grimson servants, which meant we were busted.

"Shit," Nora breathed, jumping to the side.

I grabbed a jar from my left pocket and threw it at her feet just as the woman opened her mouth. Jackson and Reese barreled up behind me with Xilen braced between them. For a moment, the woman stood there silently with her mouth open, and then she shoved both of her hands over it, but her eyes were locked on the monster the guys were holding.

"Fastest way to get outside?" Jackson demanded.

Terrified, the woman pointed behind us. Her hand bobbed. Her fingers trembled, but it seemed my silence spell worked just as well on humans as on wixen!

"That will wear off," I told her. "We just need to get this thing back to the forest."

She nodded, but kept backing away.

"Do not tell the Grimsons," I snapped at her. "If you do, I will make sure you never speak again."

She just nodded and pointed again. Hoping she was right, we headed that way.

# CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

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“Mr. Grimson!” I called out when Kingsley moved away from Nancy Redmoon and looked like he was about to start this mess.

“Ah, Zane,” he replied, smiling at me.

“Sir...” I headed towards him. “Sylvia called me this morning. She said that with today being the full moon, she wanted to do a cleansing spell, but didn’t know of any. She said something about burning sage being all she’d ever heard about.”

Kingsley scoffed. “Which we all know is bullshit. That’s a Native American thing, not a wixen thing.”

“Right, which I told her,” I said. “But since she wanted me to come over...” With a smile, I lifted the book I was holding. “I thought you might want to give this to Lucien.”

“Is that Margie’s spellbook?” he asked.

“It is,” I said proudly. “She had it sitting on her reading nook cushion, so I asked about it.”

“And when she realizes it’s missing?” he asked.

Which made me smile deviously. “Well, you see... Sylvia was saying that none of those spells work for her. Most of it’s Margie’s diary. She was complaining about it, and I asked if I could read it to see if maybe Margie had hidden things in the words. In other words, Sylvia won’t miss it for days. She actually let me take it.” Then I held up a hand. “But I also found something else.”

“Oh?” Kingsley tucked the book under his arm almost absentmindedly.

So I pulled out my phone and found the pictures of that strange grimoire Syl had. “This was tucked away in the bookshelf. I’d never noticed it before, but I’m pretty sure it’s not just some fantasy thing.”

Kingsley nearly snatched my phone out of my hand. “You saw this?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“What did it look like?”

“Um, a leather cover. Maybe red. A reddish brown, at any rate. Like oxblood? The cover was weird, though. It had a symbol, but not one I know, and no words on it. Inside, it was nothing but that language.”

“Can you get your hands on it?” he demanded.

“Probably, why?”

I had never seen this man so intense about anything. Normally, he waved it off or tried to make things look like they were his idea in the first place. With this, however, he was damned near drooling to see it.

“That,” Kingsley told me, “is the contract of our magic. It’s what gives us power - and what we can use to get more.”

“Oh.” I nodded. “Well, once Lucien is put in as the Blackwood, I won’t need to spend any more time with the witch, right?”

Kingsley’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Because if I take that book and Margie’s spellbook, I certainly won’t be welcome back,” I pointed out. “I’m just making sure we cover all bases before making our final play.”

“Tonight is our final play,” he assured me. “This spellbook?” And he patted the leather under his arm. “It will help Lucien more than he wants to admit. But that? The grimoire?”

“So that’s a big fucking deal,” I said. “The kind of big deal that makes a wix like me a little important to you?”

“Don’t you dare threaten me, boy,” Kingsley growled.

Yeah, but my real goal was simply to delay all of this. To do that, I was pretty much willing to push as far as I could.

“I’m just saying that I’ve done everything you’ve asked, Kingsley. Everything, including sucking up to that witch. I’ve been dating that bimbo, Nora. You keep asking and asking, wanting me to take the risks, so when do I get to see the rewards?”

“You want to outrank Nancy Redmoon?” he asked. “Done. I’ll put you in beside Lucien tonight.”

“That’s a start,” I said. “But marriage? Stealing the spellbook? And now you want me to get my hands on another? One that seems *very* important to you? What else do I get?”

“What do you want?” he snarled.

“Power,” I told him. “I want you to help me get the power to do real magic.”

“Get the grimoire, and I will,” he tried.

I just shook my head. “No. I’ll get the grimoire, and I’ll hold on to it until you give me what I want.”

“Zane...” Kingsley grumbled. “Boy, you barely understand the things you’re trying to do. You’re so young. Great power takes decades of work before you can handle it.”

“I have time,” I assured him. “So do you. Besides, if I have something you want, I think my place is a little more secure in this coven, no?”

“*I want that book!*” Kingsley snarled, completely losing his temper.

“And I want my power,” I said. “Since I was inducted, you’ve been promising all of us more power than we could imagine. Well, I’m still waiting. Maybe it’s time to start delivering?”

“What do you think we’re doing here tonight?” he asked. “Putting Lucien in for the missing bloodline will return us to our former power.”

“It’ll return *you* to your former power,” I countered. “You haven’t said what it will do for me yet.”

“And that power fuels the entire coven,” he said. “It’s why we’re the strongest coven in North America. Wixen dream of being invited to Summerpoint for that reason. No one else has protection from their local citizens the way we do. What more do you want?”

“Power,” I said again. “My own power. I want to be respected in town, be able to manipulate events to my will, and to not face repercussions when I decide to take matters into my own hands.” I murmured. “You know, like you’ve always been able to do.”

“Then we’ll set that up,” he said. “But we need to start this ritual before the moon sets, Zane. So this discussion will have to wait a while.”

The man turned and walked away from me, but that had been a nice little delay. Not enough of one, though. Unable to help myself, I glanced back towards the mansion, wondering if Syl was having any luck in there. If she could just get the first wild thing free, then tonight would be a success.

At least that was what I tried to tell myself - but seeing the steel cage being rolled into the middle of the massive pentagram on the ground didn’t feel right. Yatir. That was his name. He looked like he should’ve been a deer, and his antlers had been crammed in there so well that the creature couldn’t even turn its head.

It still surged, struggling to stop what it knew was coming. It could talk. I had a feeling it didn’t normally, but I’d heard it speak to Nora. Like Gyth, its voice was too deep. Too unnatural to be human. It also sounded so much like a person.

Dare and Finn put the creature in the middle of the pentagram. Kingsley moved to stand beside it. Then a bell began to toll. It was a hand-held thing, hit with a heavy stick,

but it called us all to position. I decided this was one more chance for me to slow things down.

Lucien, as the target of tonight's magic, took the point at the top of the star, clanking on the bell in a steady rhythm. I moved to his right, taking the second point. Nancy usually stood here, but Kingsley had just said he'd give me a promotion, and he hadn't stopped to tell her that.

Sure enough, Nancy stormed into my face. "What do you think you're doing? This is my spot."

"Kingsley said it's mine now," I told her. "Move down."

"No." She crossed her arms and glared at me.

The whole time, Lucien continued banging on the bell, making it ring out.

"If you don't take the next spot," I told Nancy, "someone else will."

So she shouldered me, doing her best to take the point I was on. "Move, Zane. Your ambitions are getting out of control now."

"Enough!" Kingsley snapped. "Nancy, take Lucien's left."

"The right is *my* spot," she shot back.

"Not tonight," Kingsley told her. "Zane made this possible, so he gets to stand where he wants."

"And I've done more than that fortune teller ever will," Nancy growled.

"The left," Kingsley said, making it clear he wouldn't budge.

Fuck, this was happening too fast. Desperately, I looked over at the cage, only to find Yatir looking back. His amber eye was locked on me, filled with fear. Yeah, I didn't blame him. Laid out in front of Kingsley were the sacrificial tools he'd need, including a very impressive golden blade.

With the wild thing being unable to turn its head, I had a feeling it wouldn't be able to duck away from that knife before its throat was cut. Or maybe its heart was stabbed. I honestly

had no idea how Kingsley intended to kill this thing, but I did know that I had to stop it.

And then Dare, being the elemental wix in our group, began to light the wood piles placed between each member of the coven. Five bundles, each intended to give light for our ritual and power for the taking.

As subtly as I could, I reached into my pocket for the first of many hexes I'd made for tonight. By feel, I fumbled through them, identifying each by the shape of the vial I'd put it in. There, round. Pulling that out, I dropped it onto the ground and then stepped on it.

A little thing, just a desiccated tadpole, but it would bring dampness. It would hinder fire. I'd designed the hex long ago as a fire repellent, and as Dare stared intently at the first pile of wood, I pushed my magic into the hex, lending it strength.

“What is taking so long?” Kingsley demanded.

“Wood's wet,” Dare explained. “I'm having to dry it first. Your people didn't get cured wood.”

Kingsley sighed as if unimpressed. “Get on with it!”

Finally, the first pyre lit, but the second wasn't any easier. Slowly, this mess was dragging out. Each second meant Yatir had a better chance of surviving. Thinking that, I looked at the creature again just in time to see its arm slip through the bars and reach down for the grass.

Because we were outside! Nature was what gave them power! But Yatir saw me and froze. As subtly as I could, I nodded, making it clear I wasn't about to stop it. Immediately, the wild thing grabbed an entire handful of grass and pulled it back into the cage.

*C'mon, Syl, I thought. We're running out of time here!*

And the pyre beside me burst into flames. Two down, three to go. I swore I could hear a clock ticking in my head, making me overly aware of each second slipping past, but what else could I do to slow this down?

There was no way Lucien deserved to be the head of a bloodline. The man didn't deserve the magic he had. This *coven* didn't deserve what it had taken, because we'd done it the wrong way. We'd corrupted the magic, and that meant I owed it to Sylvia, the wild things, and the entire forest to make sure Yatir got free.

No matter what that price was.

But too soon, the fires were all lit. The wixen were in place. Lifting his hands to the sky, Kingsley began to call forth the magic and begin the ritual, and I still wasn't ready. I had to do something else, but how? There were too many people looking, and if I got caught, there would be no going back.

Then again, there wasn't anyway. I was in the coven. I hadn't asked for this, but I could do something about it. So, reaching into my pocket, I found another hex and crushed it with my bare hand, feeling a piece of glass slice my finger in the process.

Immediately, Nancy began to cough as the smoke from the fire next to her smothered her. Kingsley paused. "Dare, deal with that."

"Really?" Dare grumbled before flicking his hand and setting a light breeze across our group that pushed all of the smoke away. "Done."

Grumbling, Kingsley cleared his throat and began again. The man lifted his hands skyward and started chanting. His words were magical ones, meant to bind us all together. Slowly, I could feel the power taking hold, linking Lucien to me, me to Dare, Dare to Finn, Finn to Nancy, and all of us to Kingsley, completing the pentagram.

Power hummed in the night air. The full moon hung heavy overhead. This shit was now real, and we all turned to face Lucien.

"By the sun, the moon, and the stars," Kingsley proclaimed.

But a deep, eerie howl cut him off - and the sound was much too close. We all spun towards the sound, because that

was not any creature I'd ever heard before. And what I saw?

Running towards us with her hands filled with candy was a witch so powerful I swore she glowed in the moonlight. And behind her came the rest of her coven.

“Release my wild thing!” she screamed before throwing the first jar.



# CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

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The red candy-glass shattered at Finn Undergrove's feet. Immediately, the man began to scream in pain. Okay, that wasn't the jar I'd meant to throw, but whatever, it stopped Kingsley's incantation - and made the entire coven focus on me.

"Bitch!" Nancy Redmoon screamed, grabbing at a charm bracelet on her wrist.

The skies began to change. What had been clear and cool only a second ago was turning ominous. Clouds were forming, even if they were still wisps and nothing to worry about, but it was happening much too fast.

Then silhouettes of human forms began to spring up around Finn. Ghosts? Shades? I wasn't sure, but I knew his power was communing with the dead. I just couldn't imagine how that would be dangerous.

"Shit," Nora gasped as she paused beside me. "Syl, what do we do?"

"Those jars," Reese said. "All the jars, Nora, because they won't help us once this is done."

"My brother!" Xilen gasped, lurching forward. "He's inside the pentagram. I can't get to him."

"Fuck," Jackson said. "Will it keep us out too?"

"All magical things," Xilen said.

"Which doesn't include me," Nora breathed, turning to Jackson. "I'm going to need that crowbar."

He passed it over. “Nora, what are you...”

But she was already running. The coven also hadn’t waited for us. They were drawing in power, pulling out *stuff* that I could barely wrap my mind around, and yet still stuck to their points on that massive star shape.

“Someone hit her with a blue!” I begged. “The short ones!”

“Got it,” Reese said, hurling one of the exact jars across the open pasture so that it exploded one pace ahead of Nora.

She ran right into the puff of spices and her form became hard to look at. Even my eyes wanted to shift away from her, convinced she was just a trick of the light. Sadly, that spell wouldn’t last long, but hopefully it would last long enough.

Then the first bolt of magic came at me. Literally, a bolt! The thing looked like lightning, and while small, it had come from Nancy’s direction. I dodged. Jackson threw down a green jar, and a magical shield appeared just in time to cancel it out.

“Jackson on greens,” I decided. “Reese, throw those reds as far as you can.”

But before I could give the wild thing his orders, Xilen rushed forward. The creature ran like a wolf, but he didn’t look quite like one. Close, yet in an eerily wrong sort of way.

“Fuck!” I groaned even as I began pulling out more of my spell jars.

Yeah, in my head, this had seemed easy. I’d have an assortment of options, and I’d just use the one I needed at the time. In reality, this was all happening faster than I could keep up with. Dare pushed his hands towards us, making dirt and some grass pieces fly into the air, but the shield was still up, stopping what must be a rush of wind before I could feel it.

