

CURSED



DESCENDANTS



WICKED
COVEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A.S. GREEN

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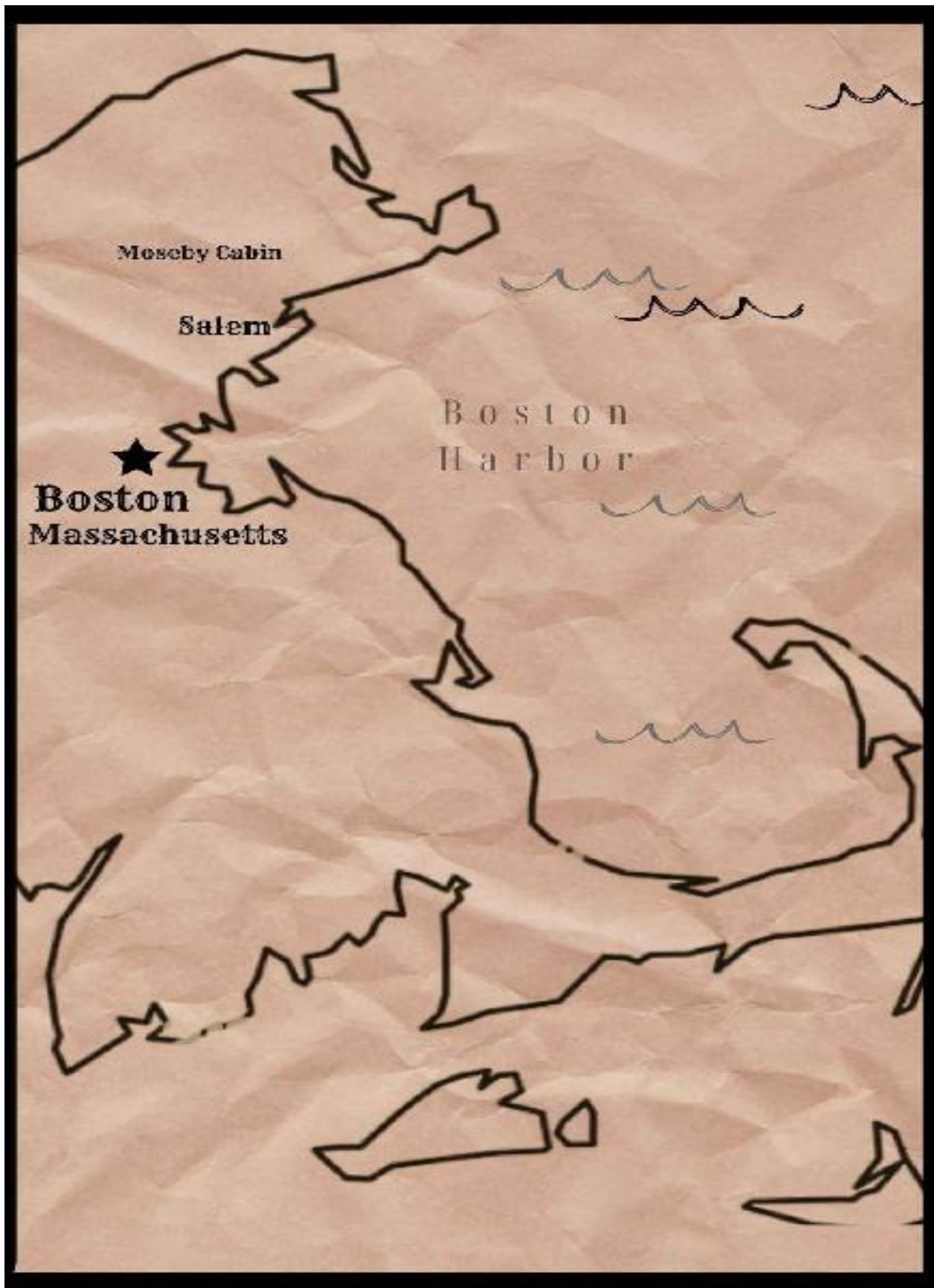
HEY, READER!

There are 12 references to pop culture witches hidden in the text of this book. Find all 12 - or as many as you can - and submit them by clicking this [form](#). Or scan the image below to get the form. Those readers who find the most references will be entered in a drawing to win bookish prizes.

This is a game for *early* readers only. Winners will be announced in my [Newsletter](#) and in my [Facebook Reader Group](#) on Halloween 2023.



And now for *Wicked Coven*, book 1 in the *Cursed Descendants* series.



Moseby Cabin

Salem

★
Boston
Massachusetts

Boston
Harbor

*Who knows why we were taught to fear the witches,
and not the ones who burned them alive.*

-Anonymous

AUTHOR'S NOTE

In 1692, more than 200 people were accused of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts and the surrounding communities. My ancestor, Samuel Wardwell, his wife, and daughter were among them.

Samuel practiced folk magic and was known for his accurate prophecies. He confessed to being a witch, thinking a confession might save him and his family. (Confessions had been known to save a few from the gallows.)

Unfortunately, though Samuel's wife and daughter were spared, he was hanged on September 22, 1692, one of nineteen others who were executed that summer and early fall.

I have wanted to write a novel based on my family connection to this story for a very long time, and while it's fascinating fodder for fiction, it must be noted that the people who were tried and hanged in Salem have all been exonerated.

May they rest in peace.

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CHAPTER
ONE

“You can’t hide from me, you little bugger.” A bell rang out, and Stella Aldren rose from her crouch behind the sales counter.

Customers were infinitely more important than a missing inventory log—especially when she had no employees to help her, a blood-sucking mortgage, plus a hefty business loan to repay. She’d been late on her last two payments.

Pushing her long auburn hair off her face, she slapped on a smile. “Welcome to Broomstix.”

A tall, athletic teenager—*Josh*, if she believed the name embroidered on his letterman jacket—stood inside the door, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the store’s dim lighting.

Stella hated the fluorescent bulbs used in most retail spaces. Her wares required a certain...*ambience*. So, she lit the store with dozens of candles—battery operated so the fire marshal didn’t ride her ass.

“Wow,” the kid said after his pupils sufficiently dilated. “This place looks amazing.”

“Thanks,” Stella said, a familiar glow of pride lighting her smile.

Her magic store operated on the ground floor of the seventeenth-century house she bought and renovated two years ago. The shop floor was a veritable feast for the eyes, if she did say so herself.

“My name’s Stella. Let me know if there’s anything I can help you find.”

“Do you have anything on monsters?” Up to that point, the kid hadn’t looked her way. When he finally did, he blinked, and his eyes widened.

His gaze traveled down Stella’s body, taking in her black lace dress and corset that cut under her breasts and pushed them up to a ridiculous height.

What could she say? When you owned a magic store, you dressed the part.

His gaze finally returned to her face, and she raised an eyebrow. The tops of his ears flared so red they were visible even in the dim light.

Why men and boys always thought they were being subtle in their ogling was beyond her, so she ignored his reaction and, instead, concentrated on his question about monsters. It was an interesting one because she had several ways to answer it.

Of course, she started with the most obvious option. In a town like Salem, someone like her couldn't be too careful.

"You mean a *book* on monsters?" Stella tucked her hair behind her ear and tried to get a better read on the kid.

She couldn't detect the scent of any magic—light or dark. Her nose didn't twitch. Not even a little.

"Yep. Like a book." He forced his eyes back to the three walls of floor-to-ceiling shelves that Stella kept jam-packed with books on myths, witchcraft, and other supernatural mayhem.

"I'm sure I can help you out," she said. "How much time do you have to shop?"

"Not long. I'm visiting Salem with my family."

He ran his hand along the rectangular table in the center of the floor. It was piled high with magic tricks and fake crystal balls for Stella's nonmagical customers, mixed in with bundles of sage, special scrying candles, and tarot cards for her more magical clientele.

"I checked out all the—" He staggered backward and exclaimed, "What the hell?"

Stella peered over the counter and down at his grubby tennis shoes. Alice, a Rhode Island Red with a bit of a diva complex, was tugging on one of the laces.

"There's a chicken in your store?" The kid looked at her like she was crazy.

Stella winced. "Actually, Alice prefers 'assistant manager'."

He shook his foot, and Alice released his shoelace, jumping out of the way and flapping her wings.

The kid cleared his throat and started again. "I checked out all the other witchy stores in town, but they only sell touristy gift-shop stuff."

That was definitely true. Most people who came to Salem left with

novelty coffee mugs and bumper stickers that said, *My Other Ride is a Broomstick*.

“I heard this place had legit books. I’m doing research on myths and monsters for my final project at school.”

By then, he’d wandered toward the back of the store and was eyeing the sagging staircase that added to the store’s quirky appeal. It was original to the house and led to the second floor where the real magic happened.

One of the first things Stella did each morning before she opened for business was cast a new ward over the bottom of the stairs. The spell deterred the nonmagical public from accidentally wandering up and getting into trouble.

Customers didn’t know why, but when they tried to look at the stairs, their gazes slid by and they steered clear. This kid, however, was studying the steps for longer than most.

With a flick of her fingers, Stella cast a quick compulsion spell, and he took several steps toward the front of the store.

She wasn’t usually into making people do things against their will, but it wasn’t like forcing him away from the stairs caused any lasting damage. All of Stella’s spells fizzled quicker than she liked anyway.

“What kind of monsters are you after?” she asked.

“I don’t know...” He frowned at his feet. Alice was pulling on his shoelace again. “*Monsters*.”

“Monsters come in all shapes and sizes. The most dangerous are the ones who look the most like you.”

His head jerked up, and his face scrunched. “What?”

Stella gave him a one-shouldered shrug meant to assure him. “It’s a metaphor.”

Though, a little over three hundred years ago, it had been a literal truth. Teenagers had screwed over a whole lot of her kind.

“Is that, like, a famous quote or something? Maybe I could use that in my report.”

“No,” she said. “It’s something my mother used to say when I was little.”

Stella’s throat tightened, and there was a sudden stinging behind her eyes, but she banished the wave of grief before it could settle too deep.

“Feel free to browse. I’ve got quite a few monster books on the shelves up front. Some good ones on Celtic mythology. I can show you where to start.”

“Oh.” His voice cracked, and he glanced back at the stairs again.

Apparently, her compulsion spell was already wearing off.

“My parents want to head home soon. Don’t you, like, have a computer database I could search?”

“No,” she said regretfully. “Sorry.”

He let his gaze drift up, down, and along the cluttered shelves of dusty tomes. There was a streak of blue as Darren, an indigo snake, slithered along one of the higher shelves and knocked a thin leather-bound book to the floor.

Apparently, she’d forgotten to latch the lid to his terrarium again.

“Oh, shit.” The kid staggered backward. “A snake too? On second thought...” He walked briskly toward the front of the store. “Maybe not.”

“No, wait!” It had been a slow couple of weeks. Selling a few monster books to an ophidiophobic teenager would mean eating something other than ramen for the rest of the month.

The kid yanked open the door, making the little bell above it jingle.

“Really. It’s okay,” Stella pleaded. “Darren’s not dangerous. He’s a—”

“I’m thinking it’s safer to shop online.”

As the door shut behind him, Stella yelled, “Not for small businesses it’s not, *Josh!*”

Silence.

Alice clucked.

Stella let out a weary sigh. More than one person had recommended she open an Etsy shop instead of a brick and mortar store, but that wasn’t how her mother would have done it.

And if Stella was going to use the money her mother had left her to create a livelihood for herself, she wanted to do it in a way her mother would have loved. Totally old-school.

Movement outside the big display window caught Stella’s attention. It was nearly eight o’clock, and daylight was fading, but there was no missing the couple across the street. They were caught in a lip lock outside the jewelry store, and though their kiss had started sweet, it was quickly veering into “get a room” territory.

It had been a while since Stella had dated anyone—witch or human. While the physical intimacies were great, she always bailed when things got too emotionally deep. So, just like her spells, her relationships never lasted long.

Blame it on being so busy with the store. It wasn’t like she could afford to

share her life with anyone else.

But in the brief moments when she was being honest with herself, she knew her problem lay deeper than that.

When the couple finally broke their kiss and walked away hand in hand, they revealed Magnus Moseby, who'd just exited Sandersons' Hardware and was headed her way.

Magnus was in the tenth grade, a little on the nerdy side—or maybe a lot, depending on your style—and Broomstix's most loyal customer. The irony wasn't lost on Stella that, some months, the last bastion between keeping her head above water and losing her shop was a lanky teenaged wannabe stage magician.

He dashed across the street and through her front door.

"Hi, Stella! And hi to you too, Alice." He reached down to stroke Alice's red feathers before stepping up to the counter.

"Magnus the Magnificent, I presume?" Stella asked.

"In the flesh." He brushed the thick brown forelock of hair out of his eyes, took a step backward, and bowed. "That is, unless I manage to turn myself invisible."

"How's that been going for you?" Stella kept both her tone and expression serious.

Invisibility spells were possible for a witch with the right ingredients, but not for someone like him. Still...she hated to burst the kid's bubble.

"Terrible." He deadpanned, then brightened. "Though, I did get ignored at lunch today, so maybe I'm getting closer?"

Stella laughed. "What are you after this evening? New magic wand? Card tricks?"

"Nope." He went to the end of the counter where she always kept a large carafe of hot apple cider. Apples were lucky, no matter the season.

He filled a steaming cup, took a tentative sip, then grabbed a snickerdoodle off the adjacent cookie tray.

"What do you mean 'nope'?" This really was a slow day if she couldn't even make a sale to Magnus.

He pulled his car keys and a folded piece of paper from his front pocket. The paper was glossy and jagged on one edge, clearly ripped from a magazine.

He smoothed the paper out on the counter and tapped the advertisement. "Do you have this in stock?"

The ad was for a levitation trick called *The Card Float Illusion*.

“No,” Stella said. “But I could order it for you.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I can do that from home.”

Stella clenched her teeth. The internet was doing her dirty today.

The scent of magic tingled her nose, and the door whipped open so fast her poor little bell nearly flew off its bracket. Izzy Jacobs, a witch who could affect the elements, particularly anything electrical, rushed in.

She was Stella’s age, twenty-seven, with long, dark brown hair. The low-grade electrical current that ran over her skin lifted her hair by its roots, making it look exceptionally full.

Her typical glitter makeup was smeared across her collar bones, and a few flecks of silver caught the candlelight as they fluttered to the floor.

Tonight, besides the scent of her magic—a wet earth aroma that only Stella could smell—Izzy also carried the aroma of recently smoked weed.

“Magnus,” Stella said, rounding the counter. “I’m going to have to close up early.”

Izzy always looked a little chaotic, but tonight was next-level. Whatever crazy thing was about to come out of her mouth, Stella didn’t need her to say it in front of a customer.

“But it’s not even eight yet,” Magnus whined. “We haven’t had time to shoot the breeze. Maybe I could—”

“Sorry, bud. Come back tomorrow, okay?”

Magnus glanced at Izzy. Then, with a disgruntled huff and after muttering an irritated, “*Fine*,” he shoved his keys and magazine advertisement back into his pocket.

“See you later, Stella.” He stuffed the rest of the cookie in his mouth but left the cider on the counter.

As soon as the door closed behind him, Stella addressed Izzy. “What is it?”

“An emergency. Like, all-hands-on-deck emergency. The whole coven will be here soon. I’ll explain everything then.”

CHAPTER
TWO

“The whole coven?” Stella asked. “Even Jade?”

Her younger sister worked at a nursing home in Rockport. It would take her over thirty minutes to get here. If this was an emergency, did the coven have time to wait?

“Jade’s already on her way,” Izzy said.

Stella frowned. “You had time to call *her*, but not me?”

The coven had been using her upstairs room as its official meeting space ever since she bought the building. She was accustomed to getting a heads-up before everyone descended. If Izzy had time to call her sister, she should have informed her too.

Izzy’s expression dissolved into an apologetic protest. “Stella, I *did* call!”

Stella pulled her phone from her pocket. The battery was dead again, and she groaned. “I really need a new one.”

“Here,” Izzy said. “Let me.”

Stella handed over her phone, and a spark jumped between the two women’s fingers before a red lightning bolt appeared on the screen. A minute or two in Izzy’s hands, and the phone would be fully charged.

The door opened again. Broomstix was feeling like Grand Central tonight for all the traffic in the last five minutes. Too bad none of it had translated into sales.

Judith Howe walked in, bringing with her the fresh-bread scent of her magic. Judith’s shoulder-length blond hair had turned mostly gray, and the bags under her dark eyes resembled those of a basset hound.

She’d gone pretty soft in the middle too, but her mind was as clever and sharp as ever—as was her craft. There was a reason she was their high

priestess.