Then Kingsley began yelling. Not orders. The man was calling out a spell. Lucien quickly joined him. Finn was a breath behind. Whatever they were doing, this part was well rehearsed.

“Witch, break the bond!” Xilen yelled at me.

What? What bond? I was tossing out pain and stun jars just as fast as I could get my hands on them, but throwing wasn't really my forte. Some missed. One made Nancy stagger, almost knocking her out of her spot on the pentagram.

"Shit," Reese breathed. "This is Grimson land, Syl. He means the bond to the land. To the fucking forest!"

"Protect Nora," I begged, emptying my pockets onto the ground before me and then dropping to my knees.

The bond to the forest? How the hell was I supposed to do that? Never mind that we were right at the edge of their cluster, no more than twenty feet from the closest coven member. There wasn't a barrier between us except the shield spell that would dissolve soon enough - and my men standing before me protectively.

All around me, magic was flying. The sky was still getting darker, filling with more clouds. The full moon shined down, breaking through all of that and making the power even more intense. Mine, theirs, and hopefully the wild things' as well.

Then I heard a voice I hadn't expected. *We're here!*

From the tree line in the distance, the family of skunks was racing towards us. Their tails were down, their little black-and-white bodies were low to the ground, and they were running hard.

"Flower, help me?" I begged.

*The forest is yours*, she told me, her voice carrying even across the distance. *Take it. Believe in it. Return the land to it!*

"How?" I begged.

"How what?" Reese asked.

*Don't interrupt my mom*, Fern snapped.

*Red ones*, Sprig called out. *Jackson, throw more red ones!*

"How?" I begged Flower again.

*Find the bond between the land and its owner*, Flower said, her words broken and panting-sounding. *Find it. Break it, Sylvia. You have the power. Take back the forest!*

The land. Intentions. I shoved my hand in the ground beneath me, twining my fingers in the mown grass, and reached for all the power I'd ever needed in my life - but it wasn't there. Not *here* at any rate.

The magic I'd been pulling so easily felt distant. Literally out of reach, but in the same direction as the tree line. Well, fuck it. Zane had taught me how to funnel power and how to use my own. This was no different than lighting the candle, right? I needed magic, and I'd get it one way or another.

But as I pulled, the coven was fighting hard. A rush of fire surrounded us, the heat breaking through and making me turn my face away. Reese threw down another blue jar, reinforcing the first shield he'd made.

Jackson was pitching red ones as fast as he could. One broke at Kingsley's feet and the chant lost a voice. I dared to look up to see that annoying old man clawing at his throat as if he could pull the magic out.

And the blur of Nora was dodging, ducking, making her way around the wixen who refused to leave their spaces. Her goal was clear: the metal cage that held Yatir. But that was when the skies opened up.

Rain poured down. Lightning flashed across the sky. The wind picked up, hammering us from behind, but Dare didn't seem to care. He was still throwing fire, even as his hair began to cling to the top of his head.

Rain was hammering down on me, soaking the candy jars, but they were thick enough. It would take more than that to dissolve them - I hoped. Yet all of this was distracting. It made it almost impossible to seek out the magic I needed. It hit my anxiety, throwing my pulse into overdrive, and demanding that I run, or look around, or do anything but fucking focus!

But I was a witch. More than that, I was *The Holt*. I was the forest's friend, not its servant, and it did not serve me. We were a coven. All of us. Maybe my pack of skunks, trees, and normal, magicless humans wasn't the way it was supposed to be done, but I didn't have to do magic like anyone else but me.

So I pulled on my handfuls of grass just enough to feel the tension, and pushed my mind down into the roots. Then deeper still. This land was manicured. It wasn't wild anymore. It was no longer a forest at all. It was an open pasture that had been tamed.

That taming broke the agreement. The coven should protect the forest, not destroy it. The wild things had given us power so we could help them. That was the trade, and the Grimsons had ignored it.

All around me, people were screaming out spells. Most of it was, "So let it be," or some variation of that, but others were words I'd never heard before. Ones that crackled with magic and built in volume the longer they went on. Screams of pain, yelps of surprise, and grunts of effort all mixed in to make a cacophony that was almost overpowering.

But I kept searching for the soul of this land. The tie had to exist. There was a bond between me and the trees on my property. Would it be the grass that would have it? The dirt? The memory of trees who had once grown here?

"Die!" a voice wailed as something dark shoved right into my face.

"Fuck," Reese hissed.

Then Flower pushed to my side. *Begone, death!* she said, with a vocal squeak for good measure.

The ghost wailed, and Reese threw a blue jar at it. Fog began to roll around us, obscuring the three of us - and our skunks - from sight.

*Zane!* Twig cried.

"He can't help, Twig," I mumbled, still trying to reach for that bond.

There! I found something. Some void that stood out. It felt like decay and disgust. I couldn't really describe it as a tube or a line. This wasn't tangible in that sort of way. It was just there, like a feeling in the earth beneath me.

So I pushed at it.

The ground rolled. Soft, subtle, but under my hands there was a tremor. I had to push harder, to sever that link, because that was what was fueling Kingsley. Kingsley had control of the entire coven, so if I could break him, then maybe, just maybe, I could snap the rest.

Maybe I could even get Zane free.

But my own power was still too far away. I'd been doing too much magic at home, secure on my own land. I was spoiled with the power of the forest around me. Out here was different, yet Zane could pull from his source, so I should be able to as well - if only this land was mine.

Nature. That was my power. This might be nature, but it was walled away from me. Wait, that was the answer! I had to get to the nature, I needed to drill into it until I could find the wilderness here again.

“Need more jars!” Jackson yelled. “Syl, this isn't working!”

“Don't distract her,” Reese hissed. “She's doing something.”

*She is freeing the land,* Sprig explained.

Drawing from myself, yanking at all the power, the magic, and the amazement I had, I strained for the nature still here. Even manicured, even fenced-off and claimed by someone else, this place was nature and that made it *mine!*

I felt something crack. That void in the center of the pasture felt like it shifted. A man cried out, but I didn't bother to look. It could be Lucien, since he was still a Grimson. Maybe it was Kingsley, proving he had his voice back. None of that mattered, because I knew the land was aching to be free.

So I pulled as hard as I could. I felt that sensation of sand inside my skin. I could feel the burn of straining my power beyond its limits, and still I pulled.

The world cracked again, but this time the rolling of the ground was more obvious. All around me, grass began to hum,

making a noise that was audible to me. One more hard yank, and I felt that thing snap.

Birds screamed as they rushed onto the property. The trees sighed in relief, almost as if testing their own voices. Even the stones in this field felt like they exhaled in satisfaction.

And all the power of the forest slammed into me, rushing under this land as if a dam had just been destroyed. Like a tsunami, I felt it, wave after wave of it, and I knew exactly how to use it.

“Hold them,” I told the grass. “Distract them,” I told the birds. “Sting them,” I commanded the insects. “Nature is mine, and this coven will never control you again.”

And the coven began to scream.



# CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

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I tried to leave my spot, but the power of the coven had me. I was locked in place, my power running straight to Kingsley. The man chanted and gestured, operating all of us as if we were his puppets. But when he wasn't focused on me, I could still move. Not my feet, but the rest of me was free.

So I reached into my pocket and grabbed all of my hexes. I would not stand by and let this happen without at least trying. I would not willingly help destroy everything Sylvia had accomplished so far.

One by one, I broke those jars. I pushed, snapping the glass, and activating them. I couldn't stomp on them, but I didn't care. The shards cut my skin, blood mingled with the strange items I'd used to make my magic. I also wouldn't stop.

Pain laced my hands. The power leaked out, working slowly. Stuttered words, forgotten spells, and missing targets. That wasn't much, but it was all I could do with hexes. These were subtle spells, meant to work in the background, but they were the help I could offer.

Then I saw a blur moving towards the wild thing's cage. I tried to focus on it, but couldn't. Yatir didn't seem to have that problem. The beast thrashed, shoving his body against the constraints.

On the other side of him, Syl, Reese, and Jack stood their ground. I watched as jars sailed into the sky. I saw when Syl dropped to her knees, grabbing at the grass - and feared the

worst. Magic was flying through the air around us. Spells were being pulled from the most powerful. The weather was condensing so that Nancy could have even more options.

Yeah, fuck that.

I reached for my back pocket and pulled out my cards. I didn't have time to shuffle them, but these cards were *mine*. They'd been the symbols of my power for as long as I could remember. Nothing else worked for me as well as them, and right now I needed all they had.

"Good outcomes," I breathed, plucking a card from the deck.

The World card jumped out. It was the best of the cards my deck could give me.

"Protection," I demanded next.

The Ten of Swords appeared, the same one that I'd used on Syl's cottage.

"A goddamned miracle," I breathed before reaching for one more.

The Eight of Cups appeared between my fingers. That was not the card I wanted. For too long, I stared at it. This card meant walking away. It symbolized disillusionment and leaving things behind. I also knew it was exactly the card I needed.

This had been my plan. For as long as I could remember, this had always been my endgame, but the last few weeks of doing spells with Sylvia in her forest had made it much less appealing.

I no longer wanted revenge at all costs. No, I wanted to feel her lips again. I longed to be wrapped up in Jack's arms one more time. Fuck, I even wanted to sit and have a long talk with Reese as the cicadas screamed all around us.

Seeing the Eight of Cups meant I no longer got that choice.

But that blur of something was solidifying quickly into Nora. Below my feet, the ground was trembling, making me

feel like the grass was shivering. That was when the skies opened up.

Rain fell. Lightning flashed. Thunder rumbled. Among all of that, Dare continued to throw fire, but now he had more elements to work with. The wind whipped up. The water began to blow straight towards Syl and the guys. All of it was almost enough for me to miss the sound of my name.

*Zane!* That was Twig, the little skunklet from Syl's!

"No," I breathed. "You should not be here. You were supposed to be safe!"

Then the entire world shifted. The power humming between those of us in the coven screamed. Kingsley jerked and Lucien cried out. Something had just changed, but I couldn't imagine what, until grass began to cling to my feet.

Birds screamed as they poured in, flying even in the rain. The downpour was lessening, though. Something was changing. Then the wild thing lurched, shoving its arm out to grab Nora by the wrist.

"No!" I cried out, imagining it ripping her apart the way my father had died.

But Yatir ignored me. "I reject you!" the beast yelled.

The deep bass of its voice made the sound slam into my body physically. To my right, Finn staggered at the force coming from it. No, the magic.

"I reject you!" Yatir roared, louder this time.

And the birds descended, flapping around my head, but also everyone else's. No one could cast like that, not even Dare. He still tried, calling a hard wind, but the birds simply came back for more.

"I reject you!" the creature who resembled a deer but wasn't screamed with all his might.

That was when the bugs came. All of them, not simply the ones I was used to seeing at night. Wasps, hornets, mosquitos, flies, and more. If I could imagine it, then they were here. Beetles pinged off my skin. Pain shot through my calf as

something hit and stung me. This was worse than even Syl's cactus!

Then Yatir pulled Nora's arm inside his cage. "I accept you instead."

Nora's head snapped back, her mouth opened in the longest scream I could imagine, and the world turned to chaos. Suddenly, Nora was completely visible, and much too close to Kingsley. The man turned, trying to pull her away from the wild thing, but she didn't even seem to notice.

But her scream shifted to words. Eerie, alien ones like I'd never heard before. Words that rang in my ears as her voice became more than it had ever been before. I couldn't even make out the syllables, but Nora screamed them.

And from the other side of the pentagram, another voice joined hers. It was also deep, but almost like a howl, or maybe a growl, depending on the syllable. My mind began to ache. The power in my body was rushing out too fast, heading right to Kingsley as he drained all of us to save himself.

Then a third voice joined, but it was one I knew. That was Gyth. He was not-tree. That made three wild things, and three was the smallest number it took to form a pattern - or a fucking ritual! How had I not seen it before? We needed all three. They needed the rituals! This was their magic, not ours!

"Use me," I begged, trying to push my power towards them.

But Kingsley felt it. "Zane!" he roared, turning towards me.

Nora kept calling those words. It was as if her body was possessed, but she wasn't struggling. Yet when my eyes jumped to her, so did Kingsley's.

"You stupid girl," he snarled before drawing in power from the last source he had: his coven.

I could feel it. When he began to chant, I knew what was coming. This wasn't the ritual we were here to perform. This power wouldn't make Lucien the fucking Blackwood. No, Kingsley was willing to throw all of that away so he could turn

it on Nora as she was held stunned by the wild thing in the cage.

“Nora, you have to break the lock!” I yelled at her.

“Betrayer!” Lucien yelled at me.

So I pulled another card. I didn't stop to think about it. I took whatever the magic would give me. But when I dropped my eyes, I saw it was the Eight of Cups again. That felt almost like a declaration, like a demand even.

I knew what I had to do.

Yatir had just given me the example. I'd also done this before, back when I'd emptied that little vial of mine and Jack's mixed blood. There was only one way to stop this, and as Syl tried to take on an entire coven by herself, I knew that would be impossible.

Nature was helping her, but it wasn't enough. We had magic too. We were organized. The Grimsons also weren't bound by such stupid little things as ethics and morality. They didn't care who they killed, hurt, or crushed in their desires. They just wanted to win.

But with five lines, the coven was hindered. With four, they would be hurting. But what would happen with none? What if I could walk away from all of this? What if the Eight of Cups was the perfect card right now?