“This better be important.” Judith pulled a tissue from her pocket and blew her nose. “It’s Wednesday night. Linda and I watch our mystery program at nine, and if I’m not back by then, she’ll watch the next episode without me.”

“It *is* important!” Izzy declared. “Can we go upstairs, Stella?”

Izzy was excellent at taking down wards, but she was always polite and never removed Stella’s without asking.

“Of course,” Stella said. “Go ahead. I’ll stay down here to let everyone in. Gotta say, Iz, you’ve got me curious.”

Izzy shook her head slowly. “You have no idea.”

It took Izzy only a few seconds to dismantle the ward, and Judith followed her upstairs.

Three minutes later, Marietta Nurse and George Hawley arrived. Marietta was an herbalist of Native American descent, and her talents lay in potion making. Her long, dark hair was streaked with silver, and her clothes could only be described as New Age. She bought most of them at Renaissance fairs.

Her husband, George, was African-American, a local carpenter, and a low-level witch. He supplemented his income by working the birthday-party circuit and entertaining kids with magic that was one step up from parlor tricks.

The two of them had raised Stella and Jade ever since their parents died when Stella was six and Jade was five.

Marietta *tsked* her tongue. “Stella, honey, you’re not eating enough.”

“Ha!” Stella opened the drawer behind the counter and revealed her stash of dark Godiva chocolate.

Marietta shook her head. “Then you’re not eating *right*. If you insist on eating junk, I’ve got a tonic at home that will replenish all your energies.”

George chuckled. He’d been witness to conversations like these for years. “Leave her alone, hon. She’s all grown up now. She can take care of herself.”

Marietta continued to grumble as George led her toward the stairs.

They were soon followed by Jillian and Jessica Sparrow, the eighteen-year-old, freckle-faced twins who were accompanied by their great aunt, Anne Crisp. The twins were just coming into their power, so it was hard to know how talented they’d become. Their great aunt was mid-level and liked to scrapbook.

The five Bly siblings arrived next—three brothers and two sisters ranging

in age from twenty-one to thirty-two. They rushed inside with quick, “Howzitgoins,” then hustled upstairs.

Jade came running in a minute later. Her loose, dark brown curls were held off her face by a thin headband, and she wore one of her many oversized sweaters, black leggings, and Doc Martens.

“Hey, beautiful,” she said, giving Stella a hug. “Do you know what this is about?”

“No clue, but everybody’s upstairs already. We’ll know soon enough.”

Stella turned the deadbolt, and the sisters headed upstairs together.

When they got to the meeting room, Anne Crisp had just finished walking the perimeter with burning sage.

The room had a low ceiling, no windows, and no furniture—just a shelf and a potted snake plant in the corner.

Stella and Jade joined the circle of witches that had formed inside a ring of unlit votive candles on the floor.

“Good,” Judith said. “Let’s get started.”

The collective magic was so strong, Stella’s nose tingled to the point she thought she might sneeze.

Izzy waved her hand at the light switch, and the room went black. Then, with a snap of her fingers, she lit the ring of votive candles on the floor.

The candles cast just enough light for Stella to make out the shadowed faces of her coven.

“Welcome, everyone,” Judith said. “The one thousand, five hundred and twenty-first meeting of the Salem coven is now in session. This meeting has been called at the special request of Izzy Jacobs, descendant of our brother in spirit George Jacobs.”

At each meeting, it was traditional to invoke the magical lineage of the person calling the circle. Every year they celebrated the winter solstice at the remains of George Jacobs’ barn.

Stella and Jade were descended through their mother’s line from Samuel Wardwell, who, along with George Jacobs, had been accused of witchcraft and hanged in Salem during that dark period in 1692.

“Cool,” Izzy said. “Thanks for getting here so quickly everyone. Oh. And here, Stella.”

Izzy reached across the circle, handing Stella her fully charged phone.

“Izzy,” Judith said, “it’s time to explain the urgency of this meeting.”

“Right.” Izzy smoothed her hands over her staticky hair, then reached into

her bag and pulled out her tablet. It further brightened the room, and she flipped it around so they could all see what was on the screen.

It appeared to be a news article. The headline read: *Old Massachusetts Powerhouse Meets Youthful Energy in Gubernatorial Bid.*

“I don’t get it,” Stella said. “What’s this about?”

Izzy let out an exasperated sigh, then turned the screen so she could read the article out loud to everyone. “In the early days of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Cotton Mather was one of the most powerful men of his time.”

At the sound of that name, a collective hiss slid around the room.

Izzy looked up from her tablet.

“Continue,” Judith insisted, but they were all getting a good idea of where this was going, even though it was hard to believe.

The witches in Salem had lived under a curse involving the Mather family for over three hundred years. Was it really coming to fruition now?

Izzy cleared her throat and picked up where she left off. “Though he was an influential clergyman, essayist, scientist, and political player, Cotton Mather may be best known for his instigation of the infamous witch hunts of the late seventeenth century.

“Now, Mather’s descendant, Ethan Mather, hopes to capture his own bit of magic, having recently filed his bid for governor.”

“Stop,” Judith said flatly. “That’s enough.”

Stella swallowed hard. Her dress’s lacy bodice made her want to scratch, and she wished she’d changed into her jeans and hoodie before joining the circle.

Jade squeezed Stella’s hand. Tight.

Stella looked at her sister.

Jade stared back with wide, haunted eyes.

“So, this is it,” Marietta murmured from the other side of the circle. “Another Mather is seeking political power. Bishop’s curse is upon us.”

CHAPTER
THREE

A buzz of anxious questions filled the meeting room, creating a din that was growing too loud and oppressive for the small, cramped room.

“Now, wait a second,” Stella said because *someone* had to be the voice of reason, and that someone was usually her.

Everyone quieted. Judith’s expression was deathly sober.

Stella took a deep breath. “Before we get carried away, shouldn’t we find out if this guy is a *real* descendant of Cotton Mather?”

“His name is Ethan *Mather*,” Izzy said.

“Lots of people have the name Mather,” Stella cautioned. “It doesn’t necessarily mean he’s a descendant. For now, we need to keep cool heads. Bishop’s curse is nothing to toy with.”

“But the article *says* he’s a descendant,” Izzy countered. “It’s right here in black and white.”

“It says that because that’s what he told the reporter,” Stella said.

Izzy made an exasperated sound and started typing on her tablet.

“Maybe Stella’s right,” Jade said. “Think about it. A young, ambitious politician claims ties to one of the oldest families in our state with arguably some of the best name recognition? Don’t you think it’s possible he’s making it up for the headlines?”

“That’s true,” Marietta murmured. “He could be lying. Mathers lie.”

“Everybody lies sometimes,” Stella argued. Everyone was letting their nerves get the better of them.

“But if he’s *lying*,” said one of the Sparrow twins, “then that would mean he *isn’t* a descendant, so the curse wouldn’t apply.”

“It’s circular logic,” the other twin added. “If he’s lying, it’s evidence that

he's a Mather because Mathers lie? But then, if he's lying, he really isn't a Mather? This whole thing makes my head hurt."

"No different than the circular logic of throwing a witch into a pond to see if she floats," Judith muttered at the floor.

"Here," Izzy said. "See?"

She'd pulled up the homepage for The Mather Family Foundation, and it included a video of Ethan Mather's press conference—front and center. In the sidebar, there was a link for a campaign fundraiser, scheduled for tomorrow night in Boston.

"Yes," Stella said in defeat. "I see."

If the Mather family was claiming this man, it had to be real.

For centuries, the Salem coven had known this moment was coming. Bridget Bishop—the first witch to be hanged in Salem in 1692—had been furious with Cotton Mather's crusade against the witches. But she'd also been disappointed in her own coven for not rising to her defense.

Right before they kicked the block out from beneath her feet, she'd sworn that, from the grave, she would choose one of her coven's descendants to magically destroy any Mather descendant who dared seek political power again.

And if her chosen witch failed to follow through, she would curse the entire coven with miserable deaths. Bridget Bishop suffered no fools.

"So?" George asked. "Best we find out who she's gonna choose."

Stella glanced around the circle, as did everyone else. She didn't want the grisly task to fall on anyone she loved. She wished she could take on the burden herself, though that was unlikely.

Presumably, Bridget Bishop would choose a witch whose magical specialty was best suited for the task. For example, a witch who specialized in *personal* magic—those spells that affected a person directly, like Marietta's potions.

On the other hand, witches like Jade and Izzy who specialized in *physical* magic could affect objects and the weather, both of which could cause devastation.

The third specialty—*prophetic* magic, like that practiced by Judith—was a less obvious choice for the task.

These were the three Ps of magical specialties—personal, physical, and prophetic.

For herself, Stella could perform some of the most powerful spells the

coven had to offer, regardless of specialty.

One would think diversification would make her a likely choice to fulfill the terms of Bishop's curse, except for one little thing: none of Stella's spells had any stamina. They all fizzled after only a few minutes—sometimes seconds.

Marietta said it was because Stella's magic—like her life—was disorganized. George said Stella's magic reminded him of a lace curtain—beautifully strong threads with plenty of holes.

Judith speculated that being orphaned at such a young age had stunted Stella's magic and that her spells had no staying power because her magic “lacked heart.”

That last one stung Stella the most. Especially since her younger sister hadn't been similarly affected.

Stella did, however, have one useful thing to offer her coven. She was the only one with the unique ability to detect magic in others—something that came in handy when unfamiliar witches visited Salem.

It was always good to know who they were dealing with before things got out of hand. Depending on the magic—personal, physical, or prophetic—they each had a specific smell, like lavender, wet earth, or fresh bread, respectively.

“Should we get the candle?” George asked Judith.

“I'm sorry, what?” Judith asked, clearly lost in her thoughts.

Confusion crossed George's face. He tried his question a different way. “Jude, your scrying candle? Shouldn't we contact Bridget Bishop tonight and get the ball rolling? I mean...”

“I think what George is trying to say,” Marietta added, “is that none of us are looking forward to the answer, but now that we know the curse has been triggered, we should get on with our duty.”

Duty, Stella thought. One of them was really going to kill Ethan Mather.

Judith's forehead scrunched into lines. Clearly, she would have liked to put this off forever, and Stella's chest ached with empathy, the weight of it squeezing her heart and lungs, making it hard to breathe.

It couldn't be easy for a high priestess to have one of her members tasked with killing a man. Even if it did mean fulfilling a curse and saving the lives of her entire coven.

Judith nodded. “Let's do this.”

Stella exhaled, and the bottom edge of her corset cut into her gut. The

sooner they found out who was chosen for the grisly task, the sooner that poor witch could get this nasty business behind them.

Judith took two barrettes from her pocket and clipped back the sides of her hair, preparing to work. That done, she flicked her fingers toward the shelf mounted on the wall behind the Bly brothers. The big, black candle that she used whenever she had to summon an ancestor rose into the air and floated toward her.

After many uses, it had burned down to half its original height, and its sides were ribbed with hardened waxy runoffs. The candle settled onto the floor at the center of their circle, and Judith knelt in front of it.

The anticipation and uneasiness in the votive-lit room wriggled over Stella's skin like a cloak made of snakes.

"Everyone," Judith said, "join hands to cast the circle. And Izzy, power that damn tablet off. It's too bright."

"Sorry." Izzy turned it off and slipped it back inside her bag.

Jade snapped her fingers to light the black candle, then took hold of Stella's hand.

Stella reached out to her left and grabbed Carrie Bly's hand.

A familiar, pleasant hum of energy flowed around their circle, equally distributed among the members.

Judith stared deeply into the candle's flame and called in a low, steady voice, "Bridget Bishop."

Stella detected the yeasty, fresh-bread aroma of Judith's prophetic magic, and her stomach twisted into a knot. Judith rarely scried with an audience, and Stella had no idea what to expect.

"Bridget Bishop," Judith tried again. "*Loquere nobiscum.*" We wish to speak to you.

The candle flickered in the darkness, and one of the Sparrow twins sucked in her breath. A spirit was definitely arriving.

Carrie's hand tightened painfully around Stella's fingers.

The flame sputtered, and for a second, Stella thought it was going to blow out.

"*Intra, soror.*" Enter, sister. "We summon you regarding the Mathers."

The flame flared brighter, turning from yellow to a brilliant cobalt blue.

Judith's focus on the candle intensified. "She's here."

Several heads turned, glancing around the room as if hoping to see Bridget Bishop's spectral presence lurking in the corner. If she was there,

Stella didn't see anything.

"A Mather descendant seeks political power," Judith said, and the flame grew taller—a good sign for magic.

"Yes," Judith said, answering a question only she could hear. "Your family is honored to fulfill your demands. Who among us is destined to confront him?"

The flame crackled as if spritzed with oil.

"Speak louder, sister," Judith commanded.

The flame sizzled, and the spectral form of a Puritan woman appeared, standing in the center of their circle wearing a black bonnet, black skirt, and red bodice.

"Holy shit," Daniel Bly whispered. "I can actually see her."

"So can I," George whispered.

Stella shivered. This was seriously fucked up.

"*You ask about a Mather.*" Bridget Bishop's spectral voice was soft and dry, like wind through a hayfield. It also held the faint odor of stale beer.

"One who seeks political power," Judith said. "We are here to do your will."

"*Regret.*" Bridget's ghost said, then she wrung her hands and moaned long and low.

Everyone in the circle looked around at each other.

"What does she regret?" Jade whispered to Stella.

"*Shhh,*" Stella warned, not wanting her sister to inadvertently land in Bridget Bishop's sites.

The spectral form of Bridget Bishop raised her arms imploringly. "*Turn around.*"

Carrie Bly loosened her grip on Stella's hand and started to turn, but Stella squeezed and kept her still. She didn't think Bridget Bishop was the literal type.

"*Phoenix,*" Bridget said, sounding frustrated with all of the witches gathered.

"What the hell is she talking about?" Carrie whispered.

Stella had no idea. Was this what it was like for Judith every time she fire scried? How did she make heads or tails out of these weird, cryptic messages?

Frown lines appeared on Judith's forehead. She wasn't looking at Bridget Bishop's spectral form—she was still staring deeply into the flame—and she

asked, a little louder than before, “Of those among us, whose path is intertwined with Ethan Mather?”

Stella squeezed Jade and Carrie’s hands as if holding on for dear life. Her magic wasn’t dependable enough to be chosen, but she didn’t want anyone else to carry the burden either.

The spectral image of Bridget Bishop flickered out, but the candle’s blue flame grew taller, then leaned out from the candle as if pushed by a steady flow of air.

A few seconds later, the flame spun like a needle on a compass, first pointing toward Judith on the east side of the circle, then swirling clockwise around the candle.

“What does it mean?” Marietta whispered.

“Wait,” Judith replied. “She’s still here. She’ll tell us.”

“This is it,” Jade murmured.

Stella hoped it wouldn’t land on her sister.

The flame lengthened and stretched away from the center of the candle, making its third rotation around the circle.

When the flame finally stopped swirling, it pointed directly at Stella.

Wait. *What?*

As glad as Stella was that her sister hadn’t been chosen, this didn’t make sense. Sure, she had power. But they needed a witch with *dependable* magic. Not a witch whose magic had no stamina or heart.

Jade exhaled in a rush and jerked her hand out of Stella’s, breaking the circle. “No. That can’t be right. Not Stella.”

The flame turned from blue to yellow, then all the candles in the room snuffed out, leaving the coven in total darkness.

Izzy got the lights, and Stella felt the weight of everyone’s stare, though her own gaze remained locked on the smoking candle wick.

“I’m sorry, Stellz,” George said tightly. “Though...I can’t say I’m totally surprised.”

Stella’s head jerked up in total shock.

Jade seemed equally stunned. “What do you mean you’re not surprised?”

“It does make some sense,” Judith agreed. “Stella’s the only one who can make a powerful enough poppet to kill a man, and that would be a perfect way to go under the circumstances. It has the farthest magical range in terms of distance. There’d be less chance of any accusations being pointed her way.”

“And you won’t have to worry about your stamina,” Marietta said, clearly trying to sound encouraging.

Stella was still too stunned to speak.

“Sure she does,” Jade said. “She made a poppet when the Davis girl was diagnosed with leukemia. The spell put her into remission for a while, but the cancer came right back.”

“That was an *illness*,” Marietta said. “But dead is dead, right? Once she’s killed this Ethan Mather, Stella won’t have to hold on to her spell. There’s no coming back from the dead.”

“But...” Jade said. “Stella uses humane *mouse traps*, for Pete’s sake. She can’t kill a whole human person.”

“*Hush*,” Stella said, scolding her sister. She appreciated her concern; she would have felt the same way if their positions had been reversed. But protests only made a bad situation worse.

If it meant saving her entire coven, Stella would fulfill her duty.

No matter the personal cost to her, she was going to kill this man.

CHAPTER
FOUR

“I won’t let any of you down.” Stella said, making a vow she hoped she could keep. “The curse won’t rebound on any of you.”

Jade scrunched her fingers into her dark, loose curls and refused to even look at her.

“That’s my girl,” Marietta said.

“This meeting is adjourned,” Judith said, giving Stella a tight-lipped nod of approval. “I need to get back home now. Linda’s waiting. Stella, get your plan together. Apprise me in the morning.”

Judith left quickly, making Stella wonder if she simply didn’t want anyone to see how much the night’s events had affected her.

Their coven mostly practiced a do-no-harm kind of magic. Bishop’s curse pushed them all into uncomfortable territory.

The others followed Judith out—some of them squeezing Stella’s shoulder as they passed in a “you got this” kind of way.

At the front door, Izzy gave her a big hug and whispered encouraging words in her ear.

Jade hugged her, too, but didn’t make any eye contact. When she ended the hug, she quickly diverted her eyes toward the door.

Stella grabbed her sister’s arm to stop her from leaving.

Jade cast her gaze toward the floor. “What is it?”

“Can I talk to you?” Stella asked, using her foot to block Alice from escaping out the door.

“Of course,” Jade said, finally lifting her gaze, and a spark of curiosity lit her eyes.

Alice clucked in frustration as Stella shut the door. “I’m going to need

someone to watch the store while I'm gone. I can't afford to close."

"Oh." The spark in Jade's eyes went dim. "Sure. I've got the next couple days off."

"Thanks." Stella exhaled and bowed her head toward the floor.

"Nervous?" Jade asked.

Stella shrugged. "I was wondering what Mom and Dad would think about all of this."

Jade scoffed. "Mom would worry like Marietta, but *Dad*... He'd be tripping all over himself with pride to see one of his daughters take on the responsibility."

"You really think so?" Stella wouldn't wish this responsibility on anyone. The fear of failure was real. If she couldn't kill this one man—this stranger—the people she loved could die. *She* could die.

"Yeah, I really think so." The corner of Jade's mouth tightened. "So, how are you gonna do it?"

Stella cringed. "Quickly."

Jade rolled her eyes. "That's not what I meant. Are you really going the poppet route? You've never used a poppet to harm anyone before."

"The magic's the same, regardless of the purpose," Stella said.

All she had to do was make a stuffed doll, add a hair from Ethan Mather's head, cast the spell, prick the poppet with a blackthorn, then come home to her coven and put it all behind her. The less she thought about what she was doing, the better.

Jade gave Stella a pinched smile that said she wasn't convinced by her feigned sense of calm.

"Really," Stella said. "I can—"

Before she could finish, Jade hoisted herself up onto the sales counter and asked, "Do you remember those bedtime stories Marietta used to tell us? The one about the Collector who lived in the woods?"

Stella winced. "I'm not likely to forget. I'm still freaked out by trees. Who tries to get kids to go to sleep with stories about an evil monster who traps children and pins them to a board like insects?"

"Marietta."

Stella laughed at her sister's deadpan expression and pretended not to understand the real reason why Jade was bringing up random childhood memories.

Besides their parents' deaths, the Collector had been the scariest thing in

their lives. Now, they had a new threat. A threat that had a name and a history. A threat that was real.

If Stella messed up, Bishop's curse would rebound, and everyone she loved would pay a horrible price.

"Do you still think about those stories a lot?" A rush of nerves had Stella pulling her auburn hair up into a top knot. She secured it with a pencil from behind the counter.

Her sister shrugged. "It was a weird premise, right? A good witch casting a spell that prevented the Collector from leaving the woods. That, in order for him to collect any children at all, they had to go to *him*."

"It was just a story," Stella said.

Out of the corner of her eye, Stella caught a streak of blue. She rushed over to her long rectangular display where Darren was slithering over a pile of tarot card decks.

"Hello, handsome." She stroked his blue scales and carried him back to his terrarium.

"But why would a kid go to the Collector voluntarily?" Jade asked. "The Collector shouldn't have had *any* kids pinned to his insect boards."

Stella made sure Darren's roof was latched tight, then said, "Marietta probably told us those stories to keep us from wandering into the woods and getting lost. She was more interested in keeping us safe than she was in fixing her gaping plot holes."

"I suppose." Jade frowned at the floor.

"I can do this," Stella said, as much to reassure her sister as to convince herself.

Jade looked up. "You're sure?"

"Positive."

She nodded slowly.

"So," Stella said a little too brightly. "Do you want to help me make it?"

Jade's expression turned confused. "The poppet?"

"Yeah."

She furrowed her brow. "Do you *need* help?"

"No, but it might calm my nerves to do it together, and I need to stay busy tonight." Work had always been her shield. If she didn't stop moving, there was less time for thinking. "I'll sew. You can be the stuffer."

"Uh..." Jade wrinkled her nose. "Maybe you're forgetting my tragic birthday party at Build-a-Bear?"

“You mean when you got a little too excited about putting the heart inside your bear and your seven-year-old magic made the stuffing machine explode? Hard to forget. But I’ll take my chances.”

Stella’s workroom was in her attic apartment, so they headed back up the sagging staircase, then up the ladder.

Stella pushed open the hatch and crawled through.

Jade followed and as she straightened out of her crouch, she sucked in an audible breath. Stella’s bed was unmade. Clothes littered the floor, though a few were actually folded on the seat to her recliner. There were dishes in the sink. And at the far end of the room, under a small square window, there were several waist-high piles of books. Stacks upon stacks of fabric and sewing supplies buried her work station.

“I should have warned you,” Stella said, leading Jade into the war zone. “It’s a mess.”

“It’s a disaster.”

Stella stooped to avoid bumping her head on the rafters. “I prefer to call it *organized chaos*.”

“I know you do,” Jade said, “but this is borderline hoarding.”

“Shut up.” It wasn’t that bad.

Stella lifted a large pile of twelve-inch fabric squares off a table to reveal her sewing machine hidden beneath. All of the squares were woven from natural fibers in various patterns: some plaids, others stripes, or even paisleys.

“Does it matter which pattern you use?” Jade examined the high shelf where Stella’s previously made poppets sat like curious voyeurs, peering down at them.

“The pattern will matter. It needs to capture the person’s personality. Now...time to stalk our prey.” Stella pulled out her phone and took a deep breath, still not quite believing the future of their coven rested squarely on her shoulders.

Jade got in close so she could see the screen. “How did witches even do this before social media?”

“Easy,” Stella said. “They only cast spells on their neighbors. They knew what their subjects ate for breakfast, let alone the color of their hair.”

Ethan Mather looked gorgeous in every single one of his Instagram pics, and Stella thought he bore a slight resemblance to John F. Kennedy, Jr.: jet-black hair, square jaw, straight nose... Your standard cookie-cutter handsome

man.

In one picture, he was in an office building with the Boston skyline behind him. Another showed him feeding the ducks at the Public Garden. A third had him speaking with some old men by a barn, discussing their concerns.

“God,” Jade groaned. “His captions are so basic.”

Stella read a couple:

Just a man and his java with a portrait-mode photo of his coffee cup held up against a backdrop of Quincy Market.

Meeting, seating, and eating with the people who make this State so Great! with a photo of him sharing breakfast with his constituents at a local diner.

Jade was right. His captions were pretty basic, but Stella knew how hard it was to promote her store. She couldn’t imagine what it would be like, having to promote herself.

“I don’t know. His captions sound okay to me.”

Jade gave her a skeptical look.

“It’s not as if he’s doing his own social media. There’s probably some public relations manager behind it all.”

“Then how do you know if you’re seeing the real him?” Jade asked.

“I guess I don’t,” Stella said, realizing her point. It wasn’t going to be easy to design the poppet if all she had was an artificial image of the man.

She pocketed her phone and selected a plain gray wool from her fabric samples. “This will do as the base. It’s formal, traditional, and basic—perfect for a politician. I’ll bring some different embellishments to Boston and edit as necessary once I see him in person.”

Stella handed the gray fabric to Jade while she plopped the rest of the stack on top of another pile of sewing supplies.

“Hand me those scissors, will you?” Stella asked.

Jade grabbed them off a hook on the wall, and Stella cut out a basic human shape from the two layers of the gray wool.

Her sewing machine was already loaded with strong black thread, so after taking her seat, it wasn’t long before she had the poppet sewn together.

She left the bottom open, turned it right-side out so the seams were inside, then handed the poppet—along with a bag of cotton stuffing—to Jade.

“How much should I put in?” her sister asked.

“Make it hard enough to put pressure on the seams.”

“Ha!” Jade said. “Sounds symbolic. And that’s *before* you add your magic and really split him open.”

Stella winced, uncomfortable with thinking about the assignment in such stark terms. But Jade was right. The closer the representation, the stronger the magic.

While Jade stuffed the poppet, Stella retrieved a small container of blackthorn from the shelf above the sewing machine.

“What’s that for?” Jade asked.

“It’s to prick the poppet’s chest once I get the spell completed. Blackthorn supposedly works the best, though, honestly, I’ve never had reason to use it before. Did you notice what color eyes he had?”

“Blue, I think.” Jade frowned as she forced as much stuffing as she could into the form.

Stella found her box of buttons and rummaged through it, selecting various blue hues to use for the eyes. She’d stitch them on later once she saw his eyes up close and knew which color would match the best.

Though, a big part of her wished Ethan Mather was faceless. It had to be easier to kill a faceless man.

Jade held up the plain gray figure. “How’s this?” She gave it a squeeze. The poppet was stuffed as hard as a rock.

“Perfect. After adding the eyes, there will only be one thing left to add.”

“Something from *him*,” Jade said. “Then you can poppet like it’s hot.”

Normally, Stella would have smiled at her sister’s wordplay. But not today.

“Yeah,” she said. “Probably a hair. That makes the strongest magic. Though a loose thread from his clothing will work. Once I used some dead skin from a badly sunburned girl.”

“Ewww.” Jade handed her the poppet.

“It was for a cure! Aloe only goes so far. And don’t worry... I don’t plan on *flaying* Ethan Mather. Just...” Stella picked up a straight pin from her work table and poked it through the poppet’s chest.

Jade smiled, but a shudder of dread swept through Stella when she realized what she’d done and how easily she’d done it.

This particular poppet would be the closest she’d ever ventured toward the dark arts—something no one in their coven practiced, and for damn good reason.

The dark arts captured attention, and witches shunned the spotlight. Even

dabbling in the dark could get a witch banished from their coven. It had happened to someone in the Salem coven decades earlier, or so Stella had heard.

For Bishop's curse, they were making an exception to the prohibition.

"Are you sure you can do this?" Jade asked. "You cried for hours after I ran over that turtle last week."

"We should have stopped the car and moved him to the side of the road."

Jade threw her arms out in exasperation. "I didn't see it until it was too late."

Stella didn't argue with her. They'd argued plenty that day.

Stella closed the bottom of the poppet with a few loose stitches—just enough to hold the stuffing in until she could add a personal item from Ethan Mather himself.

Jade rested the back of her head against the low, slanted ceiling. "How are you going to find him?"

Stella tied a knot and cut the thread with her teeth. "Didn't you see that website Izzy showed us? He's having a fundraiser in Boston at a hotel near Boston Common."

"He could have security around him," Jade said. "And you'll have to get really close to get a hair off him."

"I know." Stella's stomach turned.

"You'll need a great dress too. I think those political fundraisers can be pretty fancy. Do you still have that red, strapless dress? The one you wore to senior prom?"

"Uh...*yeah*. But that was nine years ago. It'll be too tight."

Jade shrugged. "So long as you can zip it up, tight might not be a bad thing."

Stella rolled her eyes. "I would like to be able to breathe."

"You're currently wearing a corset," she said pointedly.

"*Work uniform*, and I wanted to get out of it over an hour ago."

"The fundraiser is tomorrow," Jade said, putting her hands on her hips. "So, it's not like you have time to make a dress or even shop. Your old prom dress would be perfect."

Stella still wasn't sure.

"*Stellz*," Jade said, "your legs go on forever, and that dress has a slit that makes them look *insane*. Remember? Principal Grimsly almost didn't let you into the gym."

Jade did have a point there.

“If you can get it zipped,” Jade said, “it’ll make you look like Jessica Rabbit.”

“I’m supposed to be flying under the radar,” Stella reminded her.

“You’re *supposed* to be getting close to him—close enough to get a hair for your poppet. You don’t stand a chance if you don’t look like someone he wants to stand close to.”

“Fine,” Stella said on an exhale. “I’ll give it a try. If I can get it on, I’ll just have to suck in my gut all night and hope I don’t have a wardrobe malfunction in the middle of the hotel ballroom.”

“Women have sucked in their gut for far less important reasons.”

“Thanks for watching the store for me while I’m gone.”

“No problem,” Jade said. “I’m not scheduled to work at the nursing home for a few days, and you’ll be back long before then.”

Stella let out a breath. “You’re a life saver.”

This time, Jade expelled a self-deprecating laugh through her nose. “I don’t know about that.”

“I do.” Stella gave her sister a hug.

“You just take care of Ethan Mather,” Jade said, extricating herself from the tight embrace. “Make sure his ass is grass.”

CHAPTER
FIVE

*Liberty Hotel
Boston, Massachusetts*

Stella Aldren was about to kill a man. Kill a man, then order room service. Just her typical Thursday night. Or at least, that's what she told herself.

She tossed her hotel room key onto the dresser, then hung the long garment bag in the closet.

Her phone rang from somewhere deep inside her satchel, and it was on its fifth ring before she was able to find it. Marietta's name appeared on the screen.

Stella answered with a grateful, "Hey."

"Ah!" Marietta said. "Are you all settled, honey?"

Stella sat on the edge of the bed. "The fundraiser starts in an hour and a half. I just got into my room."

She could have never afforded this hotel on her own, but the whole coven was picking up the tab. Hopefully, the job wouldn't take too long.

"I don't mean to interrupt or distract you from your preparations. I only called because I forgot to tell you... I slipped a small vial into your bag, one that should help with any nerves."

Stella's duffel lay at the foot of the bed. "What's in it?"

"My own brand of liquid courage: a tonic infused with pepper, basil,

chives, some nettles, and horseradish. Fair warning, I might have gone a little too heavy on that last ingredient, but it spoke to me, so that has to mean something for the magic. Plug your nose.”

“Thanks, Marietta.”

“Oh, and Judith’s been reading tarot and watching all five of her crystal balls, even that small one that gives her trouble. They’re all showing her good things.”

“Thanks again.”

“No need to thank me. Call as soon as you have an update.”

They hung up, and Stella dumped the contents of her duffel bag onto the bed. The poppet fell out, along with her clothes and the vial. She popped the cork and took a whiff.

“Oof!” She twisted her head away and re-corked the bottle before her eyes *really* started watering. “God damn, Marietta.”

She headed for the bathroom to rinse her eyes and take a shower. Her long, auburn hair was naturally thick, but she still used volumizing shampoo and, on Jade’s recommendation, scrunched in a handful of mousse.

She also wasn’t used to wearing a ton of makeup, but tonight called for glam, so she contoured and blended until she looked positively airbrushed. She followed that up with phase two: smokey eye; then phase three: red lips.

By the time she was done, she looked like a total catfish.

Next came the shoes because once she was in the dress, there’d be no more bending over.

She finished fiddling with the tiny buckles on the strappy, silver sandals, then took a deep breath.

“Sorry, lungs. Here goes nothing.”

She removed the dress from its bag and carefully stepped into the shaft of ruby-red satin. Swaying her hips slowly, she managed to ease it over her ass, then up over her breasts.

Without Jade there to help, she had to summon her inner contortionist to get it zipped, but she finally managed.

It would have to be a pantyless kind of night. The dress concealed no secrets.

Stella kept her jewelry to a minimum—small ruby earrings she’d inherited from her mother and a diamond tennis bracelet Marietta and George had given her for her sixteenth birthday.

She checked the clock, and her stomach clenched. It was eight-thirty.

Downstairs in the hotel ballroom, the event was already underway.

She looked in the full-length mirror to get the complete effect, and—
“Holy shit.”

Stella barely recognized herself.

She hated to admit it, but Jade was right. The dress had been a bit too sexy for her at eighteen. Now that she had the bod for it, the whole look was over the top. The ruby satin, strapless, mermaid-style gown accentuated her every curve and squeezed her so tight it rippled into natural ruching at her waist and hips.

Her breasts nearly exploded out the top of the bodice.