Walking away.

Disillusionment.

Leaving it *all* behind.

So I began chanting softly, almost under my breath, “To this coven, I was bound. I reject that. To this coven I have ties. I reject them. To this coven, I gave my power. I want it back.”

“No!” Lucien snarled when something weakened in the pull of magic.

I kept going, letting my eyes find Jack as he threw another jar. Reese would take care of him. Syl would take care of

Reese. Together, they would be happy, and that was all that mattered anymore.

I wanted my vengeance. I knew the cost of it. I'd always known, even since they'd bound me that first day. Breaking a spell hurt. Breaking a powerful enough spell would kill, yet I refused to let anything stop me, even as I longed for some other option. Some second chance I didn't deserve.

"To this magic, I vowed to be faithful," I breathed. "I have not. To this magic, I promised to give back. I have not. To this magic, I swore to serve. I have not. I expected it to serve me instead."

"Stop, you idiot!" Nancy hissed, and lightning slammed into the ground close enough behind me to make my ears ring.

"Don't fucking kill him," Kingsley yelled. "We need the line!"

Then Nora slung her hand out, and a rush of air forced Kingsley back, but it was Yatir who spoke. "Finish it, Harkness."

"Stop!" Finn yelled, and a ghost rushed at me.

"You will become one of us," it wailed. "He will use you. Do not make this mistake, because your ties will never be severed. Not with the power of the Undergrove!"

"To the forest whose souls give us strength," I said, clenching my eyes closed and trying to ignore the specter in my face, "I have abandoned your ways."

"Stop him!" Kingsley screeched.

Darts of rain slammed into me, but they weren't lethal. They still stung, making me suck in a breath as my skin parted under the lash of raw water magic.

"To the forest whose souls give us strength," I gasped, pushing through the pain.

And wind hit me next, but they didn't dare kill me. I knew they couldn't. They could hurt me. They could torture me, but I was doing this.

“I offer myself for punishment,” I breathed. “To the forest whose souls give us strength - “

And my mouth clamped shut as Kingsley took control of my body. “This is *my* coven,” he sneered, ripping the magic from me, pulling my own source so hard that it felt like it shredded my insides.

And then a childish voice broke into my mind. *I claim you as mine! Even if it is not returned, I am your familiar!* Twig roared before rushing right into the middle of the pentagram and sinking his teeth into Kingsley’s ankle.

“I have never been worthy of this power!” I finished. “I break this bond and reject this coven.”

Mud slammed into my open mouth, making me choke and stopping my words. Earth magic. Fuck. I spit that out and tried hard to keep going.

“I break this bond and reject this coven!” I yelled for the second time.

Lightning hit again, close enough this time that I felt the burn through the air. The thunder was immediate. More wind hit me. More of that piercing water. But Nora slung out a hand and a bubble formed around me.

Behind her, I could see Syl and the guys throwing their jars. Some bounced, too wet from the rain to be breakable anymore. Others shattered, hitting the wixen around the pentagram. Three birds flew at Lucien’s face. Twig bit at Kingsley again before turning and spraying the man with all he had.

*You would’ve been a perfect familiar, I thought. I’m sorry, Twig. I tried to protect you.*

Then I screamed out the last thing I would ever say. “I break this bond and reject this coven!”

The oath snapped. All the magic that had been bound in it crashed back. The power we’d consumed for tonight’s ritual made it hit harder. For years, I’d been saying I wanted more power, and now I felt like all of it was ripping through me.



Light burst from my chest, shooting straight across the lines of the pentagram. The star lit up as if burning with a cold blue light. I could feel more burning the soles of my feet as the magic rushed up from the ground, consuming me from the inside out.

My brain was burning with it. The pain was indescribable. I screamed, unable to hold it back, but it no longer mattered. I knew what it meant to break a spell this powerful.

Yet as my body began to crumple and the life fled from my veins, I heard one last thing.

“I do *not* reject you. You are mine, Harkness. Mine!”

Then there was nothing but darkness.

# CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

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Once the land was free from the Grimsons, I could feel the power of the forest again, but I'd nearly drained myself getting to it. My knees felt like rubber and my head was swimming. Rain still fell, but lighter, yet this fight wasn't over.

"Reese?" I begged, thrusting a hand up.

He pulled, helping me to my feet, but we had to get closer. We needed to stop this. I gathered up my candy jars, feeling that some of them had turned spongy, and began to push closer.

"We have to stop this," I told them. "Somehow, we need to -"

"Syl, the wild thing has Nora."

She was on the other side of the cage, which made it hard to see her, but she was clenched up in a strange way. There was too much going on for me to keep track of, but I still knew we weren't done. We couldn't be. Xilen was out there, somewhere around that pentagram of wixen. Yatir was locked in the middle.

"We have to break the lock," I said.

"We need to get you out of here," Reese told me. "You're fucking staggering."

"We're not done yet!" I hissed at him.

That was when Zane turned into a pillar of light.

It was so bright I had to turn away. Brighter even than the lightning that had been slamming down in this pasture - but never so close that it could hurt the coven. The closer we were to them, the safer we were from the weather magic. That didn't hold true for the elemental stuff Dare was slinging, though.

And whatever this brightness was, it wasn't a mere flash. The light grew bigger, wider, consuming Zane completely until I couldn't even make out his shadow in it through the gaps in my fingers. Then it rushed out around the coven, snaking across their connections like a child drawing a simple star.

From Zane to the wix across from him, then over to the next. Point by point, that light flared, rushed, and burned the air around us. The flames were white, and I could see the blue edges as they flickered. I could hear the roar of it, like some massive forest fire trapped into a very narrow band no thicker than Jackson's arm.

Then the screams started.

"Hit them now!" I ordered.

We all began throwing our spells, struggling to drop the wixen of the coven, but it didn't stop the light, fire, or whatever that shit was.

"Nora, break that thing out!" Jackson yelled. "Hammer the fucking lock if you have to!"

I heard metal clanking. I couldn't see. Hell, I could barely see the silhouettes of the coven. This was like standing in the middle of a bolt of lightning, yet just far enough away to be safe. It was loud, bright, and completely overwhelming.

It also felt like magic. Like the same thing the forest gave me, but right there, begging me to reach in and join it. To let it consume me. To twist me and taint me in some way that I'd want more of.

Corrupted magic! That was what it was. That was the coven's magic!

But the bolt of light into the sky was fading, growing narrower. That was when Xilen bellowed, “I do *not* reject you. You are mine, Harkness. Mine!”

Zane’s body dropped. The white light that had been coming from him ended, and darkness chased the trail around the pentagram as if erasing the light. One by one, the rest of the coven collapsed, but Kingsley was the last.

Metal clanked as Nora hammered at the lock with the crowbar one more time, but even behind the bright dots blinding my vision, I could see Kingsley trying to lift himself up.

“You cannot have it!” he said, even as the rest of his coven had gone still. “No!”

He made a gesture, just like he had throughout this, and a sparkle of power lit his fingers. “Mine!” he wailed, but his voice was so weak it was mostly breath.

“Oh, fuck off,” Nora said, swinging the crowbar at him.

She hit him in the chest, knocking the old man onto his back before he even made it to his feet, and then swung at the lock again. This time, the thing cracked.

“Got it,” Nora said, scrambling to pull the padlock from the latch.

The door to the cage swung open. Yatir fell out, the thing’s legs weak from so much time locked in too small of a place. On the other side of the pentagram, Xilen reached forward as if testing something, and then the not-wolf rushed forward.

“Harkness!” he begged.

Which was when Gyth came in from the other side. “The pentagram is no longer powered,” he called to us. “It’s safe to cross the lines.”

But all of the coven members were down. They’d collapsed in place, landing where they’d been standing. Bodies were sprawled in angles that could not be comfortable, making me wonder if they were dead.

“Zane?” Jackson gasped, rushing straight across the lines to where the man had been.

Gyth knelt down by Lucien. “Children were meant to be a promise, not a resource.” Then he sighed. “The rest will wake. We should not be here.”

“Nora?” I called out.

“Zane’s down!” she yelled.

But when I tried to head that way, my legs still weren’t working. I felt so badly drained, as if I was running more on willpower than anything else. I staggered. I stumbled. The only reason I didn’t fall was because Reese swept me up into his arms.

“C’mon, c’mon, c’mon,” Nora was begging. “Yatir, you have to get to the forest.”

“I will,” Yatir said, lifting his heavily horned head easily. “My brother will help. You help your coven, little witch.”

“I’m not a witch,” Nora told him. “I’m just friends with one.”

“And we’re going to need the truck,” Reese called at her. “Syl’s done.”

“Zane’s alive, but out cold,” Jackson said as he swung the man into his arms. “Fuck, and heavy.”

“Keys?” Nora asked.

“In the console of the truck,” Jackson told her. “Just in case, you know?”

“Gotcha.” Then she ran.

I watched her vanish into the darkness of the night, but even that felt like it took more strength than I had left.

“We can’t forget the skunks,” I said.

“Nope,” Reese promised. “Fern’s giving me updates.”

“What?”

“Fern,” he said.

“I don’t hear her.”

He just chuckled. “Well, trust me, I do. Now let’s get you out of here, Syl. I have a bad idea that when these fuckers wake up, they’re going to be pissed.”

“Gyth, you got not-deer?” Jackson asked.

But Xilen was hovering behind him. “The Harkness,” the beast whimpered. “I need to see him.”

“Yeah,” Jackson grumbled before turning back to face the wild thing.

Pushing himself upright, Xilen looked like some kind of werewolf thing, and he pressed a hand to Zane’s cheek. “He thought he would die. I refused to let him, but I am too weak to help more.”

“It’s okay,” Jackson told the distraught beast. “We’re going to take care of him.”

“Just let him know he broke the entire coven,” Xilen said. “The Maybrook - “

“Holt,” Gyth corrected. “My witch is the Holt.”

“The Holt,” Xilen said, starting over, “gave the forest back this land. The Harkness destroyed the corruption in the coven, but that corruption was what held them together. He will ask. He craves knowledge too much.”

“Yeah,” Jackson muttered just as headlights flashed across us.

Then a full-size, white work truck bounced across the grass. The sound of it was different, almost more powerful, but the tires weren’t slipping in the mud. When it was close enough, the truck turned, putting its side towards us.

“Get in,” Nora called from the driver’s seat. “We’re off-roading with four-wheel drive! Oh, and someone grab the skunks?”

“My truck is never going to be the same,” Jackson said.

“The beads erase their stink,” I reminded him.

Then we all piled in. Reese set me in the back seat, and I had just enough strength to push myself over, but that was it. Zane was put in next, his unconscious body flopping against me. Jackson crawled in behind him, then Reese lifted all four of the skunks into the front seat. When we were all inside, he climbed in last, sitting right in the middle of all that black-and-white fur.

“Home, Nora.”

She started driving, following the tracks she’d left on her way in. “Uh, which home?”

“Syl’s,” Jackson told her. “Which is about to be ours.”

“Yeah,” Nora said. “And please tell me I can call in the crew? Because I think these two are going to need more help than you guys can give.”

“Call them all,” Jackson told her. “Fuck, I don’t even know what comes next, but I have a feeling those fuckers aren’t going to be happy when they wake up.”

“Yeah...” Nora said. “But, um, Jackson? You missed one thing.”

“What thing?” Reese asked.

“When Gyth was checking Lucien? Yeah, his eyes were open. I’m pretty sure he’s dead.”

“Zane’s not,” Jackson insisted, reaching over to check the man’s pulse.

I leaned into him, reaching for his wrist to do the same. There, under my fingers, I could feel it. The throb was slow, but steady. With my body flopped against his, I could feel Zane’s chest rising and falling as he breathed.

“How many died?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” Nora said. “Maybe all of them?”

“We can hope,” Jackson grumbled.

“No,” I breathed. “We weren’t supposed to kill them. We were supposed to stop them.”



“And they’ve killed plenty of people, Syl,” Jackson reminded me. “They aren’t good people.”

“All of them?” I countered.

“Dare’s not bad,” Reese said. “Least he didn’t used to be.”

“Or Finn,” Nora added. “It’s always been Kingsley. I think he makes them do those things.”

“So did we do too much?” I asked, feeling my eyes getting too heavy to keep open.

“We saved the wild things,” Reese assured me.

Then something warm and furry hopped into my lap. *Sleep, witch. You used too much magic. You did impossible things. Sleep and rest. Not all are dead,* Flower said.

“Whoa,” Jackson breathed. “I can hear her.”

“Me too,” Nora said.

Flower chattered almost like a laugh. *Which means the coven’s power is growing. But only the one died. The leader pulled from his child to call more magic. The breaking of the coven pulled from them all. For the one, the man who wanted to be a Maybrook, it was too much.*

“Lucien,” Reese said.

“And Kingsley drained him,” Nora added. “That means you didn’t kill him, Syl. Nor did Zane. Kingsley did.”

“Yeah, but he’ll still blame us,” Jackson pointed out.

“But will the rest of the coven?” Reese asked.

“That’s the real question, isn’t it?” Nora said.

But her words were the last I heard. The sound of the truck on the road was too soothing. The rocking of my body and the warmth of Zane beside me all took their toll. I was so far beyond exhausted that I didn’t stand a chance.

I slipped into darkness cradling my familiar on my lap.

# CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

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**M**y head was throbbing. My joints hurt. Hell, my skin hurt! I felt like I'd been run over by a truck. And yet, when I managed to crack my eyes open, the first thing I saw was the most beautiful thing I could imagine.