Was it weird to think of herself as totally fuckable? Honestly, she felt like a million sultry bucks.

If this dress—plus the hair and make-up—didn't get her close enough to Ethan Mather, nothing would.

Stella turned her back on the mirror, needing to focus.

Approach. Get close. Look for a hair, a loose thread, anything personal... Get in, get out, and get back up here. Then finish the grisly job.

She shoved her phone into the smallest clutch ever invented, one she borrowed from Jade, then struggled to get her room key and a tube of lipstick inside. When the laws of physics prevented her from zipping it closed, she formed a blue orb of magic in her hand and squashed it over the purse.

“Levelen.”

The contents of the bag flattened, going practically two dimensional. She zipped the purse closed and hoped the spell would last more than a few minutes.

Last, she gave herself a spritz of Chanel No. 5. She wasn't much for perfume, but it had been her mother's favorite. It gave her the boost she needed and didn't make her feel so alone.

“There,” she said, satisfied that she'd done all she could to set herself up for success. “Now, it's showtime.”

She gave the poppet a goodbye kiss, then headed out to fulfill Bishop's curse and save her coven. No sweat.

When Stella got into the empty elevator, she wrinkled her nose. Something in the air hinted of magic, though the trail was thin and fading.

She couldn't pinpoint the type or the power level, but another witch had definitely come through the hotel. It had either happened quite a while ago or, if more recently, the witch was very young, possibly untrained.

What this meant for her, she didn't know, but at least she sensed no evil intent.

She smoothed her hand over her hair, taking one last look at herself in the elevator's mirrored doors.

A few seconds later, she reached the lobby. A tone chimed, and the doors slid open.

It was a bit like landing in Oz. The lobby was filled with the colorful bustling of dozens of glamorous men and women headed for the Mather campaign fundraiser. The men's tuxedos fit too well to be rented. The women's diamonds sparkled too much to be fake.

After taking a breath, Stella stepped out of the elevator and followed the crowd. At the entrance to the packed ballroom, she stopped to survey the scene.

Hundreds of people, all dressed in their finest, chattered away as a jazz band played *Fly Me to the Moon*. White-gloved waiters maneuvered among the guests, passing out flutes of champagne.

The ceiling was two-stories high, and a marble railing on the open mezzanine level let guests view the ballroom from above. Two press photographers were already up there, getting their aerial views of the party.

A waiter passed, and she grabbed a glass of champagne from his tray before strolling farther into the room. She didn't miss that people were watching her or that several male glances were particularly appreciative.

It was hugely uncomfortable, and it made the dress feel even more like a boa constrictor, but at least the attention boded well for her plans. With any luck, Ethan Mather would show her the same degree of interest.

Stella looked forward to making quick work of things, getting back to the room, and getting into a pair of sweats.

A podium was set up on a dais at the opposite end of the ballroom from the band. The man of the hour was apparently expected to give a speech.

He wasn't at the microphone quite yet. Wherever he was, Stella assumed he'd be commanding attention. There'd likely be a circle around him. Maybe near the bar, or...

Her gaze stopped at the sight of a dark-haired man standing fifty feet away. She recognized him immediately from his photos. Ethan Mather. The witch hunter's descendant.

It was only because he had three inches on the next tallest person that she was able to spot him from this distance, and she smiled realizing how hard it

would be for someone of his stature to hide. He had to be at least six-four.

Stella made her approach, walking slowly, staying in his line of sight so he'd see her when he looked up. And boy did he look.

The man made eye contact with her not once, but *twice*. And the second time, their gazes stayed locked.

Stella's breath caught in her throat. *Damn* he was handsome. And younger than she'd realized.

The online photographs hadn't done him justice. There was nothing cookie-cutter about him. Now that he was three-dimensional and fully animated, he was a massive panty-soaker.

His jet-black hair and square jaw were downright devastating, and none of the photos had revealed the depth of his blue eyes—so deep, they were nearly navy. Neither had those photos captured how those eyes sparkled with an intelligence and humor that transcended everything else about him.

There wasn't a blue button in her entire collection that could even come close to matching them. It was a pitiful shame that the Universe would waste so much beauty on a doomed man.

Stella moved closer, narrowing the divide. The whole time, his penetrating gaze held hers, and her heart thumped wildly, as if displeased with her pace and urging faster momentum.

A bald man to Mather's right said something Stella couldn't hear.

Her quarry tore his gaze away from her, clamped his hand around the bald man's shoulder, and said in a strong clear voice, "Are you kidding? I'm so *Boston*, I've got a permanent seat at the duck pond. Every Saturday morning since I was a kid."

A loud *knock* echoed in Stella's head, like knuckles making one firm strike against a wooden door. It was so surprising, it stopped her in her tracks, still several feet away from Ethan Mather.

Stella's nose tingled with the presence of magic. The scent was faint. Very far away. The witch who'd left her scent in the elevator must have entered the ballroom.

On high alert, Stella turned all the way around, putting her back to Mather and expecting to find someone watching. Was another witch also hunting her prey?

If so, they were good at hiding. All Stella saw were wealthy, non-magical benefactors, excited about their political hopeful.

Frustrated, and more than a little confused, she put her hands on her hips.

The band finished its song and, in the few beats of silence that followed, a deep voice behind her asked, “Excuse me, miss. Are you looking for someone?”

This time, it was a different kind of tingle that skittered over her skin. The scent of sandalwood filled her nose, and she whirled so fast she nearly lost her balance. Her gaze landed squarely on the center of a man’s tuxedoed chest and when she looked up...

Fuckety fuck, fuck, fuck.

The witch hunter’s descendant had broken away from his conversation with the bald man. He was now inches in front of her—up close and personal and positively delicious.

Stella’s mouth went dry. She’d never met anyone so physically compelling. If this Ethan Mather had at least one decent idea in his head, he could totally win his election.

All the more reason to put a stop to him, her sister’s voice whispered inside her head.

The band struck up again, this time playing *All of Me*.

Stella’s gaze went to his broad shoulders, hoping to find a stray hair for the poppet. But no such luck. Not yet.

“No,” she said. “Not really looking for someone. I...I just thought I heard someone call my name.”

KNOCK!

She flinched as that odd sound echoed through her head again. Her chest warmed, and she looked down to see tiny blue filaments of magic unfurling from her chest, undulating through the air toward Ethan Mather.

She slapped her hand to her chest, and the tiny threads retreated.

Ethan Mather didn’t seem to notice anything amiss. He leaned in and spoke louder to get over the music. “And what name would that be?”

“My name?” Stella kept her hand over her chest as she groaned internally because why did sandalwood cologne have to be her crack cocaine?

“Yes, *Red*. Your *name*.”

Stella blinked, then furrowed her forehead. “Did you just call me Red?”

“It’s a nickname,” he said with a broad grin. “It’s all I’ve got until you tell me your real one.”

“Well, *Casanova*...” Stella put her hands on her hips, wishing she had time to come up with a better nickname for him, but *damn* that tuxedo looked amazing on him. Casanova kinda fit. “My real name’s Stella Aldren.”

She didn't see any harm in being honest. The beautiful, delicious-smelling man would be dead before the evening was over.

"Oh!" His eyebrows arched. "Casanova, is it? I suppose I could live with a nickname like that. You could call me Nova for short."

Stella gave him the side eye. "Why would I call you anything for short?"

"Because Nova means *star*, as does Stella. We're alike in that way."

She scoffed and resumed her search of the ballroom, looking for the other witch. "Trust me, we're nothing alike."

"We'll see," he said. "Stella's a pretty name by the way."

"Thanks. And your real name is...?"

She knew, of course, but Mather arrogance was at the root of all her ancestors' problems. Pretending not to recognize the man at his own event when his photograph was on every poster and brochure gave her immense satisfaction, even if it came off as a little ditzy.

"I'm Ethan Mather." Surprisingly, he didn't look at her like she was stupid, and he didn't answer her question in a self-important or condescending way. Rather, he sounded humble and maybe even a little apologetic.

He stuck out his hand. "I hope I'm the reason you came out this evening."

Stella glanced down and, despite her better judgment, found herself slipping her hand into his.

It was large, warm, slightly rough—as if he didn't sit behind a desk all day. His touch heated her from the inside out while her head felt light and buoyant.

She needed to get it together and focus on the safety and survival of her coven. She needed to get this grisly task behind her and get back to her store before the bank came calling.

"Yes." She pulled her hand away. "You're exactly the reason I came."

He smiled, and her nose tingled again. The presence of magic was still here—faint and far away. She looked to her left, expecting to see someone lurking in the crowd.

But there was no one magical. Where in the hell was that witch hiding?

"Are you all right?" he asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

"Fine, fine," she said distractedly.

"Would you like to dance?"

That got her attention. "What?"

He touched her arm. Just the barest of touches. "Would you like to

dance?”

Stella’s lips parted as she momentarily lost track of rational thought. It was no wonder Ethan Mather had risen through the political ranks so quickly. He was powerful.

But unlike her, it wasn’t magic that fueled him. Ethan Mather was gifted with magnetism. *Sexual* magnetism. Pure and simple. A person could get lost in those eyes.

God, she was being such an idiot! She was Stella Aldren for crying out loud. She didn’t fall for handsome men. She’d never even had a serious boyfriend and for damn good reason.

If there was one thing her parents’ deaths taught her it was that the old saying “it’s better to have loved and lost” was a pile of crap.

Before she could agree to a dance—what better way to get a hair? If one didn’t fall out, she could simply yank one from his scalp—the bald man dragged someone new over to be introduced.

“Ethan,” he said, then his gaze traveled Stella’s entire body, starting at her breasts and working its way down. “Mike here is from *The Globe*. Tell him what you were telling me about your opponent’s proposed tax breaks for small businesses.”

Ethan shoved one of his hands into his pants pocket. “I was saying that Patterson’s tax breaks for small businesses are bullshit.” He tipped a finger on his other hand toward the reporter. “And you can quote me on that.”

“Ex-cuse me?” Stella asked.

All three heads turned her way, and Mather’s navy-blue eyes sparkled with interest.

Stella continued unfazed. “But tax breaks for small businesses are *not* ‘bullshit.’”

She needed every break she could get. She was barely keeping her head above water.

Mather raised his eyebrows. “They are bullshit when Patterson considers a small business one that employs up to five hundred people. Did you know approximately eighty percent of all American small businesses have no employees whatsoever?”

“*Actually*,” she said, “I do know something about that.”

Most men—most people, in fact—assumed she was an employee of her store—at best, a manager—not the one working her ass off to repay a crippling business loan.

Mather looked at her keenly. “What type of business do you own, Ms. Aldren?”

“Come on, Ethan,” said the bald man. “The young lady can’t be more than twenty-five.”

Stella shot the bald man an irritated glance. “Twenty-seven.”

Mather still hadn’t taken his eyes off her.

“I don’t know why you think the woman’s age is relevant to my question,” Mather said. “I’m thirty-two. If elected, I’d be the youngest governor in the history of Massachusetts. Age is rarely a relevant factor. It’s character and a strong work ethic that matters most.”

“I’m in retail,” she said to Mather, “and I own my own store.”

“You see,” Ethan said to the two other men. “Ms. Aldren clearly struck me as a woman in charge.”

He unbuttoned his tuxedo jacket and addressed the reporter. “All these tax breaks Patterson and his colleagues talk about, they make great headlines, but they don’t really help the little guy.”

“So, what’s *your* plan, Mr. Mather?” the reporter asked.

“For one, I’d start by making it harder for huge companies—even so-called ‘small companies’ with five hundred employees—to buy politicians.”

Stella wanted to hear more. A Mather descendant looking out for the little guy? It defied her coven’s entire Mather lexicon.

Unfortunately, even as he continued discussing his plans, she was once more distracted by the faint tickling sensation of magic somewhere in the room. She resisted the urge to turn around and look for the source, but it definitely made her neck itch.

If Stella’s suspicions were right, and this other witch was also after her prey, she was in trouble.

“*Transparency*,” Ethan said, still talking to the reporter. “That’s what we need. People should know who’s bankrolling their leadership.”

Then his gaze flicked to Stella’s face. “People should know who they’re dealing with.”

Stella’s neck prickled with the knowledge that he was absolutely right. Everyone should know who they were dealing with, and until she located the witch, she had no fucking clue.

The bald man chuckled. “Patterson’s about as transparent as a solid oak door.”

“Exactly.” Ethan’s gaze rose to the mezzanine level, and he raised his

hand as if acknowledging someone up there. “This State needs to provide better support for small enterprise. As the late Senator Wellstone once said...” His gaze returned to Stella. ““We all do better when we all do better.””

Again, Stella heard the odd echo of a fist knocking on a door.

Her heart lunged forward. So much so, she looked down at her chest to make sure it was still on the inside.

It was, of course. But those magical blue filaments were back, unfurling from her chest and lengthening like undulating sound waves through the space in front of her.

She slapped her hand over her chest again, and they disappeared.

“Ms. Aldren?” Ethan asked. “Are you *sure* you’re feeling okay?”

Uh, no. She was definitely not feeling okay. Then she made matters worse by looking into his eyes. The room swayed.

“I think I need some water,” she said.

“Good idea,” he said. “I’ll walk you to the bar.”

“No!”

He blinked and rocked back on his heels.

Stella’s cheeks heated, and she repeated, this time more calmly, “No.”

But she wasn’t the slightest bit calm. If she failed her coven, Bishop’s curse would come down on their heads. With her parents already dead, she couldn’t bear to lose even one more coven member to tragedy—let alone everyone she loved.

No one she cared about was going to die because of her weakness, or because some other witch got in her way.

But where was the witch? And why was she hiding?

CHAPTER

SIX

“I have to go.” Stella had to find this other witch lest the interloper ruined her mission before it even began.

If Ethan or the other men responded, she didn’t hear. The pounding in her ears was way too loud, and it was amplified by the weight of heavy stares that followed her out of the ballroom.

Of course, one man’s scrutiny was more intense than the rest, and she didn’t have to turn around to know whose it was. Besides the bursts of unfamiliar magic from the spying witch, Ethan Mather’s presence was the strongest energy in the room.

Needing to regroup, she took the stairs to the mezzanine where she could find some space and a little privacy. Before she could get a hair off Ethan’s jacket, she’d need to find the other witch and figure out her deal.

Stella leaned over the railing and searched the crowded scene below, expecting the witch to stand out. Even from this distance, she should have been able to detect the telltale swirl of magic licking up into the air from where she (or possibly he) stood. But Stella couldn’t find any sign of magic.

A freezing spell might help. It was one of her better skills, though it did carry a risk. The more people she froze in suspended animation, the more the spell sapped her physical energy.

A ballroom with this many people would leave her exhausted and limp, but it had to be easier to search the crowd if everyone in it simply stopped moving.

She raised her hands, preparing to transform the ballroom below into a human statue gallery. They wouldn’t feel a thing, and when the spell fizzled—*as all her spells were inclined to do*—the guests would go back to their

conversations without missing a beat.

“Good idea,” said a deep, already-familiar male voice to her left.

Stella sucked in a breath. Her hands dropped, and one landed on the railing as she turned. She curled her fingers around the smooth marble contours and held on tight.

“It’s easier to breathe up here.” Ethan Mather smiled broadly, and his gaze searched her face. “Less competition for air.”

Stella didn’t know about air. Exactly as she’d feared, her dress was cutting off her oxygen, making it hard to breathe. “Are you... Are you *following* me?”

He looked confused. “No.” His expression turned abashed. “I’m sorry. It must seem like that.”

He gestured toward one of the TV cameras set up along the railing, forty feet behind him.

“I’d scheduled a few minutes to talk to one of the news stations before I took the podium. I was heading over to do the interview when I saw you.”

Something or someone knocked—like knuckles rapping against a solid door. Or possibly against the mezzanine wall?

Stella expected to see someone standing there, rapping the wall to get the candidate’s attention. But no one was there.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Aldren. Am I keeping you from something?”

“What?” Flustered, she faced Ethan Mather. She swore she’d heard someone knocking. “I’m sorry. What did you say?”

He grinned. “I asked if I was keeping you from something. You seem distracted.”

“No, I—”

The knocking sound was back. But still, there was no one anywhere near them. And Stella doubted, with all the other noise in the ballroom, that it was happening any farther away than their immediate vicinity.

“Ms. Aldren?” he asked again.

Was the knocking really happening inside her head? She looked down and put her hand over her heart. Or was it coming from her chest like those weird blue threads?

“Ms. *Aldren*,” he said, this time more insistently.

Stella looked up. Ethan Mather was studying her with a troubled expression of deep concern.