Curled on her side, facing me, Sylvia was fast asleep. Her full lips were barely parted. Her long lashes were resting against her cheeks. Her wild hair was loose, those spirals falling in all directions over the silky pillow.

Wait, silky pillow? Confused, I reached up to touch the one under my head. Yeah, that sure felt like silk. Wait, where was I? Blinking hard, I glanced around the room, not recognizing it at first. Then my eyes landed on the pair of open doors with a tiny little balcony on the far side.

This was Syl's bedroom. Shit, this was Syl's bed!

I sat up hard, trying to remember what could've happened to end up with me in her bed. Worse, why didn't I remember it? Unfortunately, moving was not a good thing. I groaned as the pain kicked in.

*There are pills here, said a boyish voice. I'm watching for you to wake so I can tell you.*

I turned to find Twig curled up on a third pillow, proving this bed was not a small one. "Hey, bud," I tried to say, but the words came out a croak.

*Mom, Zane's awake!* Twig yelled.

I winced at the volume in my head. “Yeah, gonna need those pills. You know what they are?”

Twig just moved, revealing a bottle of Advil and a glass of water on the nightstand. Chuckling, I leaned far enough to grab that. Pouring two pills into my palm, I thought better of it and added two more. Then I tossed all of those back. Hopefully, it'd help.

But what the hell had happened? Had there been a party? Did I get that drunk? Fuck, and if I had ended up in Syl's bed... No, I would've definitely remembered *that*. If we'd done anything, there was no way I'd let myself forget it.

Or had I been that drunk? What was the last thing I remembered? It had been bright, and hot. Flashing lights. Lots of them. But I'd been wet?

And slowly, the jumbled pieces of my memory began to work their way back together. I'd broken my bond to the coven. That had been the only way to stop them from hurting Syl and Nora, let alone the guys. I had to protect Jack. I had to keep all of them safe, so I'd done it.

But I should've died.

Breaking a spell that powerful should've killed me instantly. That was why joining a coven was a one-way ticket. No one could get out unless the coven worked together as a whole to let them out. Those were the rules. That was how magic worked. So, was this some wixen version of heaven?

*You forgot one thing.*

That was not a voice I knew, but it made me look around, trying to figure out where it had come from. Sadly, turning hurt. I also didn't want to wake Syl, but there was no one in here except the pair of us and Twig.

Yet before I could ask him about it, another voice spoke up. *Magic comes from us, not your coven.*

*The coven is granted the power.* That was yet another voice.

Then one more added, *We are the ones who control it.*

*That means we can also shield you from it.*

“Who are you?” I asked, my voice a croaking whisper.

*Those are the trees, Twig told me. They talk to Syl all the time. Now come downstairs, because you need to eat. Or I can call for someone to carry you.*

“Bathroom?” I asked.

*Come, Twig said, hopping off the side of the bed like a damned cat.*

So I scooted that way and forced my body to stand. Yeah, this was going to be one of those hurts that lingered for a bit. I could tell.

*Bathroom, Twig announced before turning to a cabinet. Dry things. Place to make pee. Then he faced the toilet. And when I laughed, he trotted back out. Do human things. I will tell them you are awake.*

Yeah, that actually sounded like a good idea. So, turning on the shower, I pulled a towel out from the “dry things” cabinet, and then climbed in. Surprisingly, the water was truly hot - which was exactly what I needed. The shampoo was a little girlier-smelling than I was used to, and I’d bitch about it if asked, but I kinda liked it.

Then the door clicked and creaked as it swung open. “Zane?” Jack asked.

“In the shower,” I said.

“You okay?”

“Think so,” I said. “Feel like someone ripped a few pages out of my life, and Twig says I heard trees?”

“Yeah...” Jack moved further into the room, then I heard the door close. “Lucien Grimson’s dead.”

“What?” I pushed open the glass door to see him. “What the fuck?”

“When you broke the coven - “

“I broke my bond with the coven,” I corrected. “That was it. No different than breaking our blood oath. I broke the bond I made back when I was inducted against my will.”

“No,” Jack told me, “you didn’t. Zane, you broke the entire coven. That was Wednesday. It’s Friday.”

“Shit,” I breathed, feeling my legs try to buckle.

I shoved a hand out to brace against the shower, but Jack was already moving. Not caring about his clothes, he pushed his way in and wrapped his arms around me, holding me up.

“I got you,” he breathed. “It’s okay, Zane, I got you.”

“I was in bed with Syl,” I told him.

He just smiled. “Yeah, we put you two in there together. Nora, Erika, and Beth are downstairs. Jayden’s currently out buying groceries. The cottage is packed, but everyone’s been doing what we can to take care of you two.”

“Care of?” I narrowed my eyes and shook my head. “I was unconscious.”

“You were in and out,” he corrected. “Nora made you drink soup. I helped you piss. Reese has been doing the same with Syl. It’s almost like the pair of you were rebooting.”

“Yeah, kinda how it feels,” I admitted. “And you’re getting soaked.”

“Can you stand?” he asked.

“I’ll make sure of it,” I promised.

That was enough for Jack to back out of the shower, but now we both were wet. I didn’t have clothes to worry about. Still, I turned and rinsed my hair, feeling a million times better for the shower. There was just one little thing I hadn’t considered.

“Jack, have some pants I can borrow? Maybe a shirt?”

“Got you covered,” he said. “Just don’t fall while I’m getting that?”

I didn't. I may have needed help getting my legs into his sweats, and I kinda hated that they hung so loosely on my hips, but Jack was a broad guy. His t-shirt fit, thankfully. Not as tight as it did on him, but well enough for me to count as covered. Then he helped me down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"How's Syl?" Reese asked before smiling at me. "Welcome back to the living, Zane."

*Zane?*

Yeah, that voice had a bit of a Hispanic accent and came from the front door. Confused, I turned that way to see Lupe the cactus waving at me.

"Lupe talks to me now?" I asked.

"What?" Beth gasped, standing up from the couch. "Lupe, you bastard. I thought only Syl could do that."

*The forest's wixen can,* Lupe explained.

I blinked.

Then I blinked again as I replayed his words, trying to make sense of them. "What?"

*The ability to hear us comes from the forest,* Lupe explained. *Wait. Let me get Xilen to explain it.*

"We got none of that," Jack told me.

"Lupe said the forest lets us hear them, and he's getting Xilen," I said.

"Oh, house!" Erika called out. "Open the doors wider for him? He's not used to coming in and out of doors yet."

So the back doors opened all the way just as not-wolf made his way in. The thing was on all fours, but his front paws were hands. He was also kinda creepy-looking.

"Hey, Xilen," I said, aware that the last time I'd been this close to the thing, I'd been collecting his blood.

So he pushed himself upright, proving he was quite a bit taller than me. "You are Zane Harkness?"

“I am.”

Then he pushed his pointed muzzle right into my face and sniffed. “You are the divination wix?”

“Yes, uh, sir?”

He ignored my fumbled attempt at respect and simply grabbed my shoulder. “I claim you.”

“I don’t know what that means,” I breathed.

“It means you are still a wix,” he explained. “It means your power still exists. It means I did not let you die, and when the forest asked, I told them you are mine. I said that I will not take another. My Harkness did what was necessary to stop the corruption. My Harkness is hard, feral, and *powerful*. My Harkness is no longer of the coven, but he is still of the forest, and the forest has agreed.”

“I have to sit,” I breathed.

Jack was immediately there to help me down. “He’s running on fumes, Xilen.”

“We will fix that,” Xilen promised. “My Harkness is strong.”

“I do have a name,” I reminded him. “It’s Zane.”

“I thought only friends used first names?” Xilen asked.

“Then maybe we could be friends?” I asked it - er, him. “I didn’t mean to help them bleed you, but I couldn’t get you out on my own.”

“And you tried to heal the wound,” Xilen said. “Yes, I know. I felt that.”

Which was when Gyth made his way inside. “Xilen, be gentle. He is drained. We will need to help him before you push him.”

“Yeah,” Nora said from where she was standing in the kitchen. “Pretty sure Zane’s getting his world rocked right now.”

I just nodded. “I am. What happened?”



“Lucien’s dead,” Beth said, “the coven is broken, Syl’s pretty much wiped out, and we’re working on some wild thing-approved seasonings for you two. They wanted to feed you sticks.”

“Wood from trees is filled with magic!” Xilen insisted.

“Which is why they’re wild things,” Erika giggled.

“I don’t eat sticks, Xilen,” I said. “Thanks, but not gonna work out so well in the end, if you know what I mean. But what about Yatir? Did he get free?”

Nora just groaned. “Yeah, he’s free. He also doesn’t fit inside. Those antlers? They’re rather impressive, and I’m pretty sure Syl doesn’t want to replace all the lights on the ceiling.”

“And he claimed her,” Beth added.

“But I don’t hear Lupe!” Nora said.

“He still claimed you,” Beth pointed out. “I mean, that’s gotta mean something, right?”

“It means,” Jack said, “that Syl’s coven isn’t what any of us expected. I think the wild things are following her lead. She doesn’t seem to care if the people who help her are wixen or human. She just wants good people.”

“Yes,” Xilen agreed. “That.”

“But more than that,” Gyth added. “Jackson, the coven is broken. The spells will degrade.”

“Shit,” Reese said. “The protection ones?”

“How the fuck do we stop that?” Erika asked.

“Can two of us do it?” I added to the list of questions. “Gyth, can Syl and I help the townsfolk?”

“Yes,” he promised, “but you cannot do it alone.”

I just looked around the very full cottage. “But we aren’t alone.”

“And now I think you understand,” Gyth said. “You, Zane Harkness, are a good wix. I was not sure, but you have proven

yourself. The forest agrees. You are a good wix, and now you are our wix.”

“But if you can help us wake up Syl, that’d be amazing,” Jack said, rubbing my shoulder.

“Yeah...” I breathed. “Do you know where my cards are?”

He stood and walked across the room, pulling the deck off the kitchen table. “I took care of them and even cleaned off the blood you left on them.” Then he offered the deck to me, card faces up. “And that one was the worst.”

There, the Eight of Cups was staring me in the face. “Yeah, because that was the card that convinced me to do it.” And I traced the design I had spent so much time painting when I was younger.

All I could do was chuckle softly. Walking away, disillusionment, and leaving things behind. Yeah, I’d definitely done that. The question was if this would really be my second chance. And if it was, could I get it right?

So I turned the deck over and shuffled. Tapping the edge, I pulled out the card that revealed itself. When I turned it over, my eyes landed on the Empress. She represented motherhood and nature. I couldn’t think of a better card for Syl.

“Do your thing,” I whispered to my deck. “Let’s prove we deserve to get this right, because the evil coven will come after us, so we’re going to need our leader.”

“Yeah, we are,” Nora said. “Both of them, because *this* coven is going to do things right.”

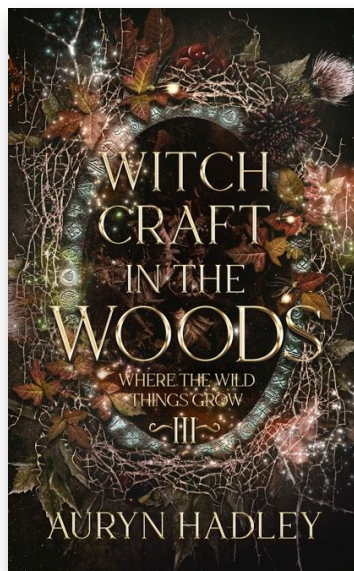
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**PROLOGUE**

**SYLVIA**

*Twenty-six years earlier...*

The moment I was outside, I was running, leaving Aunt Margie to catch up. Behind me, I could hear her laughing, but also the clanking of the jars she carried in her ugly old bag. I loved those jars, though. We made so many things out of them!

With sunlight trickling through the leaves, I wove between the trees, heading deeper into the forest. My arms were held

wide, and my smile was so big! I couldn't play like this at home. There, it was always "Watch out for traffic, Sylvia," and "Come in before dark, Sylvia." Aunt Margie didn't care about that. No, she let me stay outside late enough to see all the fireflies!

By the time I reached my super-special spot, I was breathing hard. My poofy hair was coming out of the braids Mom had put it in, and a few curls stood out making me look like some kind of gremlin-child. Paired with my missing front tooth, it would've gotten me laughed at by my friends at school.

Here? It was called "natural."

But there, right in front of me, I saw it. All the seeds I'd planted yesterday with Margie were sprouting! With a squeal of delight, I moved closer, careful not to step on any of them. This open space was one of the many clearings in the forest, and when I'd started poking helicopter seeds into the ground in the shape of a gigantic heart, Aunt Margie had come over to help.

Now, the first little leaves were peeking above the dirt. I didn't realize trees grew that fast, but it must be a forest thing because they didn't back home. Then again, a lot of stuff was different here. Margie said it was magic, but Mom said it was fresh air. Daddy just laughed and asked if I had fun getting dirty.

"Sylvia!" Margie's voice called through the trees.

"They're growing!" I yelled back in my childish voice. "Aunt Margie, come see! They're all growing!"

The rattle and clank of her jars was steadily growing louder. "Well, look at you, sweetie!" she panted as she got closer. "Looks to me like you might even have a green thumb."

So I looked at my hands. "Nunh-unh. They're just brown."

Which made her laugh. "No, Sylvia. That's a saying about people who can grow plants easily. It's a good thing."

“Yeah?”

She nodded sagely, as if all the secrets were stored in her mind. That was why I loved Aunt Margie. She knew so many cool things! She also showed them to me. She used to show my little brother until he said she was lying. He was just jealous because he couldn't make the trees whisper, though.