Her nose tingled. The faint scent of magic was back, and noting the silk

pocket square in his jacket pocket, she got a brilliant idea.

She pressed her hand under her nose, squinted, and waved her hand in front of her face, pretending to hold off a sneeze. “Ah! Ah!”

“Oh, here!” But instead of offering her his handkerchief—which, if she couldn’t find a hair, was a good plan B for the poppet—he reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a travel-sized package of tissues.

That wouldn’t suffice. A disposable tissue wasn’t nearly personal enough to sustain any magic.

“Never mind.” The fake sneeze left her, though the tingling in her nose remained.

“False alarm?” Ethan put the tissues back in his pocket.

Magic pressed at the air, too thin and superficial to reveal its specific type. It wasn’t clearly personal, physical, or prophetic.

Maybe Stella’s mind was playing tricks on her. If it was, it was probably the effects of a guilty conscience.

Ethan grimaced. “This time of year is murder for allergies. I always come prepared.”

He glanced over his shoulder at the news crew and held up one finger to delay them a little longer.

“So,” he said. “*Stella* Aldren, was it?”

“Correct, and...” She pointed at him. “*Ethan* Mather, was it? Did I get that right?”

“Correct.” He smiled, letting her know that his ego could stand having a woman yank his chain.

He wasn’t at all what she imagined a descendant of Cotton Mather to be like, but prejudices ran deep. Her coven’s early debate about whether he was lying about his lineage rose to the forefront of her mind.

“Are you *really* descended from Cotton Mather like that article said?”

He blinked, apparently surprised by the direction or the directness of her question.

“So says the DNA test my mother bought me for Christmas.”

“You just found out you’re related?” That was a surprise.

“Yep.” He leaned one hand against the railing. “Name recognition is an asset in any politician’s toolbox, but being a *true* Mather in Massachusetts... My campaign manager about wet himself when I told him.”

“You think a name with such dubious historical connotations will be an asset?”

“Ah.” He wiggled his fingers as if conjuring a spell. “You mean the witch thing.”

“Yeah,” Stella deadpanned. “The witch thing.”

His responding smile was beautiful and bright. “Don’t you think there’s a certain...I don’t know...*romantic drama* to that whole period?”

“*Romantic?*” She folded her arms. He was definitely a Mather—the condescending, arrogant slime hole. “Is that what we’re calling it these days? Good people were hanged.”

His face fell with the obvious change in her mood. His gaze lowered to her frowning lips, but only briefly.

“Sorry. You’re right.” He placed both hands on the railing and looked down at the crowd below. “So, which one of these rich constituents is your date tonight?”

Stella clenched her teeth, annoyed by his change of subject.

When a few seconds went by without a response from her, he turned from the railing with his eyebrows raised. “You didn’t come here alone, did you?”

She arched a brow. “Is that so hard to believe?”

“A little, yes. You don’t look like the kind of woman who has to do anything alone.”

Stella was pretty sure what he *really* meant was that she didn’t look like the kind of woman who had any extra money to donate to a political campaign, so she must have come with some older, richer man.

“I don’t have to be alone if I don’t want to be, but tonight, I chose to come single.”

He let out a breath. “That’s a luxury I wish I had. I hate crowds. These events are my least favorite part of campaigning. I really just want to get the election behind me so I can get to work.”

“That’s pretty arrogant.” And so much like a Mather. “You’re so certain you’ll win?”

“Not one-hundred percent, but my opponent can only complain about our problems. I’ve got real ideas about how to fix them. Besides, I’ve grown accustomed to winning. My life has been pretty charmed, and Doherty—that’s my campaign manager—he says the only thing that would give him more assurance of my win was if I were married with two kids and a dog.”

Stella rolled her eyes. “If you’re looking to get married, you should get back down there and mingle.”

“I’d prefer to talk to you, Red.”

“I don’t think there’s a future between us, Casanova.”

He leaned in. “Would you be up for pretending?”

Stella stared at him for a few seconds, waiting for the punchline, but none came.

“Excuse me?” she asked.

“Pretending to be my fiancé.” He grinned, and his deep blue eyes sparkled. “Only until the election is over.”

She stared at him, still waiting for him to laugh. When he didn’t, she said, “You’re joking.”

He shrugged, but the teasing twinkle in his eyes intensified. “It would require you to attend a few events like this...stand beside me at the podium when I make a speech... I’d make it worth your while. Name your price.”

“You’re insane.”

Though, maybe she did have a price. There was one written in red on the last “overdue” statement from her bank.

He sighed like he never really expected her to accept. “I saw that scenario in a Hallmark movie once.”

“You watch Hallmark movies?”

“I did. Growing up. Anyway, I thought the fake engagement angle was worth a shot, even though you’re clearly annoyed by me.”

“That’s because you’re annoying.”

A camera flashed to their left, temporarily blinding her.

“Mr. Mather?” the reporter called.

Stella peered around Ethan Mather’s broad shoulder to where the reporter and her cameraman looked more than ready to go.

“Right,” Ethan said. “I need to do this interview. Will you wait for me? It won’t take long, and there is the matter of that dance you promised.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I never promised you a dance.”

“Really?” His eyes widened, then he frowned. “That’s not how I remember it.”

Stella groaned, wanting to say no. She wanted to punish him for his overconfidence. But a dance *would* give her the opportunity to stay close, and that was her only shot at getting a hair for the poppet.

“All right,” she conceded. “One dance.”

“All right,” he repeated, sounding relieved.

He headed for the news crew, and Stella watched him walk away, unnerved by how much she liked the way he moved. Long strides. Powerful.

But without any obnoxious swagger.

He smiled as he answered the reporter's questions, more than once glancing Stella's way.

She steeled her nerves and smiled back. How on earth was she supposed to kill this man?

As soon as the interview was done, he came back, offered his arm, and escorted her downstairs.

The dance floor was more than half full by the time they reached it. Ethan took her hand and spun her around before pulling her back so fast their bodies collided.

Stella's breath left her in a *whoosh*, and the heat intensified between them, making her heart race and her stomach dip.

Her mind went on red alert. *Danger! Danger! Danger!*

If she wasn't careful, their bodies wouldn't be the only things colliding. She'd be on a collision course with disaster.

Ethan Mather's shoulder muscles were rock hard under her fingertips, and his body heat hinted at his own brand of magic, something Stella had never encountered before. Pure male magnetism.

The knocking sound was back. She still couldn't tell where it was coming from.

"Do you trust me to lead?" Ethan pressed his words close to her ear, nearly a kiss, before pulling back so he could see her face.

She frowned. "Not really."

"I know how to dance," he said, misapprehending the cause of her worry. "I took lessons when I was younger."

"Did you go to a lot of cotillions as a kid?" she asked. "According to the article, you Mathers are practically Massachusetts royalty, right?"

Something flickered in his eyes—something undecided—then he leaned toward her ear again. "You want to know a dirty family secret?"

Stella pulled back and checked his other shoulder, hoping to spot a loose hair, but the man's follicles had a firm grip on every thick, dark strand.

"Are you sure you want to share your dirty secret?" she asked. "You don't know me. I could be writing an article for the tabloids. I could be a spy from your opponent's camp."

Humor warmed his eyes. "Are you one of Patterson's spies, Red?"

Stella didn't answer that, and he laughed, probably taking her silence as part of the bit.

“It’s actually not that much of a secret,” he said. “Anyone who cares to do the research on me could find it.”

Stella wanted to ask what he meant, but he didn’t give her the chance. Finally—after all that talking—they started to dance. Like, *really* dance. He wasn’t kidding when he said he knew what he was doing.

They moved in quick, graceful steps, and even though she was dancing backward most of the time, and didn’t know what in the hell she was doing, Ethan’s strong arms kept her upright, twirling her around the floor.

It was thrilling, but the room was spinning so quickly, there was no chance of finding a hair for the poppet.

They spun toward a corner of the dance floor, and Ethan suddenly stopped.

He pulled her so close she practically straddled his leg. At least, as much straddling as her dress would allow. Heat flared through her as her feminine parts pressed firmly against his hard, muscular thigh.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “We’re just dancing.”

That was a bunch of bullshit. “I think you’re trying to give me an orgasm right here on the dance floor.”

Ethan’s eyes widened. “I am shocked to hear you talk like that.”

“I could shock you in more ways than that,” she said, wishing she could think of a spell that would put him in his place without calling too much attention.

“I bet you could,” he said.

“You’re holding me kinda tight,” she said, even as she pressed herself more firmly against his thigh. Her core throbbed.

“Do you feel that?” he asked. His gaze bore into hers.

“That’s what I’ve been saying, Casanova. And people are starting to stare.”

Not that she blamed them. Ethan in his tux. Her O.T.T. dress. The fact that they’d been holding this pose for way too long... Who wouldn’t want to watch to see what happened next?

“No,” he said. “*This.*”

He tightened his arm around her waist.

The knocking sound returned, and Stella’s magic surged, heating her chest and sizzling through her veins.

Oh, yeah. She felt it. It was impossible to ignore—whatever the hell it

was.

“I felt it the moment I saw you,” he said. “It’s like there’s a magnet... pulling me closer to you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

That wasn’t a total lie. While she’d felt the strange pull of his charm and charisma, she had no idea why she was responding to it—other than her being a colossal idiot who hadn’t gotten laid in over a year.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “I feel ridiculous saying it out loud, but I thought saying it might help me understand.”

“Positive,” she lied. “I don’t feel anything.”

“Hmmm.” He didn’t sound convinced. He also didn’t seem uncomfortable about making himself so vulnerable. There was no game play with this one. *Nada*.

They resumed their dance, and after a few more turns, Ethan arched her over his arm in a heart-pounding dip.

His warm breath brushed against her ear when he asked, “Have you given any more thought to what I asked you upstairs?”

Stella closed her eyes as a shiver ran down her spine. “Are you referring to your phony marriage proposal?”

“Yes.”

“Then, no. But I’ve given more thought to your need for psychiatric help.”

Ethan pulled back a little, grinned, then brought her upright.

She stared into his eyes, amazed by how calm he seemed while her lower muscles clenched and unclenched with waves of unfulfilled anticipation.

She may have been taught to hate this man and his entire family, but if this was how he *danced*, she couldn’t help imagining what it would be like to —

Another camera flashed, and there was a blur of movement as whatever sexual spell Ethan had cast over her dissolved in the air.

Thank the universe. She blinked as if waking from a dream.

A man with light brown hair, a spray tan, and a harried expression approached them at a rapid clip. “Ethan!”

Ethan bowed his head, muttering, “Damn.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” the man said as he reached them.

“Is it time already?” Ethan asked.

The man gave Stella a tight-lipped, apologetic smile. “It’s important we

stay on schedule. After his speech, he's got to catch a plane to Pittsfield."

"It's all right," she said. "The song's over anyway."

"Stella Aldren," Ethan said. "This is Shawn Doherty, my long-time friend and campaign manager. Give us one more second, Doherty, and I'll be at the podium."

Doherty nodded once, then walked toward the stage.

Ethan gave Stella a hungry look that said he really wished they could have danced longer.

"Can I see you again? I'll be back in Boston tomorrow night. We could have dinner. Maybe discuss the pressing concerns of small-business owners?"

"Of course." As dangerous as this man was to her sanity, she had to agree. This evening had been a bust when it came to collecting the main ingredient for her poppet.

"Can I get your number?" he asked.

Stella hesitated. She'd never intended to have so much personal connection to him. The whole reason for making a poppet was to do what needed to be done from a distance with a rock solid alibi.

Now, there were photos of them. Having her number in his phone was next level.

Still...she needed a way for their paths to cross again, and she couldn't rely on fate. She needed to get this done quickly, and it was already taking longer than she'd hoped.

"I guess I could give you my number."

Ethan gave her his phone, and she entered her digits.

She handed it back to him, and he smiled at the screen.

Something knocked in her heart—that fist pounding against a door—and that's when she saw it.

She'd given him her number a second too soon because there, on his shoulder, a single hair had caught in the fibers of his tuxedo jacket.

Orgasm-inspiring dancer or not, this man was still a Mather with political ambitions. And one way or another, she had a covenant to save.

Ethan put his phone back in his pocket and with one more electric smile, he leaned in.

Stella put her hands on his shoulders and claimed her prize.

He put his cheek against hers, giving her a continental kiss.

"Knock 'em dead," she whispered.

“Thanks,” he said. “I will.” Then he jogged toward the dais, looking like a man ready to conquer the world.

Stella let out a relieved breath. This ordeal was almost over. And now that she had what she came for, there was no reason to stick around for the speech.

Besides, the flattening spell she’d put on the items in her tiny purse was fizzling. Any second now, they would pop back to their original shapes, and the purse would explode, scattering her lipstick, phone, and room key in all directions.

She didn’t need to call any more attention to herself. She quickly made her escape and headed for the elevators.

As soon as the doors closed, she let out a sigh, and her gaze rose from the strand of hair pinched between her fingers to her reflection in the mirrored elevator doors.

Her mother’s voice was suddenly in her ears. *Monsters come in all shapes and sizes, Stella. The most dangerous monster is the one who looks the most like you.*

Stella couldn’t help asking aloud, “Is that what I am? A monster?”

Now that she’d met Ethan Mather, could she really do what Bridget Bishop had chosen her to do?

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Back inside the security of her hotel room, Stella held the single strand of Ethan's beautiful, silky, dark hair up to the light, rolling it between the pad of her thumb and middle finger.

The strand had a slight curve and, as it rotated, its appearance oscillated from that of a thick dark line against the bright light to one so thin it was nearly invisible.

How strange, she thought, that such a delicate thing could be the conduit for so much destructive power.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she loosened the basting stitches at the bottom of the poppet and stuffed the hair deep inside. That done, she stitched the bottom tightly closed and tied it off with a knot.

The poppet had everything it needed now. The magic was complete. All she needed to do was stab one of the blackthorns she'd brought with her through its heart.

The poppet's blue button eyes stared innocently up at her. Her throat closed and, unable to look at the poppet any longer, she tossed it aside. She took out her conflicted emotions on the zipper at the back of her dress.

She wrestled it down, then peeled the ruby satin off her body and tossed the dress, the shoes, Jade's clutch, and a half dozen hairpins across the room in a tornado of frustration.

Finally, it was with a sigh of relief that she pulled on a baby-blue hoodie and a pair of matching sweats. They were a Christmas present from Jade. Stella only wore them around the house because they had the words *Bitch, Please* scrawled across the butt.

She glanced at the poppet again.

It stared back at her, taunting her. For a second, she thought she heard it ask, “What are you? Chicken? *Bok-bok!*”

Marietta’s bravery tonic had rolled onto the floor. Stella thought about chugging it, but the memory of its smell had her considering other options.

Maybe she needed some food in her stomach. She hadn’t eaten all day. The hotel was on the edge of Chinatown. Earlier, she’d spotted the sign for a hotpot restaurant not too far away.

That was it. A little fresh air. Some dumplings and spicy chicken wings. Then she could get back to business.

She slipped on her tennis shoes and headed out the door.

When she hit the sidewalk, she was surprised to discover that it had been raining. The pavement was still wet.

A man walking several yards ahead stepped into a puddle that was far deeper than he realized. He cursed and hopped onto drier ground.

Beyond him, nearly two blocks up the street, the neon sign for the hotpot restaurant beckoned.

Stella’s stomach growled, but she only made it a few more feet in the restaurant’s direction before she lurched to a stop. Her ears piqued, and her heart stuttered.

What the hell was *that*?

She could feel it like a sixth sense—itchy—between her shoulder blades.

Someone was watching. Someone behind her.

She remembered the sassy words scrawled across her butt and hoped that was what had caught their attention.

Bitch, please. No need to stare.

She resumed her path toward the restaurant, and after a few seconds, the sense of being watched disappeared.

A car passed, the muffled sounds of The Smiths’ *How Soon is Now* blasting from its open windows. Tires splashed water up onto the sidewalk, and she dodged out of the way.

The music faded as the car disappeared into the night, the sound replaced by that of wet, squelchy footsteps.

They were coming from behind her, and a tingling sensation wriggled over her body as the same weighty gaze from moments ago returned with a vengeance.

Her nose tingled, telling her that whoever it was, they had magic. It was strong, and it was close.

It was also definitely physical magic, like Izzy's, because she detected the scent of wet earth, though the familiar fragrance was mixed with the scent of sweet decay—like apples that had fallen from the tree and left to rot.

It was unlike any physical magic she'd encountered before. Definitely old with hints of the macabre.

She glanced behind her, saw nothing, and walked faster. But when she quickened her pace, the soggy footsteps quickened too.

She walked faster. The restaurant was only a block away now.