Slowly, taking her time about it, Margie made her way to my side to see the seedlings. But when her eyes fell on the inch tall plants, the old woman sucked in a breath. Her hand clasped my shoulder, almost like she was holding me back, but I wasn't going to *step* on them. Then, slowly, she leaned closer, bending over to peer at the baby trees.

“They're all maples,” she breathed.

“Isn't that what the seeds were?” I asked.

She glanced at me quickly, then back to the plants. “Uh huh...” But she sounded distracted. “You only made the one heart, right?”

“Yep, this one!” And I stabbed a finger at it proudly. “Now there's going to be a heart in the middle of the forest *forever!*”

Gently, Aunt Margie reached forward to caress one of the leaves. “Sweetie, I think your thumb is a whole lot greener than mine, and that says a lot.”

“Yeah?” I asked, not sure if that was a good thing or not.

“Yeah,” she said softly before turning to me with a smile. “Now close your eyes and tell the trees to grow up big and strong, okay? That way, when you come back the next time, you can see your handiwork.”

So I stood as straight as I could and clenched my eyes shut tightly. “Grow,” I whispered. “Grow. Grow! It'll be so cool to see a heart of trees, and it'll be my special place, and it'll grow forever!”

None of that really made any sense, but it was what I wanted. In my childish mind, I could imagine the trees getting so big that their trunks could almost touch and only fairies

could fit between them. It'd be the most magical spot of all, and even when I was old like Margie, I'd still come to peek between the gaps to see if there was a unicorn or something inside there.

Because out here, anything was possible. That was why I loved the forest, and Aunt Margie said it loved me back. I wasn't sure how she knew, or if she was just trying to be nice, but I liked it anyway. It made me feel like I belonged when nothing else really did.

I was too light-skinned for some of the kids at school and too dark-skinned for others. My hair was too silky to count as Black, but too curly to be like the other girls. It was as if I was trapped somewhere in the middle of everything, never quite fitting in anywhere - except here.

Then Aunt Margie sucked in a breath. That made me jerk my eyes open, but only to find her staring out into the woods.

"What?" I asked.

"Sylvia, if you stay real still, you might get to see something special," she told me. "Look over there, sweetie."

She flicked a finger, but nothing else. Besides that, she didn't move at all. I turned my head slowly, looking in the direction, and swore a shadow moved. My eyes jumped to it, but it was already gone - yet it moved again somewhere else.

I was so busy chasing it with my eyes that I almost missed the other thing. The thing Aunt Margie was probably talking about. The big, massive thing that had paused in a beam of sunlight and lifted its head to look right back at us.

I wanted to say it was a deer, but I wasn't sure. This wasn't like the ones I saw killed on the side of the road. This one was massive, and its antlers were even bigger. Its face was strange, almost like it had too much mouth, and it stood too tall, or straight, or something. Maybe it was an elk? Did they have those out here?

Then the shadow moved again, and my eyes jumped that way on their own. This time, I finally saw it! Paused right beside a tree, the creature didn't move. Brown and green fur

rippled in the soft breeze, proving it was actually a part of this world, but it didn't look like anything I'd seen before. It looked like it wanted to be a tree and an animal at the same time.

Then it smiled. My lips curled to match, but the thing was already moving, shifting again, as if it had been little more than a trick of the light. Desperate, I looked back to the deer only for it to spin and run just as my eyes landed on it. Beside me, Aunt Margie laughed.

"I think the forest *really* likes you, Sylvia," she said as she pushed her aging body straight again.

"I like it back," I promised.

"Good, because not many people get to see so many wild things out here," she said proudly. "You just have to be very careful around them, because they are wild."

I nodded, knowing that. Dad had told me all about how wild animals could attack - even the nice ones like deer! He said that was how nature worked, and that it didn't mean to hurt us, but it was simply scared we'd hurt it first.

"I like the wild things a lot," I said, trying to explain. "And I know how to be careful and everything."

"Well, if you're lucky, maybe you'll get to see baby ones one day. Back when I was your age, they used to be all over, but not so much any more."

"Babies?" I gasped, sucking in an excited breath. "Yes! Aunt Margie, this is my favorite place in the whole wide world! Maybe when I grow up I can come live out here with you?"

"Yeah?" she asked, offering me her hand.

I reached for it, then paused. "Stone!" I called out, diving to pick up a silver-dollar-sized rock from between a pair of fallen leaves.

"Oh, that's a good one," she praised. "Maybe we'll go make some moonstones, hm?"



“Can we?” I begged. “And when the sun sets, maybe we can get just a little more lightning before I have to go.”

“I don’t know if you’ll be here long enough for that,” Aunt Margie said before offering me her hand again.

This time, I grabbed it. “I know,” I mumbled as she led me back through the trees, angling mostly towards her cottage. “But I don’t wanna go home yet.”

“Your dad has to go to work,” she reminded me.

“Yeah...”

“And you have to go to school,” she added. “That way you can learn all the most important things and become a very smart young lady.”

“But I don’t wanna go back to school,” I grumbled.

“How come, sweetie?”

“Because they don’t let me be the princess like you do,” I whined.

She laughed. “Oh, Sylvia, you will always be the princess. If nothing else, you’re *my* princess, okay? And if you get good grades, maybe you can come stay with me for a bit in the summer, hm? How does that sound?”

“Really, Aunt Margie?” I asked, bouncing beside her and forgetting all about the things I’d just seen in the middle of the forest. “And we can make some cookies and maybe build fairy houses?”

“You will have to ask your mother,” she warned me with a smile. Then she looked up. “Thank you, forest.”

“Yeah, thank you, forest!” I repeated obediently.

Because that was what Aunt Margie said was important. If I wanted to use the land, the plants, and even the animals, I needed to appreciate what they gave. That was how we kept things wild. We had to give them their space so they could give us ours.

And a good princess would take care of the forest forever. It was the last bastion of magic, she said - although I wasn’t

sure what a bastion was. I also didn't care. Princesses *and* magic? Yep, I was all in. So, just to make sure the forest knew that I really did appreciate it, I turned and waved at the heart of trees I'd made, still clenching my soon-to-be moonstone in that hand.

*Sylvia... the breeze whispered back.*

Which made me giggle. "I promise I'll come back soon, forest! This is my favorite place ever!"

"You tell those trees," Aunt Margie teased, but they were already replying.

*Sylvia is her name.*

*She will come back.*

*She gave us a heart.*

*Sylvia...*

The sound of their words was little more than the leaves rustling, but to me, it was proof that magic really did exist. No one else believed me but Aunt Margie. Dad just rolled his eyes and Mom told me to stop making up stories.

My little brother, though? He said I was just a liar. He called me names because of it, so this time I'd keep it to myself. I loved this place so much, and if they were just going to talk bad about it, then this would be mine and Aunt Margie's secret!

But when I climbed in the car to head home that evening, I had no clue how long it would be before we returned. Aunt Margie wasn't getting better, Mom said. She refused to see someone about her delusions. If she continued to decline like this, it wouldn't be safe for me to keep playing with her, because she really needed to be in a hospital.

That was the first time my heart ever broke.

PREVIEW - WITCHCRAFT IN  
THE WOODS

## CHAPTER 1

### SYLVIA

The soft gravel of the driveway rolled under my feet as I headed towards the gate. Pizza was the perfect way to end the final day of moving! Reese and Jackson now officially lived with me. Jennifer, Jayden, and Nora had pitched in to help get my boyfriends' stuff to my cottage.

But it had been chaos for the last two weeks. While Reese and Jackson were moving in with me, Nora and Jayden were moving into the guys' old place. Even better, it sounded like Erika and Beth had finally found a house they could afford, so they were making the big step of moving in together and taking their relationship to the next level.

It all felt like a win, like we were all finally getting our happy ending - or so I thought. And now, my part was done. The guys were here. All their stuff was here. The three of us were officially living together permanently, and the forest seemed to adore them. The smile on my lips felt like nothing could make it slip.

Down at the end of the driveway, a teenager was holding a stack of pizza boxes. "Ms. Holt?" he called.

"That's me," I promised, stretching my legs a little more.

"Sorry, I just didn't want to mess with the gate," he said. "And the boss added in free cinnamon sticks for you."

“Thank you!” I said as I cracked open the gate to get the boxes. “I’m just so glad you deliver this far out.”

“Not normally,” he mentioned, “but since you’re one of the founding families and all...”

I just nodded. “Yeah, only barely,” I assured him. “Still, I hope the tip makes up for the drive.”

“Sure does, ma’am,” the kid agreed, flashing me one more smile before hurrying back to his car.

I turned to make my way back to the cottage, thinking nothing of it. The kid’s car started up and began to move. I dared to glance back just in time to see a large black sedan with too much chrome trim turn into my driveway without caring that it was already occupied.

For a moment, I was sure there’d be an accident. The pizza guy’s car was in the way, and I didn’t have a spell ready to do anything to stop it! Tires squealed. Gravel flew. The pizza guy gunned it - and thankfully this stretch of road wasn’t the busy kind.

As one car rushed onto the road, the other slid into my driveway, stopping only inches in front of my gate. Above me, the trees were rustling. Before me, that idiot clearly needed a lesson on how to not kill people on my property!

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?!” I demanded.

The door of the fancy looking car opened and the trees got louder.

*He shouldn’t be here.*

*Tell the skunks to call the others.*

*The Grimson is not welcome.*

*Sylvia, be careful.*

I heard that last bit just as the man climbed out of his car. It was Kingsley Grimson, the leader of the old coven, the man who’d tried to screw me over so many times already. Standing in the middle of my driveway, no more than three paces back

from the gate while holding an armful of pizza, I felt like I was at a disadvantage here.

“What do you want?” I demanded.

Kingsley slammed the door to his car and stormed forward, not stopping until he was right at the gate. Suddenly, that flimsy wrought iron didn't seem to be enough of a boundary to hold him back.

“I want my magic back!” he growled.

“Not my problem,” I told him.

So he grabbed a pair of bars and leaned in. “It's the new moon today, and I still have no power. *You broke my magic!* Whatever you did on my land, you ruined my power, and I want it back.”

But I heard the gravel crunching behind me. A lot of it. That meant my backup was on its way.

“I had nothing to do with the loss of your magic,” I told Kingsley. “That was all you. Maybe you should've thought about appreciating it while you still had it.”

“You stole my power with your spices!” he screamed. “I got it back, and then you did it again with your animals. My son is *dead*, and all you can say is that it's not *your* fault? You should've kept your nose out of things you don't understand, Sylvia.”

“But it's not your fault, of course,” I grumbled, turning away because this conversation was clearly done.

All of my friends were walking closer. Reese and Jackson were at the front. Jayden, Nora, and Jennifer were following behind them. Overhead, the trees were leaning in, but people who came to my place were used to that. The forest out here wasn't like most.

“Here,” Jackson said, taking the pizza from my hands. “Let me handle that.”

“Mom will take it to the table,” Jayden offered, stealing the boxes from Jackson just to pass them to Jennifer.

“I will?” Jennifer asked even as her hands closed on them.

“You will,” Jayden assured her. “Mom, this is one of those things you don’t want to be around.”

“Right,” Jennifer agreed before turning and heading back towards the cottage.

But Kingsley wasn’t done. “I know you put *him* up to it, and I’m going to make sure he pays!”

Zane. That was who Kingsley meant, but the problem was I hadn’t seen a lot of Zane lately. Not with the moving. He’d said he needed to recover from the magical use he’d done that night, and we’d all been focused on boxes and fitting them into trucks.

“You know...” I turned back around to face Kingsley. “I really don’t care what you think. Shouldn’t you be mourning your son?”

“*You killed Lucien!*” Kingsley screamed.

“No!” I sliced a hand through the air. “You did. You were so worried about more and more and more magic. You’re the one who drained him to death. You could’ve let us go. You could’ve stopped fighting. Hell, you *could have* let the wild things go, but you didn’t. In your demand for magic, you wouldn’t let anything get in your way and *you* killed your son because of it.” I took another step closer, only stopping when Reese’s hand caught my arm. “Now you have to deal with that, Kingsley.”

“Give me back my power!” the man roared.

“No.”

And for a moment, we stood there staring at each other. The sound of Jennifer’s feet was now distant. The leaves overhead were still rustling as the forest whispered softly to itself. The few dozen yards between us felt like it was simultaneously too much and not quite enough.

Then Kingsley said, “If you don’t give me back my power, you know what will happen.”

Except I didn't. I had no clue what he was talking about. "I didn't take your power," I told him again.

"Then he did!" Kingsley rattled the gate. "The coven is broken. Our bonds were destroyed when that idiot recanted his oath." The old man pressed his face right up to the metal. "And without the coven, the spell on Summerpoint will fail."

Fuck. The spell.

"What spell?" Jayden asked behind me.

"The one that prevents bigotry and enables the continued effects of the magic the coven made before," I said.

"We told you about it," Nora hissed. "The one that keeps your mom's cancer away."

"Oh," Jayden muttered. "Right, from the fourth of July. Forgot about that."

"That spell," Kingsley almost purred. "The spell you need, Sylvia. You and your two boyfriends. You think people will be okay with you fucking both of them if we hadn't removed bigotry? You think they'd be so welcoming to a woman of your race? You think they'd like your little friend who can't decide if he's a man or a woman? What about the lesbians? *You need this spell.*"

Yeah, I did, but the way Kingsley bargained only made me hate the man more. Did he not know how to use the singular "they"? Never mind that I really hadn't taken his magic! Okay, so maybe I'd broken the bond between him and his land, but that had only given the place back to the forest.