The magic seemed heavy and territorial. The intensity of it followed her every move, scraping against her skin.

Her nipples hardened like cherry pits under her hoodie, and she walked faster.

So did her stalker.

Oh, hells no. She broke into a run and dodged into an alleyway, hoping to double back and get the witch off her tail.

She was halfway through the alley when a burst of wind rushed toward her from the opposite end—so fierce it had to be magical. It didn't merely stop her in her tracks; it flattened her against a dumpster that protruded into the alley.

Stella's hair blew back, and she had to close her eyes to save them from the flying grit.

From behind her, her stalker finally reached the corner and entered the alley.

Stella pushed against the wind, trying to escape, but the air was as solid as a wall.

That is, until the witch abruptly cut off the wind, and Stella's weight pitched forward. She staggered and nearly dropped to her knees.

There was nothing left to do but face the witch head on. Once she had her balance, she whirled to confront her.

"For fuck's sake!" Stella yelled, throwing her arms out in exasperation and trying to make herself look as big as possible. "What do you want?"

She was shocked to discover there were only six feet of wet pavement separating her from a stooped, dark-skinned woman with a deeply wrinkled and weather-beaten face.

The woman wore a colorful headscarf and a shapeless tweed coat over what appeared to be a floral house coat. Her outfit was completed by nylon socks and white, terrycloth bedroom slippers that were now completely

soaked.

The outfit said, “I don’t give a fuck. It’s comfortable,” and magic licked up from her like hundreds of mini tornados.

Stella didn’t know if it was the old woman’s speed, appearance, or power that she found most surprising.

“*Eskize*,” the old woman said in a Creole accent. “I didn’t mean to frighten you, *cheri*.”

“You didn’t,” Stella said, though she winced at her unconvincing lie. She’d just tried to outrun someone’s grandmother by dodging into an alley. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“I am...” The elderly witch pressed her palm to her chest. “Lovey DuPre. And you are a *sòsyè, non? A witch?*”

Out of habit, Stella glanced around to make sure no one else was in earshot. Of course there wasn’t. It was only the two of them in the alley, along with a dumpster and a soggy hamburger wrapper that had defied the wind by plastering itself to the ground.

“Is that a problem?” Stella asked. “Am I in your territory or something? If I am, I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

She wasn’t aware of a coven in this part of Boston, but if she was wrong about that, it would have been bad form for her to arrive without first giving them a heads-up.

Lovey studied Stella’s face, then her dark eyes traveled Stella’s entire body, her gaze turning shrewd. “Your magic is very interesting, *non? I notice.*”

Stella frowned. She was the only one in her coven who could detect another witch’s magic and power level. She wasn’t used to other witches being able to assess *her*.

It wasn’t a good feeling, especially when it could expose the weaknesses in her magic.

“Why are you here?” Lovey asked.

“In the alley?” Stella intentionally played it dumb because she had a good hunch this was the witch she’d been sensing all evening. She didn’t want to give away her own plans without first knowing this older witch’s intent in regard to Ethan Mather.

“In Boston,” Lovey said. “Are you here to steal our *objè pouvwa?*”

Stella blinked and leaned back. Long ago, she’d given up on her high-school French ever being useful. Amazingly, it came in handy tonight

because these Creole words sounded close enough to their original source.

“I assure you Madame DuPre, I have no idea what *object of power* you’re talking about.”

Covens’ power objects could come in many forms: books, amulets, stones, and crystals.

“*Non?*” Lovey asked, tilting her head to the side. “You have no idea?”

“No,” Stella assured her.

And if this particular object was behind the scent of sweet decay in Lovey’s magic, Lovey and her coven could keep it to themselves, thank you very much.

Stella didn’t need to wrangle with anything new right now. Especially something dangerous. She had plenty of her own drama to keep her busy.

Lovey tipped her head to the other side, and her scrutiny grew more intense. She didn’t seem to believe Stella’s denial.

“Honest,” Stella said. “I have no interest in your power object, or your coven in general. That is...unless you have plans that interfere with my own?”

She was being intentionally vague, feeling the older witch out. Stella knew she’d been watching her, so perhaps Lovey was aware of her mission. If Lovey planned to interfere, now was the time to get it all out in the open.

Lovey shuffled closer and stopped two feet in front of her. “You are friendly with the *kandida*?”

“The...?”

“The candidate,” she said.

Stella’s lips parted on a breath, as surprised by the older witch’s lack of caginess as she was by the way she phrased her question.

“You’re asking if I’m *friends* with Ethan Mather?”

Stella supposed from Lovey’s observation in the ballroom, it had looked like she was being friendly with him, but that was just part of her assignment.

“Yes.” Lovey nodded impatiently.

Well, if the older witch could be direct, so could Stella. She put her hands on her hips. “What do you want with the candidate?”

“*Mwen?*” Lovey clucked her tongue, but her dark eyes remained hard and sharp. “Nothing.”

Stella scoffed, not believing that for a second. Why else would she ask about him? Why else would she have been watching him—and Stella for that matter—all evening?

“If there’s nothing you want from him, what were you doing there?”

“There?” Lovey asked.

“In the hotel,” Stella said. “In the ballroom. At the fundraiser. That was you watching us.”

“*Mwen?* In the ballroom?” Her confused expression deepened the lines in her face.

When Stella didn’t respond, she cackled, revealing a gold front tooth. The sound of her laugh sent a ripple of fear down Stella’s spine.

“I don’t have a dress for the ball, *cheri*. I am like Cinderella, *non?*”

Lovey pulled a worn handkerchief from her coat pocket and covered her mouth as her laugh dissolved into a body-racking cough.

Okay. Maybe she had a point. Her attire wouldn’t have gone unnoticed among all the tuxedos and evening gowns.

“Then maybe not the ballroom, but in the hotel? You were in the elevator, right? And later up on the mezzanine? There was magic up there. I could sense it.”

Lovey shook her head while wiping her mouth with the handkerchief.

So much for that. Stella was back to square one when it came to discovering the witch in the ballroom. But she was betting it was someone from this witch’s coven.

“If you weren’t in the hotel, what makes you think I even *know* Ethan Mather?”

Lovey shoved her handkerchief into her coat pocket, then leaned in close. Her breath smelled of onions as she whispered, “I watch. Always watch. Now, tell ol’ Lovey the truth.”

She jabbed her finger toward Stella’s chest. “If you have not come to steal our *objè pouvwa* for yourself, are you here to help the *kandida?*”

“I’m not here to help him. No.” Far from it.

“Then it is still only the *kandida* I must worry about?”

Stella honestly had no idea what she was talking about, and she shook her head in frustration.

“Why would Ethan Mather want to steal your power object? It’s not like he could use it on his own. He’s not a witch.”

Lovey cackled again, her laugh dissolving into another coughing fit. “I thought you could read magic, *cheri*.”

“I can. I...”

Slowly, it occurred to her what Lovey was saying, but she refused to

believe it. It was impossible. It couldn't be. How would a Mather be touched by magic?

And yet, it explained the presence of magic she'd felt all through the evening.

"From one *sòsyè* to another, a warning." Lovey touched a gnarled finger to her lips as if she were telling a secret.

Stella swallowed hard and focused on Lovey's upturned face.

"Be careful around the *kandida, cheri*. He is not to be trusted."

CHAPTER
EIGHT

“So?” Doherty asked as he climbed into the back of the black Range Rover parked outside the Liberty Hotel. “What’s with the girl?”

Ethan Mather ignored his friend’s question for a moment, opting instead to greet the driver he’d hired to take them to Hanscom Field, a small airport thirty minutes northwest of Boston.

“How’s it going, Matt?” He clapped his hand down on the driver’s shoulder.

“I’m good,” Matt replied. “Thanks for asking, Mr. Mather.”

Ethan took off his tuxedo jacket, hung it from the hook behind his seat, and climbed into the vehicle. Matt closed the door.

Once Ethan got his seatbelt fastened, he addressed the question left hanging in the air. “What do you mean, ‘what’s with the girl?’”

“The chick you were dancing with.” Doherty pulled his own seatbelt across his chest.

“I know who you’re talking about,” Ethan said. “I just didn’t understand your question.”

They pulled away from the valet station. Matt flipped on the windshield wipers as it started to rain for the second time that evening.

“Did you know her before tonight?” Doherty asked.

“No,” Ethan replied, watching the dark and rainy city slide by his window.

“You two looked pretty cozy.”

“Did we?” Ethan couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at the corners of his mouth, and that smile grew wider when he saw his reflection in the darkened window.

“It’s not like you, Ethan.”

Ethan turned away from his window. “To dance with a woman?”

He was surprised by Doherty’s comment. He and Doherty had known each other since high school, and his friend had seen him dance with plenty of women.

“No,” Doherty said, huffing out a laugh. “To get so distracted. I called your name several times before you even looked my way, and you knew it was nearly time for your speech.”

“What can I say?” Ethan shrugged, then made eye contact with his reflection in the window. “She was distracting.”

“Well, she did have a wicked bod on her, that’s for sure. Here are the notes for the people you’re meeting in Pittsfield.” He set a folder in Ethan’s lap.

“It was more than that,” Ethan said without even glancing at the folder. “There was something...different about her, but...”

“But what?” Doherty bent over to retrieve more files from his attaché case.

Ethan shook his head, not really knowing what he wanted to say. Sometimes it was easier to agree with Doherty and let the rest slide. “You’re right. Wicked bod.”

And those eyes... Large, wide, and so gray they reminded Ethan of storm clouds.

“If only you’d have met her years ago.” Doherty’s smirk signified a joke was coming. “She would’ve made a fuckin’ fantastic first lady for the State of Massachusetts.”

“Funny,” Ethan said without laughing. “That’s what I told her.”

Doherty sucked in a lungful of air and nearly choked. “You told her she’d make a fantastic first lady? *Jesus*, Ethan.”

“I blamed you. I told her my campaign manager thought it would help my campaign if I were married, and I suggested a pretend engagement would give me a step in the right direction where voters were concerned.”

Doherty chuckled and shook his head. “You’re an idiot.”

“That’s what she said.”

“A body and a brain?” Doherty asked. “She might be a keeper.”

“Did you see her anywhere during my speech? I was trying to spot her in the crowd.”

“Nope. But I wasn’t exactly looking for her either.”

“Mmmm,” Ethan murmured, and he opened the contacts on his phone. She’d entered her name under the nickname, *Red*, maybe in hopes that he’d forget her real name, though there was fat chance of that.

The phone number she gave him was encouraging. At least it looked legit for the area.

But maybe Doherty was right, and he’d been an idiot. Stella had to know he’d been joking about the fake engagement, but maybe he’d come on too strong and taken the joke too far.

He would have thought—in that sea of black tuxedos—he could have easily spotted Stella’s auburn hair and red dress. But even from his elevated position at the podium, he hadn’t been able to find her.

He didn’t usually have any trouble with the ladies, but maybe this woman had given him a wrong number, glad that his speech gave her the opportunity to get far, far away.

He wondered if he should test out the number now, just to see who’d pick up. He checked the time. It was nearly midnight. With his luck, he’d wake some old woman from her sleep. He let his phone’s screen go dark.

Thirty minutes later, Matt pulled the SUV into Hanscom Field and parked.

Ethan and Doherty got out, and Matt carried their bags as they navigated several large rain puddles on their trek to the hangar.

The charter pilot greeted them, and Ethan slung his tuxedo jacket over his shoulder. He wished he’d had time to change into jeans. Jumping into an executive jet while wearing a tuxedo made him look like James Bond, and that was nowhere near the common-man image he was going for.

He glanced over his shoulder as if someone were watching, but all he saw was a line of airplane hangars. Paranoia was another bad look on him, and it had been getting worse. He was nearly positive that someone was following him.

Stella’s voice was suddenly in his ears. *Are you sure you want to share your dirty secret? I could be writing an article for the tabloids. I could be a spy from your opponent’s camp.*

Ethan frowned. He thought she’d been joking. Had he read their exchange all wrong? Was she actually a spy?

The pilot stuck out his hand, and Ethan shook it.

“Can we leave right away?” Doherty asked.

“All set.” The pilot unlatched the airplane’s side door, then flipped it

open, revealing the short set of stairs that led up into the cabin.

Doherty took one of the four plush leather seats, facing backward, and stowed his bag.

Ethan sat across from him, facing forward, and set the folder and his phone on the small work table between them.

“Prepare for takeoff,” the pilot said, and the engines started up with a roar.

Ethan slid his window shade up and watched as they taxied down the lane past the hangars, heading for one of the airport’s two runways.

The pilot centered the plane on the line and powered up.

As the plane steadily picked up speed, barreling down the runway, Ethan’s thoughts returned to the woman whose body had felt so right in his arms.

His weight settled solidly against his seat as he recalled the solid feel of his chest—that strange moment of rightness—when she’d agreed to dance with him.

He’d always trusted his instincts before, and they’d served him well. He wasn’t about to stop now. Stella Aldren was no spy. But she was...*something*.

He looked forward to getting to the bottom of it. Tomorrow night. At dinner. God willing.

Ethan looked down at her number as a powerful urge to hear her voice squeezed his chest. It wasn’t necessarily painful, but it did cause him to hold his breath.

Doherty was right. Stella Aldren was a distraction. It wasn’t merely her voice he wanted to hear, he wanted to run his hands through her long auburn hair. He wanted to stare into those wide, storm-cloud eyes. He wanted to run his hands over those curves in a private room, away from prying eyes.

And most of all, he wanted to understand that strange pull he’d felt to be near her—the one he’d admitted to her, straight up, like some kind of creeper.

Fuck, what had he been thinking, saying that out loud?

“Bro,” Doherty said as the view outside their windows turned to a solid field of black. “Are you going to look at those notes? We’ll be landing in Pittsfield in twenty minutes, then you’re going to need some sleep. Your first meeting is at eight tomorrow morning.”

“Right,” Ethan said, and he opened the folder, though his focus remained on that captivating woman.

His thumb still hovered over her number. Was he losing his mind?

CHAPTER
NINE

E than Mather was a witch.
Maybe.

The possibility was so shocking, Stella hadn't even gone to the hotpot restaurant.

She'd hightailed it back to the safety of her hotel room where she was now flopped down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling and breathing heavily through her mouth.

How could a descendant of Cotton Mather be touched by magic? No self-respecting witch would poke that bloodline with a ten-foot pole.

Obviously, she needed to get answers before she took things too far and made a terrible mistake.

Killing another person was bad enough. Killing a fellow witch was particularly taboo. Normally, it was grounds for banishment. Bridget Bishop couldn't have possibly contemplated this insane scenario when she cast her curse.

Stella grabbed the room service menu off the end table and flipped it open. She thought she'd been hungry before. But Lovey DuPre's shocking accusations—that Ethan Mather was a witch who wanted to steal her power object—had left her positively *ravenous*.

Her phone rang, and she answered. "Hi, Jade."

Her sister responded with an excited, "Is it done?"

The poppet stared back at Stella from its perch on the dresser. It had everything it needed except for the final stab from a blackthorn.

"Um..." For a split second, she considered telling Jade about the older witch, the wild insinuation she'd made about Ethan Mather, and—if true—

the insane wrinkle it put in her plans.

But she thought better of it.

Jade already suspected Stella wasn't up to the task. She'd be looking for any sign she was chickening out.

She'd think her delay was caused by nerves.

She wouldn't understand that this was about being careful.

While Stella still had a hard time believing Lovey was right, she couldn't just ignore her accusation. She needed to discover the truth for herself before stabbing the poppet through its heart.

That's what her mother would have done.

"No luck yet," Stella said with a defeated sigh.

"You mean...*no poppet?*" Jade's voice rose an octave.

"The man's got iron-clad hair follicles." She cringed as she dead-ass lied to her sister. "He didn't shed a single hair all night. And then he left for Pittsfield before I could collect anything else that might have been useful."

"So...? Now, what? You said you could take care of this." Jade's alarm conveyed the collective angst of their coven.

"Don't worry," Stella assured her, switching the phone to her other ear. "It's not like I'm working on a specific time limit."

"You don't know that," Jade said. "Bishop's curse could already be cinching its noose."

Stella chewed on her lip. She could be right about that.

"Mather will be back in Boston tomorrow," Stella said. "I'll be seeing him again in less than twenty-four hours."

There was a long pause. Then Jade asked, "*Seeing* him?"

"Yeah," she sat up and caught her guilty reflection in the mirror before quickly looking away. "He asked me on a date."

This unanticipated development was met by more silence.

It stretched out for so long Stella eventually had to ask, "Jade? Are you still there?"

"You're going on a *date* with a Mather?"