What had broken his bond to his magic was Yatir. Not-deer had rejected Kingsley. That was what had severed the man's magic, but I didn't want to tell him that. I really didn't want to give this asshole any more ammunition than I had to.

So what I yelled back was, "I still can't give you back your power. I didn't take it!"

"But you have the grimoire!" he yelled. "You have the spells to fix this. You can give me back my power, and if you don't, your friends will be the ones paying for it."



“Or I can use that grimoire to fix it myself!”

He scoffed at that. “You still need a coven, and two wixen aren’t enough.” Then Kingsley smiled. “You need me, Sylvia. Admit it.”

“Syl...” Jackson breathed, sounding worried.

“Don’t,” Nora whispered.

Reese’s fingers simply gripped a little harder, almost like he was trying to convey something through the touch.

But my attention was still on Kingsley. “If you have no power, then why do I need you?” I asked. “You, old man, are useless. The coven is broken, you say? So why do I need any of that? I still have magic, and if I have to remake each and every spell for those people, then I will!”

“You stupid fucking girl!” Kingsley screamed. “Give me my magic. You do it or I’ll make you pay. You have no idea what I can do, and - “

I turned around and started walking back to the cottage. “Let’s go have some food, guys,” I told my friends.

They followed, but looked confused. “Syl?” Nora asked.

“He’s useless,” I told her. “He also can’t come in the forest.”

“Yeah, but what if he’s right?” Reese asked. “Supposedly, he has a lot of power in town.”

“Then we’ll deal with that if we have to,” I promised. “But I’m not giving his magic back simply because I can’t. I’m also not going to let him ruin my day.”

“Oh, but I have an idea,” Jackson said. “Forest? Can you convince him to leave?”

The breeze that swept through the treetops sure sounded like a collection of trees laughing. A moment later, Kingsley yelped in pain. I glanced back - and wasn’t the only one - in time to see the briars on the gate smack the man. The blackberries were reaching for him from the other side, all but forcing him to let go of the bars.

Kingsley took a step back, but the plants were reaching. They couldn't reach far enough, sadly, but the forest was made of more than just plants. Just when I was sure Kingsley would keep yelling from a few feet back, I saw the swarm.

Dozens of red hornets flew at him. At least one managed to sting the man. With one more yelp of pain, Kingsley realized that not even the driveway outside my gate was safe. The old man rushed for the door of his car and dove in, closing it quickly behind him.

Then Jayden, unable to help himself, lifted a middle finger in the best dismissal I could think of. "Have a nice day; don't come back," they yelled at Kingsley.

He probably hadn't heard that, but we had. It was just enough to lighten the mood. Sadly, it didn't fix the problem, because Kingsley was right. Damn it, but the man had to be. If the coven really was broken, then the spell that made Summerpoint so amazing was going to crumble soon. The real question was how much time we had left.

"Trees?" I asked. "Can someone call the wild things? I think I have some questions for Gyth."

*They are on their way*, a feminine tree assured me. It was a voice I recognized.

"Thank you, Maple," I said.

"What?" Nora asked, because she couldn't hear the trees.

"The wild things are coming," I told my friends. "So, sounds like we're going to have pizza on the deck. Reese, Jackson? Would you two bring some drinks out?"

"Something with alcohol," Nora said. "Because I have a feeling this isn't going to be a light talk."

"Nope," I agreed. "Not after what Kingsley said. Guys, I think we have a big problem."

"Least he waited for us all to finish moving in," Jayden grumbled. "Fucking founding families!"

"Not you," Nora quickly told me.

I just shrugged it off. “I’m not a founder in this town. I’m a Holt, not a Maybrook.”

“And I think that might even be important,” Reese said. “Not sure why, but just a feeling I’m getting.”

“Here’s hoping,” I mumbled.

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### **PROLOGUE**

My stomach was in knots as I walked into the juice bar. I'd texted Ashley telling her I'd be here, but her response had been a bit cold. Not that I could blame her, really. I'd missed yoga for almost a month now, and getting a smoothie was something we typically did after our workouts. Still, the moment I was inside, I saw her.

Blonde, beautiful, and as relaxed as ever, she'd claimed a booth at the front and was sipping on something disturbingly green. I lifted my hand in greeting, but it was weak and pathetic. When Ashley smiled back, one tiny weight fell from my shoulders. Unfortunately, there was plenty more to keep me mired in misery. Right now, our friendship was all I had

left, and if I lost that while trying to get the rest of my life together, I wasn't sure what I'd do, so I did the only thing I could. I slid onto the bench seat across from her.

"Sorry, I'm late," I mumbled.

"It's ok," she promised. "You getting something?"

"Uh..." I quickly ran over how much cash I had in my purse, then waved that off. "No, I just really wanted to talk to you."

"Ok." But she still raised her hand to flag down the waitress. "Another one of these and a strawberry cream for my friend?"

"Ash!" I hissed.

"Oh, don't even try that. I am *not* pigging out on my own."

The look she gave me was supposed to be intimidating, but in the best friend sort of way. The truth was that we both knew what she was doing, and I loved her a little more for it. The moment the high school kid left to fill the order, Ashley leaned closer and grabbed my hand, forcing me to stop fidgeting.

"Elena, what's going on?" she asked. "I'm worried about you."

Time for the moment of truth. I gripped her fingers a little tighter and took a very deep breath before blurting out, "I'm leaving Gerardo."

"Ok..." she drawled. "Did something happen between you two?"

"Gabby." I stopped, hoping that was enough of an answer, but the look on my best friend's face said it wasn't even close. "A while ago, I was trying to tell her to stand up for herself, and she told me I shouldn't talk because I didn't stand up for myself either!"

Slowly, Ashley nodded, looking like she was trying to process that. "So, you're leaving your husband because your daughter mouthed off? Elena, I love you, but that doesn't make any sense."

I paused, seeing the kid returning with our drinks. Ashley looked up, pointed out which one went where, and then took a polite sip of hers as the server wandered away again. Me? I slowly turned the glass back and forth, hoping it would make my apology to my friend a little easier.

“That’s why I haven’t been around,” I finally admitted, my voice a whispered breath. If I tried to say that louder, I knew she’d hear the tension of these nerves I was fighting. “I’ve been saving money, trying to put something away so I can have a deposit for a place to live. He’ll never let me have the house, and there’s no way I could afford it without his income. Plus there’s Gabby to think of, and -”

“Hold on,” Ashley said. Her confidence had the strangest way of soothing me. Just that tone of voice made me feel like she would put this whole talk back on track. “What’s going on in your marriage?”

“Um, I don’t think he respects me.”

She leaned closer. “Details. I am your best friend. I’m not here to judge you, just to listen and help. So, how about we start at the beginning, ok?”

I jiggled my head in something meant to be a nod. Then I took a sip of the smoothie, swallowed it, and sighed like all my anxiety would flow out with that breath. Easier said than done, but if I was going to stop being so meek, then this was my first step. Ashley would understand. She had to.

“When I was pregnant with Gabby, I think he cheated. He said he didn’t, and that I was just paranoid, so I believed him. And then, when she was born, he always worked a lot. He said it was because my kid cost so much, and he needed the overtime. *My* kid, Ash. Not *ours*. But I let it go.”

“And that was, what? Fourteen years ago? Why now?”

“Because it never got better.” I flopped my hands into the air in exasperation. “Marriage is forever. It’s a commitment. We’re supposed to work out the problems, and it’s supposed to be hard yet rewarding. But *he* isn’t putting in any effort! Since Gabby was born, it’s only gotten worse, and it happened so

slowly that I didn't even notice. We fought about something, and I compromised - but he didn't. Now it's just been like that for so long, you know? And then came the day that Gerardo was yelling at me because I signed us up to help with her play. He screamed about how he didn't have time for stupid things like that, and how theater was a waste of time, but Gabby could hear us. She loves her drama class, and he was just tearing it down - and you know what I did?"

"What?"

I paused, lifted my chin, and met her eyes. "Nothing."

She pushed her drink to the side. "And what does 'nothing' look like, Elena?"

"It looks like me telling him he didn't need to worry about it, I could handle the play without him, and saying I was sorry that I hadn't asked first. It looks like me tucking my tail between my legs, never thinking about my daughter listening from her room, and acting like inconveniencing my husband was so much worse than breaking her heart. It looks like me being the shittiest mother in the *world!*"

"Ok." Ashley lifted a hand, slowing my rant. "And then Gabby said that to you?"

"No, it was the next day, when her friends were over. One of them said Gabby needed to lose weight - she doesn't - because she didn't have a thigh gap, or something just as stupid. When I asked her about it later, intending to have a talk with her, you know, about eating disorders and such, she threw it back at me. She said I wouldn't know how to stand up for myself, and that she's fine. She's not going to do anything wrong. She's just not going to do anything *at all*. It was like a slap in the face! I mean, she learned all of that from me. She watches Gerardo push me around, and I always let him win. Always."

"Why?" Ashley pressed. "C'mon, honey. I can tell this is something big for you, so why do you let him win?"

I grabbed the tall, fluted glass with both hands, hoping it would ground me. "Because I hate confrontation. I hate



fighting. I thought that if he loved me, he'd want to make me happy, but I'm starting to think he just wants me to shut up and make dinner. I mean, this has been building, but..." I leaned in for a little sip from the straw, needing something to cool my throat. "I asked him to go to marriage counseling. He said no. I don't know what else to do. If he upsets me enough to make me cry, he sends me away because it makes him feel bad. Just think about that, Ash. Me crying is a problem for *him*? And it's been bad for a while, but I thought it would be easier on Gabby if I just waited until she got out of school. It's only a few more years, and we've been married this long, so I could just wait. I have my hobbies, and he doesn't fight with me if I don't say anything. But now? I mean, when she said that? My little girl is supposed to grow up and take on the world. She should be proud, and strong, and shouldn't let anyone push her around, but look at this. Look at what I've been teaching her without even knowing it! Sit down, shut up, don't pick fights, and do whatever your man wants even if it kills you inside. What kind of lesson is that for a teenager?"

I paused to grab one of the napkins, then pressed it under my eyes to make sure my mascara hadn't smudged. I wasn't crying, but my eyes were definitely damp. Across from me, Ashley waited, knowing that my tirade wasn't quite done. She didn't press me, but she also didn't try to make it stop. She knew I wasn't used to this. I didn't air out my dirty laundry for just anyone, and this was possibly the hardest thing I'd ever done - and also the easiest. It felt oddly... good.

"I want my daughter to be strong," I finally said. "I don't want her to be like me, but she can't learn that without an example. She needs me to step up, and letting my husband do this? No, he isn't hitting me, and I don't think he's cheated in a while, but I'm not sure. Or maybe I am. I don't know! I mean, he hasn't done anything I can prove is 'wrong' to make me leave, but he hasn't done anything 'right,' either. He doesn't love me, and the truth is that I just don't love him, either." I leaned closer and dropped my voice. "I can't remember the last time we had sex, but it's been more than two years!"

"Ouch," she said in sympathy.

I nodded. “And this is what I’m teaching Gabby is a ‘good’ marriage? When she threw it in my face that her father walks all over me, I realized that I’m not doing this because I want to take care of her. I’m staying with him because I’m too weak to leave, and that does *not* make me a good mother. It makes me scared and helpless. It means I’m teaching her that some man’s comfort is more important than hers. His wishes, his desires, and his everything gets put first because I’m too *weak* to stand up for myself, let alone my daughter! If I want her to be strong, then I have to figure out how to do it first. I need to stop rolling over and ignoring it because all that does is prove to my little girl that this is how women are supposed to act, and it’s not.”

“Ok,” she said, reaching out to grab my hand. “How long has this been going on?”

I swallowed. “Fourteen years, give or take?”

She nodded once. “And Gabby saying that was your breaking point, right? Have you talked to him?”

I nodded again. “Often, but lately, I’ve been seriously trying to make something change. I told him he was setting a bad example for his child, and he said she’s making good grades. I told him I need more, and he said I’ve been fine this long. I *keep* trying to talk to him, but maybe he ignores me because I don’t yell? I don’t know, actually. All I know is that the harder I try, the worse it gets, and....” I sighed, feeling some strange sense of peace come over me, like what I was about to say would finally make it real. “I’m done, Ash. I can’t make him change, and I don’t deserve to put up with this. I know I’m not perfect. Trust me, I know that. I also know that if I don’t do something, I won’t come any closer. I need to respect myself first, right?”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

I nodded. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. I...” The words failed me, but one idea kept rolling around and around in my head. I knew it would sound stupid, but right now, it was my lifeline, and this was Ashley, my best friend. The one person who seemed to get me better than

anyone else. So I just had to blurt it out and see how she took it. “I want to be stronger. I want to be independent. I just want to wake up in the morning and be proud of who I am, and I can’t do that right now. Not with him always pushing me back down, telling me to stop making problems.”

“Ok.” The look on her face said she was thinking, and fast. “So what’s the first step? Because you know I’m *always* going to help. I just want to make sure you’ve actually thought about this. What’s your first step, Elena?”

“I need a place to live, somewhere I can afford. I need to do this before school starts, since I will be taking Gabby with me. Um...” I reached up to scrub at my face, hoping I didn’t look like a complete train wreck. “I know it’s going to be hard, and Gabby will hate having the finances cut in half, but if I had a better job...” Then I stopped. “I dunno. Mine’s got great hours, but the pay isn’t enough. I could get a second, although then Gabby would be home alone all the time. Um... Yeah. Getting set up to live on my own is the first step, I guess?”