Stella forced a laugh, even though the thought of seeing him again made her heart flutter with anticipation. *That jaw—so sharp it could cut paper. That warm smile. Those navy-blue eyes...*

Though, honestly, it was Ethan's defense of the "little guy" that had really grabbed her attention. He might have pissed her off with his dismissive talk of witches, but at least he didn't seem like the typical slimy politician.

She flopped over again and opened the room service menu. “I’m not going on a date with him. *He’s* going on a date with me. From my perspective, it’ll be a night of wrapping up unfinished business. Oh, my god!”

“*What?*” Jade shouted. “What’s wrong?”

“The hotel charges sixteen dollars for pancakes!” Stella tossed the menu over her shoulder, and it landed on the floor.

Jade exhaled slowly. “Order delivery.”

Stella rolled to her side, then sat on the edge of the bed as one particular memory from the night came into sharper focus. *Ethan Mather had pissed her off with his dismissive talk of witches.*

Coupled with how barely detectable his magic had been, if Lovey was right about him, was it possible he didn’t know he was a witch? In which case, what would he want with Lovey’s power object?

“Want me to update the rest of the coven?” Jade asked.

“Hmmm?” she murmured, her thoughts too distracted to fully comprehend.

“They’re going to be blowing up your phone in a few minutes if they don’t hear from you.”

“Oh.” Stella let out a sigh. “Right. Would you, please? Tell them it’s only a minor setback.”

“Yeah. Of course,” she said, but Stella could hear it now, the flash of bitterness in her sister’s voice. Jade actually wished she’d been chosen.

“I promise, Jade. I’ve got this. I won’t let any of you down. Oh, and don’t forget to feed Alice and Darren or they’ll attack each other. And double-check the lock on Darren’s terrarium before you close up the shop.”

“Don’t worry,” she said. “My jobs are all taken care of.”



STELLA WOKE THE NEXT MORNING, pushed the long mop of tangles off her face, and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “Here we go.”

Tossing back the blankets, she rolled out of bed, stepped into the jeans she’d worn to Boston, then pulled on a Harvard hoodie she thrifted years ago. Her hair went up in a messy bun.

She may have come to Boston with a plan, but she was now a witch on a

mission.

Ethan had said that anyone who cared to do the research could discover his lineage, so that's exactly what she planned to do. Either she'd find the root of his magical ancestry, or she'd determine that Lovey was mistaken.

If Ethan isn't a witch, she thought while brushing her teeth, it's business as usual.

If he was...

She spit into the sink, then slapped her hands on the counter and stared into her own wide gray eyes, looking for answers.

She couldn't believe that Bishop's curse would apply to a Mather if he was *also* a witch. For all they knew, there was an exception to the curse for Mather-born witches.

Or maybe...

"What if we have it all wrong?" she whispered.

She waited for a response from her reflection, but none came.

It was just that none of them had been there when Bridget Bishop died. Maybe one of the witches at the scene heard it all wrong.

Maybe it was like the classic game of "telephone" that she played in elementary school. She'd whisper a message into Jade's ear, then she'd pass it on to Izzy, who'd pass it on to Carrie Bly...

By the time the message passed through six or seven girls, the message was hilariously different than the way it began.

And if they couldn't keep a message straight in real time, it wasn't a stretch to think that Bishop's curse had been twisted and reinterpreted over the last three hundred years.

There was no way she could kill Ethan Mather until she knew for sure that he wasn't a witch or...if he was...that there was no exception to the curse, that it still applied to him, and that his death was the only way to save her family.

She re-entered the bedroom area, and her gaze landed on the poppet for a second before continuing on to her duffel bag.

She hadn't expected to be in Boston for more than twenty-four hours, so she'd packed light. She hoped wherever Ethan planned to take her to dinner wasn't too fancy.

She grabbed her satchel, double-checked to make sure she had her room key, then she was on her way to discover the truth.



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, Stella entered the Massachusetts State Archives, a stark gray building that reminded her of a military bunker—the kind that held alien specimens deep in its high-security basement.

In actuality, it held a lot of microfiche. She found a work station and got down to business.

If the magic she'd sensed in the hotel ballroom really had been Ethan's, then it must have originated from an old genetic marker that had been bred out of him by too much nonmagical DNA. The magic had simply been too faint for any other conclusion.

Female energy left the strongest magical trail, so her best guess was a maternal ancestor from at least four generations back.

It didn't take much effort to find Ethan's birth certificate. From there, she went to his mother—a woman named Catherine Renaudin—but her side of the family didn't have deep roots in New England, so there wasn't much trail to follow.

She focused her attention on Ethan's paternal line. This research took her back much further and didn't hit a roadblock until she got to the birth of a boy named John Silence Mather in 1679, thirteen years before the witch trials in Salem.

The mother's name, *Isobel Duncan*, was barely legible in faded sepia ink. The father's name wasn't listed at all, but if Ethan Mather was a true descendant of Cotton Mather, Stella had a pretty good guess who the missing father was.

Still...even though Cotton married three times, she didn't remember any of his wives being named Isobel. In fact, Cotton would have been a teenager when this baby boy was born.

She did a little more digging and found Isobel Duncan listed on the manifest for a ship called *The Valiant*, arriving from Scotland fourteen months prior to her son's birth, but that's where her research stopped.

She picked up her long list of potential witches and shoved them into her satchel. She slung the strap across her body, then headed for the exit.

"Find everything you were looking for, miss?" asked the gentleman at the desk.

“Absolutely,” she said, though the honest answer was *not yet*.

If Ethan really was a witch, then one of the names she’d written down from his genealogy would have to show up in the secret Registry of Witches.

And that meant another stop. This time, to the Boston Public Library.



A SHORT TIME LATER, the iconic building loomed in front of her: a giant, granite, Beaux Arts structure with thirteen arched windows across its symmetrical facade.

She’d been to this historic branch only once before, on a sixth-grade field trip, but she remembered the layout well. And even though the tour hadn’t included the particular record collection she was after today, every witch in New England knew where to find it.

Inside the vestibule, she darted past the bronze statue of a gallant man wearing a jaunty hat, then through the doors into the palatial lobby. Many patrons had stopped to admire the vaulted mosaic ceiling and grand staircase, but she rushed on, capturing more than a few curious glances.

Pumping her arms, she raced up the stairs, rounded the stone lions at the landing, then dashed up the next flight and down the hall into the Abbey Room.

The transition from the lobby’s warm amber glow to the reading room’s heavy, medieval ambience was startling, and so was the fact it was currently empty. She had to work fast. Patrons would be coming up the grand staircase any second.

Stella headed straight for the cold, empty fireplace and—still being miraculously alone—reached inside the firebox. She felt around blindly until she found the brick Marietta had told her and Jade about years ago.

It was exactly as Marietta had described: On the left side, as high as the lintel, a brick with three small impressions meant for a witch’s middle three fingertips. She held her breath and pressed in.

The room filled with a grating sound. The floor of the fireplace slid open to reveal a steep iron staircase. Stella ducked inside and descended the first several steps as the floor of the fireplace slid closed above her head.

Darkness shrouded her, and she clung to the iron railing while feeling for

the next tread with her toes. The only sounds were that of her own breathing, her tentative steps, and the groan of metal brackets, straining to keep the staircase attached to the limestone wall.

When she reached the bottom, she activated her phone's flashlight app and cast the beam around the small room, no more than ten feet square. A round oak table stood in the center. The scent of ash and beeswax permeated the dry air.

A large candle sat in the center of the table alongside an ancient, leather-bound book. The book was three inches thick and an ornate brass clasp latched its front and back covers together.

There was no title, but she knew what it was. Every region in the United States had its own registry. This was the official list of every known witch from the original thirteen colonies, from 1624 to present day.

When she opened the book, the foxed and rippled pages were blank, but this didn't alarm her. She held her palms over the book and recited a Gaelic spell every local witch learned for this exact occasion: "*Leugh an leabhar.*" Read the book.

Pulling her hands back, she drew in a long, slow breath, patiently waiting as the first name—Goodwife Joan Wright—rose to the surface. The woman had been a healer and midwife from the Jamestown colony.

She'd been accused of witchcraft in 1626, but disappeared before the trial concluded. No death was ever recorded for her.

The rumor among witches was that Goodwife Wright had transformed herself into a wolf and lived off her accusers' livestock for the rest of her natural days.

Stella checked the back of the registry to find that the last few pages were still blank, waiting for parents to list the names of future-born witches.

She flipped several sheets closer to the front of the book and found her own name and birthday listed, as well as Jade's, both written in their mother's handwriting. Stella recognized the slants and loops from her birthday cards and her grocery lists.

More recently, she'd seen the notes her mother had kept on all her magical experiments and endless pursuits for the truth.

Even as a child, Stella understood how her mother wasn't content to merely perform a spell. She had to unwind it, to understand how and why it worked.

Stella took more than a little pride in recognizing that trait in herself. It

was why she was here after all. She needed to understand Ethan Mather before she worked a spell on him.

The last thing she needed was for it to blow up in her face because she hadn't taken the time to learn the truth. Uncharacteristic carelessness was what had killed her mother before indirectly killing her father too.

Stella flipped a few more pages back in time, and a familiar pang of sadness intensified as she stroked her thumb over her mother's name, birthday, and date of death. Her father's name and birthday were listed only a half a page before hers.

Whoever had recorded her mother's death—most likely Judith—had forgotten to do the same for her father. But she remembered the blinding grief that had swept through the coven when they died. The neglected date was odd, but understandable.

She cleared her throat, then got back to business. She set the list of women she'd researched at the archives on the table and began the tedious task of looking up each name.

She started in the twentieth-century because the records were clearer, and she had complete birth dates for all of them.

She didn't have any luck with the limited names she had for Ethan's mother's side of the family. The closest was a smudgy entry for a witch with his mother's initials. Close, but no cigar.

So, moving on to his father's side of the family, she scanned back through the nineteenth and eighteenth-century women, looking for evidence of witchcraft.

Still, no names matched.

Stella worried that maybe Ethan Mather's magic had come from a *male* ancestor, and she'd royally screwed up by assuming a female was behind it.

Getting more and more frustrated, she made it all the way back to the final name on her list: Isobel Duncan, the Scottish woman who'd arrived on *The Valiant* in 1678.

Her birth would have been recorded in Scotland, but if she was a witch, her arrival should have been memorialized by her new high priestess.

Stella traced her finger down the registry. The list was quite long for that year, but still nothing matched.

"Unbelievable," she muttered. All this research and it had been a bust. "What a fucking waste of time!"

Stella slammed the book shut, and a puff of dust motes bloomed in the

air.

Her nose tingled. But not because of any dust. A grating sound echoed above her as the fireplace floor slid open.

Someone was coming. And it was another witch.

CHAPTER
TEN

Stella shoved her notes into her bag, then searched for a place to hide. The only option was to duck under the table, but there wasn't enough time to do even that. By now, whoever was coming would have noticed the tiny beam from her flashlight.

A light switch clicked on, illuminating the entire room, and a pair of yellow suede stilettos came into view.

Stella's heart pounded as the brackets that fastened the stairs to the wall groaned in despair.

Whomever the feet belonged to didn't seem concerned by the alarming noise. They moved with smooth self-assurance until the yellow stilettos became stilettos *and* skinny black jeans, then stilettos, skinny black jeans, and a yellow leather jacket.

Finally, a tall, twenty-something, light-skinned black woman with an eight-inch Afro, mirrored sunglasses, and impeccable lip gloss finished her descent.

There was the faint scent of lavender, the sign of a witch who specialized in personal magic, but it was nearly overwhelmed by the same sweet, apple-rotting decay Stella had detected on Lovey DuPre.

"Sup?" The tall witch took off her sunglasses, and her eyes met Stella's. "Guess I don't need these down here."

"Hi," Stella said, not knowing if there was an occupancy limit to the registration room or a protocol when two witches found themselves down here together.

"I'm Antoinette." She hooked her sunglasses on to the neckline of her white T-shirt.

Stella adjusted the strap of her bag against her shoulder. “Stella.”

Antoinette was over six feet in her shoes, and she sucked on the inside of her cheek while looking Stella over.

“Never seen you down here before. You must be the witch Gran was talking about.”

She opened a drawer in the table and pulled out a quill, along with a small bottle of ink. Then she lit the candle with a snap of her fingers. The tiny flame was unnecessary, now that the electric lights were on, so Stella assumed it was part of the recording ritual.

“Gran?” Stella asked. “You’re related to Lovey *DuPre*?” It was hard to see any resemblance between this tall fashionable witch and the elderly woman Stella met last night.

“Didn’t I just say that?” Antoinette flipped the book open to the last page of entries, causing the candle flame to dance wildly. “She’s my grandmother and our coven’s high priestess.”

Stella’s earlier concerns about another coven interfering in her efforts to fulfill Bishop’s curse shot to the surface. She might have been out of her depth lately, but she wasn’t so naive to think this meeting was purely coincidental.

Lovey DuPre had been wary of her last night. Perhaps Stella’s assurances that she wasn’t after the Boston coven’s power object hadn’t been as convincing as she’d thought.

“Your grandmother seemed very nice,” she said, hoping a little small talk would lead to a better understanding of the situation.

Antoinette smirked. “Did she?”

There was both surprise and quite a bit of good-natured humor in her voice, both of which made Stella question her suspicions about this unexpected meeting.

“Sure,” Stella said, feeling her out a little more. “Your grandmother and I... We had a nice chat.”

Stella didn’t see any point to going into specifics about the subject of that chat or the accusation that she or Ethan Mather planned to steal their power object.

Either Lovey had told her granddaughter everything, or she meant to keep her in the dark. If the latter was true, she wasn’t getting in the middle of that.

“Gran said you’re from out of town.”

“That’s right.”

Antoinette scribbled the name and birthdate of a newborn witch onto the next blank line and blew the ink dry.

“My cousin had a baby,” she explained.

“Congratulations to your cousin.”

“Did you have a new birth in your coven too? Is that why you’re here?”

“No, I was just...” Stella’s thoughts scrambled. She’d never expected to run into another witch down here, so she’d given no forethought to a credible lie. “...updating a record.”

Antoinette’s smooth forehead crinkled. “Updating? You mean, like, someone died?”

Obviously, Stella couldn’t tell her the truth—that she was investigating the very same person Lovey had warned her about. She’d practically sworn on her mother’s grave that she had no affiliation with the *kandida*. Bringing Ethan Mather’s name back into the conversation would only raise more suspicions.

“Yeah,” she said, hanging her head. “We lost someone. It’s very sad.”

Antoinette tipped her head to the side, and though Stella couldn’t read the subtle nuances of her expression, she got the distinct impression that—one—Antoinette didn’t believe her and—two—she didn’t really care.

“Is your magic really as unique as Gran said?”

Stella shrugged, glad to learn this witch couldn’t read magic like her grandmother. “Unique is one way to put it.”

Though, according to her coven, *disorganized*, *ephemeral*, and *lacking heart* worked well too.

“How long will you be in town?” she asked.

“Until tomorrow morning.” Hopefully. If it took her any longer to fulfill her promise to her coven—or find reason to take a step back—she was going to have to renew her reservation at the hotel.

Antoinette smiled. “Our coven is casting a circle at ten tonight. You should join us.”

This surprised Stella. Last night, Lovey DuPre was concerned she might be a thief. Now, they were inviting her into their circle?

“Aren’t you worried I might steal your...” She adopted Lovey DuPre’s accent. “*Objè pouvwa.*”

Antoinette flinched, then plastered on a smile. “Gran said you weren’t interested in it after all, and she can read a witch like a book. So, nah, I’m not worried. You should come.”

The magic around her flickered, sickly sweet.

“I didn’t get the impression your grandmother dropped her suspicions that easily.”

“Okay, fine,” Antoinette said, abandoning all pretense. “She doesn’t. But we could really use some fresh energy. You’d actually be helping us out a lot if you came.”

“I’m pretty busy. But I’ll try.”

This was, of course, a lie; Stella had no intention of attending. Something about these witches’ brand of magic gave her the creeps, and she had too much on her plate already.

Antoinette pulled a receipt from her pocket. She used the quill to scribble an address and a time on the back of the scrap paper.

“Here,” she said, handing it to Stella. “We meet in the cellar of a tattoo parlor.”

Muffled voices sifted down to them from a crack in the fireplace floor, and the candle flickered.

“Ah, *sheeee-it*.” Antoinette tipped her head back to look up at the ceiling. “I hate when the normies show up while I’m down here. Once, I had to wait two hours before the coast was clear.”

Stella’s pulse quickened. There was no way in hell she was spending two hours in this tiny room with Antoinette DuPre. She seemed nice enough, but there was something deeply unsettling about these Boston witches.