“How soon?” she asked.

I licked at my lips. “A month, maybe? The sooner, the better. I’m serious, the tension at home is thick enough that Gabby’s been spending more time in her room or with friends. This can’t go on much longer.”

Slowly, a smile was starting to form on my best friend’s lips. For a moment, I wanted to snap at her for not taking this seriously, although I figured she had a plan. Ashley always did. That was what I liked most about her. She was only a couple of years younger than me, but she’d found that perfect balance between being a free spirit and keeping her crap together.

“So how much would you need to make a month to cover everything?” she asked.

“Depends on rent at my new place.”

“Ok, without that. How much would you need to pay the bills, afford groceries and clothes for Gabby, and still have

enough to put some in savings? Three thousand a month? Five?"

I murmured as I thought it over. "I'm making twenty-two hundred a month right now. Three thousand would be a serious step up in life."

"Sold!" she announced, slapping the table to prove her point. "I think I have the perfect answer to all your problems. Yesterday, I was told I get to hire a leasing manager for the front office. Needs to be someone good with customers, with human resources experience, and who's professional looking. The job is Monday through Friday, eight am to five pm, and the dress is business casual." Then she grinned. "And not only is the position paying eighty thousand a year, with room for annual raises, but it also includes a house in the community."

"In Wolf's Run?" I gasped.

I'd been to Ashley's place before. I'd also seen the billboards along the highway for the development and had heard the talk about it on the news. Wolf's Run was an *exclusive* community. The kind of exclusive that wasn't just doctors and lawyers, but more like year-long waiting lists and the talk of the town. It was a community built to make neighbors neighborly again, and so far above anywhere else that I would be able to afford.

"There's a catch," she warned me. "The employees get the houses at the front, and we have to keep them presentable because they're the first impression. On the upside, that means the office is across the street. The downside is that we're expected to maintain our lawns and homes in such a way as to sell the place. That's why we get free rent. We're the examples. The model homes, if you will."

"Are you kidding me right now?"

"No," she promised. "I was honestly considering how to ask you. I mean, you'd be working under me, and I didn't want that to mess up our friendship, but I think you'd be perfect. And if this will help you and Gabby?"

“It’d be a miracle,” I admitted, feeling my eyes do that tingling thing again, but this time for a whole different reason. “If I had a job and a home in there, Gerardo would be less likely to get custody! I just don’t want you to feel like you have to hire me.”

“I don’t,” she promised. “Elena, the kind of people we approve aren’t always what’s expected. Some of the ones we deny can get really upset. They’ll yell and scream, threaten to sue, and just about everything else. You say you want to get stronger? Well, this will be the perfect chance. I need someone with enough spine to stand her ground, but sweet enough to make everyone think they have a chance.” Then she canted her head. “And it won’t hurt at all that you can speak Spanish.”

“Oh, so you mean it’ll look good to hire a minority?” I teased.

She giggled. “Well, exclusive communities can get a little white-washed. Ours isn’t too bad, but I think having you up front will chase off any of the neo-nazi types before they apply. Or is that out of line?”

“I am totally ok with being used,” I decided. “You just have to promise that when some rich idiot tells me to ‘go back to my country,’ you’ve got my back.”

“Always,” she swore. “Not just as your boss, but also as your best friend. So...” She lifted her glass and sucked back at least half of it in one gulp. “You wanna ride over with me and see the house? Check out the place and make sure it’ll work? See what else we have to do to make this happen? Have some wine and plan out how my bestie is going to get divorced?”

“You don’t have to do that,” I told her. “It’s not your problem, Ash, and I’m sorry I just dumped all of this on you. I honestly thought I was just explaining why I’ve been such a bad friend.”

“And I’m a *great* friend,” she teased. “You’re set on this path, and I can’t say I really blame you, so I’m all in. Now, what about the house? Wanna see what your future holds, or not yet?”

“It’s in *Wolf’s Run*,” I pointed out. “The nicest, safest, and most prestigious community in town. You think I wouldn’t want to see it?”

She gestured to my drink. “Then finish that, and let’s get out of here! Besides, I have a feeling I can help in more ways than just this. Have I mentioned that I have an *entire* wine fridge? Yeah, and it’s stocked. There’s nothing better to help a woman find her spine than consuming a few bottles.”

“That,” I assured her, “I can do.” I was done with being weak. I was tired of being pushed around. For once in my life, I was going to do it on my own, and if I was lucky, I’d end up as the kind of mom I’d always wanted to be.



## CHAPTER 1

A month later, I moved out. Gerardo didn't think I was serious, not until I started packing my things. Then he tried to say I'd never make it. Too bad for him, that only secured my resolve. Gabby wasn't happy when I had the talk with her, but no teenager wanted to hear her parents were getting divorced.

Thankfully, she didn't hesitate to come with me - although she wanted it known she was pissed about moving. In her mind, the dad was supposed to move out so she could keep her old life. Then I told her where we'd be living. That helped, but teen angst was still stronger than even the idea of a fancy new neighborhood.

And Wolf's Run was the type of place most people could only dream of. From the tall brick walls around the thousand-acre property to the highly managed flowerbeds decorating the medians, everything was designed to please the eye. Then there were the homes.

I took the long way around the community so my daughter could see her new neighborhood. We passed large houses and miniature mansions. The cars in the driveways ranged from brand new trucks to wonderfully maintained classic sports cars, with a few BMWs and such thrown in for good measure. For a woman who'd grown up on the wrong side of the tracks

and clawed her way up to the middle class, this was a little intimidating. It was the last place I ever would have expected to live, especially after leaving my husband of eighteen years, and yet here we were.

Beside me, my daughter had her face pressed to the glass, gawking at everything. “Did you tell Dad where we’re living now?” she asked. “I think this is nicer than some of his client’s homes.”

“Your father has our new address.” I made the final turn, heading back toward the front of the community. “And the last one up there is going to be ours.”

Gabby’s nose scrunched up when her eyes fell on the smallest house on the street. In the wedge-shaped lot that was tucked in beside the main gates, it was set on an angle due to the almost cul de sac shape of that turn, the front tilted slightly toward the larger home beside it. And while small by comparison, it was still bigger than what we’d had before.

“The little one?” she asked. “Why didn’t you get one of the nice houses, Mom?”

“It’s very nice, Gabby, and plenty big for the two of us. It’s a three-bedroom, which means we’ll even have a spare. Plus, we also get to make it our own and do things like plant flowers...” I looked over at her. “And mow the lawn.”

“Aw, Mom,” she groaned. “Dad would hire someone for that.”

“I’m just glad we have a lawn to worry about. Gabby, it’s only the two of us, and this is more than I can honestly afford,” I reminded her, well aware that in her teenage mind, money just grew on trees. “We’ll have to be frugal until I start getting paid, but I’ll try to be fair, ok?”

She slowly nodded - then sucked in a little breath as I eased the car to a stop beside our curb. Her eyes were locked on the house beside ours and its open garage filled with people.

“Whoa. *Those* are the neighbors?” she asked.



Turning off the car, I followed where her finger was pointing, and damn. Clearly, my daughter had inherited my taste in men because the four guys lounging around a collection of weights inside the garage were physical perfection. That none of them had on shirts, and half wore loose-fitting pants - the kind that hung a little too low - only made it more obvious.

“Close your mouth, honey,” I said, trying to act like I didn’t care about their ripped bodies. “Those men are a little old for you.”

“And too young for you,” she shot back. “But maybe that’s why you decided to screw up my whole life, huh? You left dad to sleep around, didn’t you?”

“Gabiella,” I snapped. “That is not why your father and I split up, and you know it!”

She huffed in the way that only teen girls could. “Well, *he* said that’s what happened. And you did. *You* left *him*, Mom.” Then she shoved open the door and surged out of the car to glare at me with her arms crossed.

I paused to drag a hand down my face. I completely understood her anger. Hell, I was angry at myself for not being able to fix things with Gerardo, but for him to say that to her? It was going too far. Even if it was what he thought - and he was *wrong* - he should’ve known better!

But that was how Gerardo worked. He’d mastered the ability to shift things so he looked like the victim, never the villain. Not that my soon-to-be ex-husband was a bad man, he just wasn’t a great father. Or husband. Or, well, great anything except an employee. His greatest love was the pride he got from his success at work, and I’d been more than willing to take a step down in life to find a little of my own happiness again.

The honest truth was I’d left because I was just sick and tired of being lonely. I was tired of being treated like a maid and a roommate. No one should accept being taken for granted, and no matter how hard I tried to find a middle ground with my husband, it just hadn’t happened. We’d simply

grown in two different directions. While he'd been off chasing promotions and awards, I'd gotten tired of waiting to be noticed. And somewhere in there, I'd managed to forget who I was.

I'd become his wife and Gabby's mom. I was the chaperone or the hostess, sometimes even the maid. All of that was fine, right up until I wanted to be something that helped no one else but me: the painter, or maybe the ballroom dancer. As soon as my goals inconvenienced my husband in the slightest, they were deemed selfish and unworthy. *That* was why I'd left, because I deserved to actually live, not just make sure that everyone else could.

Although leaving meant moving, which Gabby had tolerated better than I'd expected. Even worse, it also came with a new school just days before her high school debut - and so my daughter blamed me for ruining her life. She wasn't exactly wrong.

We'd gone from middle-class suburbia to a fancy house and a careful budget thanks to the debts of moving and my upcoming divorce. We now lived on the complete opposite side of town, which meant she'd left all of her friends behind, and we were living in a place where we would probably be the only brown people around. The stability of her life had just been destroyed, and all so I could find some in mine. Plus, there was the fact that she was a little too good at playing on my guilt.

"Staring is still rude," I told her through the car door, deciding that was the easiest way to handle this. "Go pick out your room. The movers should be here in a minute with our stuff, and they'll need to know where to put it."

"Whatever." With that, she stormed up the yard.

Yep, Gabby was mad at me. While I put my keys in my purse, I watched her jog away, angling for the wrong side of the house. When I realized what she was doing, a moment of sheer panic twisted my guts. I thrust open the door in a hurry, but it was too late. My brazen daughter was already halfway to the neighbor's driveway with her hand stretched out and a

smile plastered onto her face. The four guys she'd been drooling over were making their way toward her.

"Hi," I heard her say in a much too chipper voice. "I'm Gabriella Castillo, and we're moving in next door."

Four men stepped up to greet her, shoulder to shoulder like a barrier. All of them were built like fitness models. Side by side, they looked like something that belonged on Pinterest for women to drool over. The best part was their matching amber-colored eyes. I wasn't sure if these boys were brothers - because they honestly looked nothing alike - but each one had the same yellowish-brown irises. It was a shade that was impossible to miss. I'd only ever seen one person with eyes like that before, and I'd always envied Ashley's striking eye color.

As I hurried to catch up, the men stopped just at the edge of the property line. The third one jerked his chin in her direction. "Didn't know we were getting neighbors."

"Yeah," Gabby told him. "So brace for the moving van that will be here soon."

"Great," one of the others mumbled.

"You know about this, Ian?" another asked.

The apparent leader shook his head, proving he was Ian. "Nope. Hadn't heard a thing."

Standing before my daughter made it obvious that Ian was anything but small. Her head barely reached his shoulder, and his chest was almost twice the width of hers. The lines of muscles decorating his abdomen were amazing, and Gabby was enjoying the view. She didn't bother checking out his cocoa brown hair or the close-cropped beard. Nope, my little girl's eyes dropped right to his happy trail. She didn't even look guilty about it.

"Gabby!" I snapped when I was close enough that it wouldn't be a yell. "I told you to go pick out a room. Now! Don't bother the neighbors."

Ian grunted in agreement. "That's probably safest."

Gabby rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry, she doesn’t care what I want anyway, but it’s nice to meet you guys.”

“Yeah,” he said, and the others mumbled similar sentiments. My kid had clearly caught them off guard.

I stepped up to take Gabby’s place as she scurried away before I could yell at her again. “Sorry about my daughter,” I told the guys. “Like a typical teenager, she’s not overly thrilled with the idea of moving and is trying to make sure I pay for it. This was her attempt to embarrass me.”

Ian crossed his arms over his chest. “I honestly had no clue the corner lot had been leased.”

“I just got hired for the front office,” I explained. “The best perk of the job is living inside the gates, right?” This guy was giving me some very unwelcome vibes.

I started to step back, but his next words made me pause. “Ashley hired someone?”

I nodded, hoping I hadn’t just made a mess of this. My goal was to live here for a while, and upsetting the neighbors wouldn’t be a good idea. Especially not ones who actually *paid* to live here. And while, yes, these guys were hot, I also couldn’t forget that they all looked young enough to think of me as the old lady living next door. And they were probably rich. If they wanted to make our lives hell, they could.

“I’m the new leasing manager,” I told him, making sure I looked nothing but professional, even if I wasn’t exactly dressed for it. “Sorry my daughter bothered you. I’ll let you get back to what you were doing.”

I turned for the house as fast as I could. They were most likely waiting for me to cause problems and start complaining about their party life or music. Then again, that was something my husband would’ve said. He always expected the worst from people, and it was one more thing I needed to put on my list to change. Just because they weren’t welcoming didn’t mean they were bad. Just surprised, right?

Besides, up close, they looked a bit older than they had from the car. Probably closer to thirty than twenty, if I had to

guess, and in *very* good shape. Still too young for me, but old enough that I wouldn't feel bad about *looking*. I hadn't missed the weight set taking up most of the garage. The big question was how often they came over to work out. If this was a regular thing, then Ashley had just given me the best lot in the estate. My home was within walking distance of work *and* came with a killer view.

Thinking about my best-friend-turned-boss, I fished my phone out of my purse and sent Ashley a text.

**Elena:** So we made it.

Her reply came back almost instantly.

**Ashley:** You're there? Perfect! I'm coming over. Have housewarming gifts.

Typical Ashley. We'd met initially through my previous job, and again when we ended up in the same yoga class a few months later. Eventually, some of us started getting together for smoothies after our sessions, and the two of us had gravitated to each other. Kindred souls, she'd called it. I'd known her for a couple of years now, and yet it felt like she'd been a part of my life forever. Soul mates of the best friend variety.

And now, I had her to thank for all of this. I had never expected her to give me a job. That was so far above and beyond that the least I could do was make sure she didn't regret it. The idea of working with her every day was pretty much heaven. And this? The house, the job, and the pay that came with it? This was my ticket to a fresh start. A new life. One where I could finally get it right.

I was barely inside before I heard a car pull up out front. Turning in place, I opened the door again in time to see Ashley unfolding herself from behind the wheel of her adorable MG Midget. The car was tiny, but perfect for her. It was exactly the kind of thing one would expect an elegant blonde bombshell to drive. Then, she leaned over to grab the gifts she'd promised.

"I come bearing the necessities of life," she called across the lawn. "Wine for you and chocolate for Gabby."

I grinned and opened the door a little wider, inviting her in. “And a list of utilities, right?”

“Already emailed those to you,” she assured me as she headed straight for the kitchen. “Gabby! I have chocolate!”

“On the phone,” Gabby yelled back from upstairs.

I just sighed. “She’s moping.”

“Do you really blame her?” Ashley asked. “Everything she knew just vanished. I remember when my parents split up, and I was in *college*. But how are *you* handling all of this?”

I lifted my hands and let them flop back to my sides. “One step at a time. Ask me again after I’ve managed to get everything unpacked and sorted out because that’s when it’ll feel real.”

“Promise, and you have all weekend to worry about that before your first day.” Then she pointed at the wine she’d brought over. “And I won’t tell if you decide to drink that straight from the bottle. Elena, you should be proud of yourself. You’re starting a whole new chapter in your life. One where you get to make your own rules and finally be happy.”

I grabbed the bottle and started peeling off the protective seal to reach the cork. “Fingers crossed, because I’d kind of like to get a little of that fairy tale perfection before I’m too old to enjoy it.”

“You and me both,” she agreed, passing over a corkscrew she’d pulled from her purse. “And you’re going to share that, right?”

“Hell yeah, I am.”



## CHAPTER 2

When I saw Ashley pull up at the neighbor's house, I was fuming. What was she *thinking* bringing these people into our neighborhood? Did she have any idea how dangerous this was? Never mind the way that human girl had walked over like we were all going to be the best of friends.

No, this had to be dealt with, and soon. I tried to work out a little more, but I couldn't get over the rage building inside me. The full moon tonight explained part of that, but not all. Mostly, it was just my sister disrespecting my authority. I loved Ashley to death, but if she wanted to lead this pack, then she shouldn't have stepped aside.

Eventually, I gave up. A cold shower helped cool my temper, but not nearly enough. Finally, my sister's car started up, proving she was done with her visit, so I grabbed my phone and sent off a text.

**Ian:** Meet me at Dad's. Five minutes.

Without waiting for a response, I told the guys to keep an eye on things and headed to my father's house on the opposite side of the community entrance. I didn't bother to knock, just stormed in, slamming the door behind me, and didn't stop until I reached his office. Henry heard me coming.

He was leaned back in his chair with a bemused expression on his face. "So, what is it this time, Ian?"

"Ashley hired humans," I snapped.

My father chuckled. “Her best friend, actually. Does she know you’re angry about this?”

“She’s about to,” I said, tilting my head when I heard the front door open. “The entire point of Wolf’s Run is to give us a human-free area to live in peace!”

A heavy sigh proved that my sister had heard me. “I needed a leasing manager, Ian.”

“You could’ve hired a wolf,” I shot back.

She lifted a perfectly manicured brow. “Natural-born or changed? Would it matter if they had any experience? No, I’m sorry. This was a business decision. It has nothing to do with the pack.”

“It has *everything* to do with the pack,” I shot back as I stormed into her face. “All it takes is one person with a cell phone, and I can promise you her teenage daughter has one. One video uploaded onto YouTube. For *hundreds* of years, we’ve lived in isolation, making communes and cults so people can explain away our strange behavior. It’s not going to work much longer. Everyone carries a phone. That means a camera and video. Let’s not even talk about Google mapping everything from space. And now that I’ve finally convinced people this is worth trying, you decide to risk it all for some woman you know?”

One side of her mouth curled into a smile. “Are you *scared*? Doesn’t look good on you, Alpha.”

If my throat could’ve handled it, I would’ve growled at her, but my body was in the wrong form. “You are not the leader of this pack, Ashley. *I am*. And if you think that stepping aside means you get to disrespect me, then think again.”

She moved, surging into me so fast I barely had the chance to grab her wrist before she was squeezing my throat. “I love you, little brother, but don’t think I’ve gotten weak. Elena’s staying because I owe it to her. She may not understand pack loyalty, but I do. That woman has been there for me when even you weren’t, so give her a fucking chance.”



Finally, I pushed her hand away. “No. We promised the people here the freedom to move around in whatever form they prefer. We’ve painted this place to be elite enough that we can be eccentric. Never mind the risks of that teenage girl! Have you thought about that? When she brings her little friends over to play and they decide to go hiking? I’m sure her mother would *love* to hear about the naked walking group, right? Or do you have a better way to explain all those people shedding their clothes to run off into the woods?”

“Then *fix* it,” she told me. “Make rules. Talk to the pack and warn them to stay away from the office. I don’t care. We have a couple of days before she officially starts at the office. That gives you time to introduce her. Invite the neighborhood over, show her off, and let them all see who to avoid.”

“But why?” I asked. “Why are you so adamant that she needs to be *here* of all places?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

Of course, my father chose that moment to join the conversation. “You’ve made it clear that mixed couples are allowed, haven’t you? What makes the wife or husband of a wolf different from this woman?”

“The simple fact that they know what they married,” I told them. “Anyone who lives here knows about wolves, and we don’t need to hide from them, but her? That woman and her child? Not a clue.”

“How can you be so sure?” Ashley countered.

I looked at her like she was an idiot. “Because I know you, Ash. She’s part of this little fantasy life that you’ve made outside these walls. The one where you pretend like everything is fine, and you can just be normal. Yeah? Well, bringing her here is going to destroy that. Eventually, she’ll figure it out. We can’t hide everything, and we shouldn’t have to. Not in our own homes!”

Ashley nodded. “I was actually thinking that she’d be a good test. I mean, if we can make Elena accept that werewolves exist, even if it’s not for the reasons she’s seen in

the movies, then isn't that a big step? Couldn't we use that to do something different?"

Henry lifted his hand, stopping me before I could yell again. "What are you thinking, Ashley?"

She flailed an arm at me. "Ian's always saying that the best defense would be a slow integration, right? Well, having Elena here is a good way to test that. To ease the pack into living so close to humans. Our core group is one thing, but the new members? They came here because they don't want to isolate themselves from the luxuries of modern life."

"And what does that have to do with the human?" I asked her.

"Her *name* is *Elena*," Ashley said, a clear warning in her voice to get it right. "And I want to tell her. I just figured that if she's living here, slowly getting exposed to the idea, then she'll come around. And when she figures out that there's something just a bit different about us, I think she'll ask me. Just... Can you give me a few months? I mean, having her here will keep things under control. No one's going to wolf out in front of her - or the potential clients coming to look at the houses."

"Shift," Henry corrected. "I do not like that slang term."

"Regardless," Ashley said, plowing forward with this, "I put her in the front lot, furthest from the community. She's in an easy place to keep isolated, and I'll say there's a curfew or something so Gabby won't go out. You tell the pack that daylight hours are human hours, unless they're inside, and it takes away the risk of someone looking at a house and seeing the wrong thing. We're going to have potential clients walking through, and not all of them will be wolves, Ian. If we don't show the homes, we're breaking discrimination laws, so we have to at least let the prospective clients *see* them."

"Which means humans in Wolf's Run," Henry clarified. "Even if they aren't working at the front office. That's why I told Ashley it was ok."

Well, fuck. If my father approved of this, then I was already fighting a losing battle. The worst part was that they had a point. The only question was what to do about it. The problem with three alphas living together was that I couldn't push them to agree with me. They'd be just as likely to push back.

And I really did want things to change. I wanted it to be possible for my kids to live in a world where being a wolf was accepted. Where this wasn't some mystical hocus pocus thing. We all knew there'd be resistance, and that some group would deem us evil - probably the religious types since that was how it always went down - but we weren't ready yet.

Although, if this Elena woman was going to be here, then I could see just how far I could push her. A test, as Ashley had mentioned. I just needed to have a ready excuse to explain away the things she wouldn't understand and walk that very narrow line between the truth and lies. Too many times, I'd seen people snap when they realized we were different. The shock and fear made them do stupid things. Usually, with guns pointed at one of us.

Speaking of that. "Does she own a gun?" I asked.

Ashley actually laughed. "No, she doesn't. Elena's not exactly the 'protect herself' type. She's more of the 'try not to cause problems' type."

"Ok." I turned, pacing the length of the room as I thought. "So we'll need to introduce her to the community. Some innocuous gathering where they can all see her and ask us if they have questions." Reaching my father's desk, I turned back toward Ashley and kept walking. "You can use training her as an excuse to keep the approval process under your control."

"And," Ashley said, interrupting my thoughts, "I'll find out which habits we have that set her on edge. Things we should be conscious of. She can be a barometer for human sensitivities, ok?"

I nodded once, accepting that. "What about the disease?"

Ashley rolled her eyes. “It’s bloodborne! Just like all the other gross stuff. If we have a medical emergency, we’ll use gloves. That’s why they’re in the first aid kit. I’m looking for a doctor to move in, but don’t have one yet.”

“That works for the mother, but what about the kid?”

“Gabby?” Ashley blew that off. “She’s not an idiot, Ian. Look, this is going to be fine. If you keep the wolves away from them, then the chances of exposure are minimal. Wolf-form bites are the most likely, and no wolves mean no bites.”

Those were the same words I’d used when convincing Dad that this community thing would be a good idea. For Ashley to throw it back in my face stung, but also proved that she was right. Mostly right, at least.

“So should I assume you have a plan for what to do when she finds out?” I met my sister’s eyes, daring her to do something about it. “Because no plan ever works like we want. She will find out, and probably in the worst way. I just hope you’re prepared for the fallout when that happens.”

“She won’t expose us,” Ashley insisted. “That’s why I chose her. I *trust* her, Ian, and she needs us.”

“*She* is not my problem,” I reminded my sister. “Everyone else in this pack is. Your little friend is just a human.”

“She’s not.”

I lifted both of my brows, waiting for some amazing revelation. “Then what is she?”

“The ‘just’ part,” Ashley grumbled. “She’s not *just* anything. Elena’s a woman who’s been pushed around her entire life, and she just keeps going, trying to make things easy on those around her.”

“And just a human,” I said again, rubbing it in.

My sister’s jaw clenched in frustration. “Yeah. Fine. She’s *just* a human who happens to be my best fucking friend. A human who I want to protect and take care of. So, if you don’t want her here, then you don’t want me here, and you really need to think about that, *Alpha*, since I’m not the only person

who's going to have friends or family that aren't like us. You need to figure your shit out because Wolf's Run can either be our own isolation, or we can integrate. The problem is that we can't do both."

"Fine!" I told her, knowing she was right. "The humans can stay, but we're going to make sure everyone else knows that they're here because of you."

"I'm ok with that," she told me.

From his chair, my father just sighed. "Well, now that *that* is settled, I almost don't want to point out that the full moon is tonight."

I smiled at my sister. "Guess who's not running with the pack?"

"Not a problem," she told me. "I already invited Elena and Gabby over to watch movies since their things are still in boxes." Then she wiggled her fingers at me and turned, damned near flouncing away. "Have a good run, you two! I'm going to play with the humans."

All I could do was groan, but when Dad's sound joined mine, I felt a little vindicated. "You know," he said, "I expected you to run her out of here before now."

"She's my sister," I reminded him.

"Yes, I'm well aware of that - and I'm your father. I also know that it can't be easy on an Alpha to have the pack's former leader and heir apparent pushing his buttons. Just let me know before you send her off so I can make sure she lands on her feet?"

"I'm not sending her off," I promised. "Believe it or not, I actually like my big sister. Besides, we're making this place so we can do things differently, right? So we don't have to leave our families behind? Well, you two are my family, and she may piss me off *sometimes*, but..."

"She's still your sister," Dad finished, showing he understood completely. "I'm proud of you, Ian. You're a good Alpha. Much better than your sister would've been."

But we both knew that was only half true.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Auryn Hadley is happily married with three canine children and a herd of feral cats that her husband keeps feeding. Between her love for animals, video games, and a good book, she has enough ideas to spend the rest of her life trying to get them out. They all live in Texas, land of the blistering sun, where she spends her days feeding her addictions – including drinking way too much coffee.

For a complete list of books by Auryn Hadley, visit my [Amazon Author Page](#), my [Books2Read Reading List](#) or check out my website: [aurynhadley.com](http://aurynhadley.com)



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