“I’ll take care of it.” Stella adjusted her satchel across her chest and dropped Antoinette’s scribbled note inside.

Antoinette lowered her chin and jutted out her hip. “How’s that?”

“Follow me.”

Stella headed up the staircase, praying it would hold their combined weight because Antoinette followed right on her heels. Each of their steps made the iron brackets groan against the wall.

Reaching the top, Stella crooked her finger, making the fireplace floor slide open a few inches.

She stuck her hand through the opening and whispered, “*Fresen*.”

Then, with a flourish of ice-blue sparks, she froze the patrons in their places, transforming the room into a living statue gallery.

The lack of heart behind all her spells meant the effects wouldn’t last long, but hopefully there would be enough time for them to climb out of the floor without anybody noticing.

“What did you do?” Antoinette asked from three steps below her.

“I bought us some time. Let’s go.”

The freezing magic was one of the most powerful spells in Stella’s magical grab bag, but she rarely used it because it left her physically exhausted. So much so, it was a struggle to open the fireplace floor wide enough to climb out.

Once they got to their feet, Antoinette looked around at the patrons—frozen in suspended animation—and let out a low whistle. “Good spell.”

Stella swayed and caught her weight against the back of an empty chair. “It comes in handy.”

“Gran was right about you. You *are* powerful— *Whoa*. Are you okay?”

Stella pitched forward, but caught herself against the wall. Collapsing would be embarrassing. “Fine...it’s just...this spell kinda...takes a lot out of me.”

“Do you need help?”

“I’ll be okay. You should go.” She didn’t need Antoinette to watch her recovery. She also didn’t want her to see how quickly her spell would wear off on these people.

It worked to her advantage for the Boston coven to see her as powerful. Not so much if Antoinette’s report went the other way.

“Okay...if you’re sure.”

Stella leaned her shoulder against the wall. The freezing spell was already wearing off; some of the patrons were blinking their eyes.

“It was good to meet you.”

“You too, Stella. I hope to see you tonight at the circle.”

Stella nodded, too exhausted to make any other reply. She needed her energy and to make a quick rebound because her research hadn’t provided the answers she needed.

That left only one other option for rooting out the truth about Ethan Mather’s magic.

She was going to have to go through with their date.

Maybe, if she was able to focus on him without having hundreds of people around to distract her, she’d be able to discern whether the magic was truly his. And, if it was, whether Bishop’s curse should still apply.

Once those questions were answered, she’d make her decision...and hope for the best.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Still free tonight? This is Nova.

Still free, and stop with the nickname. It's never gonna stick.

Damn. But gotta say I'm a little relieved.

About it not sticking?

No about you responding. I halfway expected you to have given me a wrong number.

Snub a governor? *gasp* Are you kidding? Fancy or casual?

Not governor. Candidate for governor. And I'm not kidding. Your pick.

Casual.

Good! I've been craving McDonalds. I hear the McRib is back.

LOL Is that where we're going?

No. But I've missed it.

You're not at all what I expected.

In a good way, right?

Jury's out. :) Jeans okay?

Perfect. I still need your address though.

I'll just meet you at the restaurant.

Smart. You don't know me. For all you know, I could be a creeper who's only running for office to improve his chances with the ladies.

You wouldn't be the first.

True.

Pasquale's 7:00.

??? That sounds kinda fancy.

It's not. I hope you like Italian.

Stella re-read their text messages for the umpteenth time, confused if not unnerved by their friendly banter.

Self-loathing made her flush with shame, even though there was no one to see her...no one but the poppet's lifeless, unseeing button eyes. Somehow, they bore into her as she paced the hotel room.

She honestly didn't know what she hated most about herself—that she was such a liar or that she was letting herself get too personally involved.

She put on her matching red satin panties and push-up bra because magic was one thing, but pretty undies always made her feel a special kind of power.

Then, because Ethan said the restaurant was casual, she opted for her thrifted, olive green cashmere sweater, a clean pair of jeans, and ankle boots.

Satisfied with that, she finished her makeup—more natural than last night's look, only enough to cover the dark-circled evidence of her early rising—and fluffed out her hair to maximum volume.

Pleased with the overall effect even as her gut tied into a hard anxious knot, she stuffed the poppet into a drawer.

“Be patient,” she told it. “I've still got some things to figure out.”

Then she closed the drawer, grabbed her satchel, and left.



PASQUALE'S WAS a tiny place in Boston's Little Italy, tucked between a liquor

store and a dry cleaner. As soon as she entered, she was hit by a mouth-watering wave of garlic and the realization that if Ethan was here, she'd have to walk around to find him. The place was crowded and dimly lit. It was a wonder anyone could see their food.

She pulled out her phone to text him, but the damn thing had gone dead. *Again.*

The couple ahead of her at the hostess station was led to their table, clearing her view of the rotund, older man behind the podium. He greeted her with literal open arms and a warm smile beneath his thick mustache.

“Buona sera! Welcome to Pasquale’s. I am Pasquale Russo. Do you have a reservation?”

“I’m actually meeting someone.” She glanced toward the dining room. “Ethan *Mather*, if he’s on the list.”

“Ethan!” he exclaimed. “He’s already here. Follow me.”

Pasquale stepped away from the podium, but instead of leading her to a table, he escorted her through the double swinging doors that led into the kitchen.

“Um...” Maybe he’d misunderstood her. “I think you—”

Pasquale raised his hand and flicked a finger forward, indicating that he understood her confusion but expected her to follow.

They shimmied behind the line cooks as they assembled delicious-looking dishes, then past the salad station with its large bins of romaine, croutons, and shredded parmesan.

The rich aromas of an Italian kitchen hung like a thick perfume in the air.

Pasquale grabbed a bread basket off a shelf and took a few more steps before making a sweeping gesture with his other arm. “And here we are.”

They were still in the kitchen but had arrived at an alcove just big enough for one small booth upholstered in black vinyl.

Ethan rose from the booth. “Red! You made it!” He slid his hand around her waist to her lower back and leaned in to kiss her cheek.

Stella bit her lip as her magic surged—heating her chest—and tremors of truly inconvenient but undeniable physical attraction rippled through her. It couldn’t be helped. Damn him for looking like he’d stepped off the cover of *GQ*.

His navy-blue, half-zip pullover sweater fit perfectly across his broad chest and shoulders, and though she didn’t glance down, she had a pretty good idea that his faded Levi’s fit him just as well.

What she also noticed was that there wasn't a single note of magic anywhere.

Stella practically sagged with relief.

Lovey had been wrong about Ethan. Last night, the faint scent of magic they'd both sensed around him must have been a magical residue left behind by yet another witch.

And as much as Stella hated another witch being close enough to leave her scent on Ethan's skin—*seriously, the image burned her chest with an unsettling flash of jealousy that she'd have to unpack later*—it was a relief to know that he was only a Mather.

Nothing else.

Definitely not a witch.

No wonder she didn't find any of his female ancestors in the magical registry.

Now that she had her answer, she considered making an excuse to end the date early so she could get back to the poppet and get this whole unpleasant thing behind her.

But he looked so happy to see her, she didn't want to hurt his feelings.

Oh, the irony.

Besides that, she *was* actually hungry, and there was a good chance he'd be picking up the tab.

Stella refused to acknowledge any other reasons for wanting to spend more time with him. Those had to stay tightly lidded if she was going to survive the meal.

A waiter and a cook started arguing in Italian, complete with colorful hand gestures.

Ethan turned over his shoulder and yelled at them playfully, "Yo, Tony! Gino! Do you mind? I'm on a date here!"

Tony and Gino both flipped him off.

"Hey!" Pasquale said. "There's a lady present."

Ethan gave her a warm smile. "Casual enough for you?"

"We save this spot for our most special guests," Pasquale said while setting the bread basket on the table. "Much more private."

Not exactly private, Stella thought, with all the cooks, but at least she'd be able to see what she was eating.

"Do you host a lot of politicians?" she asked.

"No," Pasquale said, chuckling. "Ethan's practically a member of the

family. He and my Tony were in school together. Now, sit, sit.”

Ethan took his seat again, and Stella slid onto the opposite side of the booth.

Pasquale took a starched white napkin from the table, flicked it out so fast it snapped, then laid it gently across her lap. “Can I get you a glass of wine, signorina?”

Ethan already had a glass of red in front of him, and he lifted it saying, “It’s the house chianti, and it’s very good.”

“I guess I’ll have that.”

“Brava!” Pasquale exclaimed, and he walked away.

“Is this okay?” Ethan asked. “Eating in the kitchen? In my opinion, it’s actually the best table in the place.”

“Because you like to be where the action is?”

“There’s that.” He draped one arm across the back of the booth. “But mainly it’s because I like to see my food when I’m eating. Still, if you’d rather eat in the dining room...”

“No, this is fine. But I’ve never eaten in a restaurant kitchen before.” It was novel, maybe a little strange, but not in a bad way. And she couldn’t help smiling at their mutual aversion to eating in the dark.

“It’s not any noisier than the dining room,” he said, “though it’s a different kind of noise. You won’t be able to listen in on the next table’s drama, but you’ll know if Gino gets something wrong. The last time I ate here, Tony threw a ladle at him, and it was still full of sauce.”

“Toxic workplace?”

He smiled. “More like a sibling spat.”

Stella raised her eyebrows in a knowing kind of way. She and Jade enjoyed plenty of knock-down, drag-out brawls when they were younger.

“So, this is the real Stella Aldren,” Ethan said, leaning back and appraising her.

“The real me?” she asked warily.

“It’s nice to get rid of all the spit and polish—dresses, tuxes—and see who we’re really talking to, don’t you think?”

“Oh, totally.”

Stella reminded herself that she wasn’t talking to *just* a handsome man. She was talking to a Mather with political ambitions. The very thing Bridget Bishop warned them about.

He smiled.

She smiled back. She couldn't help it. "So, how did your speech go?"

"If you have to ask, then I was right. You didn't stick around for it."

He sounded a little hurt, and that made her feel bad. But why should she even care? It was all so confusing—like, she was going to kill the guy, but didn't want to hurt his feelings? What was wrong with her?

"I'm sorry," she said. "It had already been a long day, and I was tired."

"I'd planned to say goodbye to you one more time before I left. When I couldn't find you..." The overconfidence she'd gotten used to with him faltered, and he sounded almost vulnerable when he said, "I thought maybe it meant you'd be bailing on me tonight too."

Stella didn't know what to make of his tone, but she felt the need to assure him.

Why? Again, she had no idea.

"I said I'd have dinner with you."

"And you're as good as your word?" he asked.

"Usually."

Stella picked at her thumbnail under the table. She was such a hypocrite, and this was a good, decent man.

Pasquale returned with her wine, and he put a whole bottle of it on the table. "Compliments of the house. Have you decided what you'd like to order?"

"Oh, I haven't looked at the menu yet." She picked it up and quickly scanned the dozens of options.

Ethan lowered her menu to the table and said, "I've eaten everything they offer at least a hundred times. If you like chicken parm, it's the best in Boston."

"That actually sounds great." She didn't have enough headspace for menu items, and she really did love a good chicken parm.

Ethan smiled up at Pasquale. "Two of your best, Mr. Russo."

"*Ethan,*" he admonished. "You're thirty-two. I keep telling you, you can call me Pasquale now."

"Old habits," Ethan said, "they're hard to break."

To which Pasquale responded, "Bah!" and walked away.

After that, she and Ethan were quiet for a few seconds, both of them sipping their wine, and Stella feeling like shit. Pasquale and his family would grieve Ethan when he was gone. Their pain would be all her fault.

She swallowed hard and asked, "And how was your thing in Pittsfield?"

“Fine.” Ethan took another sip of his wine. “Really good actually. I’ve been involved in the Boys & Girls Clubs of America for a little over ten years, ever since I was in college.

“I was the keynote speaker at their event this afternoon. I got to meet with the organizers and even with some of the kids I worked with years ago in Boston. It was great to see how they turned out, to celebrate their successes...”

Stella took a breadstick from the basket, feeling like the worst person on the planet for what she planned to do. She’d been relying on the old rationale that it was justifiable to kill one if it saved a dozen—but every time Ethan opened his mouth, he made that philosophy so much harder to swallow.

Or maybe the breadstick was just really dry. She gave herself an internal eye roll. Yeah, that was it.

“But it was good to get back to Boston this afternoon. Every time I leave, even on a short trip like that, it reminds me how much I like being home.”

“Have you ever lived anywhere other than Massachusetts?” she asked.

“No. In fact, my family’s never strayed far from Boston.” He held out his hands to the sides, palms facing her. “Total townie.”

“That’s right,” she said, leaning into the table. “The famous, old Massachusetts Mather line.”

He laid one hand flat on the table while rubbing the stem of his wine glass with his other hand. “My line’s not so famous.”

“What do you mean?” She picked up her glass.

“Well, the truth is—like I told you—I only recently learned I’m descended from Cotton Mather, and what I learned is that I’m not the fruit of his *legitimate* line.”

Stella reached forward with her free hand. “So *that’s* the ‘dirty little secret’ you mentioned last night!”

Her mind went immediately to the missing father’s name on John Silence Mather’s baptismal record. Apparently, she was right about where Cotton Mather fit in, and it explained why she hadn’t recognized Isobel Duncan as one of Cotton Mather’s wives.

Ethan looked down at her hand, then met her eyes. At that moment, she realized she’d laid her hand on top of his.

Tingles rushed through her, completely unrelated to magic, and she yanked her hand back. What the hell was she doing?

Ethan chuckled warmly but was kind enough not to comment. “Let’s just

say, ol' Cotton sowed some wild oats in his youth."

Stella took a big gulp of her wine. "I doubt a centuries-old sex scandal will hurt your campaign."

"Oh, no. Of course not. Besides, the well-known Mather family line has acknowledged me."

"Yes, I saw that on their website." *When my coven discussed your murder.*

"My campaign manger, Doherty, he says my history has the flavor of a rags-to-riches story, even though I can't say I've ever been in rags."

"Not like the people your ancestor hanged." Stella cringed. She hadn't meant to say that out loud.

He pointed his fork at her. "Now...*technically*, Cotton Mather didn't hang anyone. He wasn't one of the accusers in Salem or even a judge at the trials."

"He was the so-called expert," she said. In for a penny, in for a pound. "When they were conflicted about whether there was enough evidence of witchcraft, the magistrates consulted with Cotton Mather, and he told them to believe the accusers."

"*And...*" Stella pointed her own fork at Ethan. "When Reverend George Burrows recited the Lord's Prayer perfectly from the gallows, that was supposed to be indisputable proof that he *wasn't* a witch, but Cotton Mather said it was the devil's trickery, so they put a rope around the reverend's neck."

"Yes," Ethan bowed his head. "I've read about that one."

"You know the only reason the hysteria stopped was because the accusers pointed their fingers at one of the judge's own wives. Then all of a sudden it was like, 'hold up!'"

Ethan let out a breath. "You really do know your history. Have you ever visited Proctor's Ledge?"

At his mention of the Salem execution site, Stella sat back—quick and hard—against the booth. She hadn't intended on getting into the past with him again. All that mattered was the future of her coven. Or so she tried to convince herself.

"Sorry," she said on an exhale. "I didn't mean to bring this up with you again. But the patriarchy has always sucked balls."

"Colorful. But, yes, it has, and I agree there's no excuse for executing nineteen innocent people. *Twenty* counting the man who was pressed to

death. And not a witch among them.”

“More like, not a *dark* witch among them.”

He stared at her for a long second, then asked, “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean none of those people were evil. They didn’t nurse their familiars from extra teats and dance with a horned devil in the moonlight. But maybe some of them *were* good at seeing the future. And maybe some of them were excellent healers.”

His face grew even more serious. “Are you saying...you believe in actual magic, Stella?”

She was surprised by his use of her name. The sound of it on his lips did strange things to her heart, and the deep familiarity of it made her whole chest warm.

“Do you believe that *that* kind of witchcraft shouldn’t have gotten someone put to death?” she pressed.

“I think we can both agree on that,” he said. “Now, can we move on to less depressing topics?”

“Sure.” She was more than happy to move on.

“Great.”

“So tell me this,” she said, “you’re thirty-two. As far as I’m aware, you have no political experience. Yet, you’re confident you can win. How did you get to the point where you’re an actual contender for governor?”

He smiled slyly. “Luck.”

She gave him a deadpan expression. It had to be more than that.

“Okay, okay.” He turned sideways in the booth and hitched his knee onto the seat. “Short story, then we talk about something else. My mother set me up with a trust. The trustee made a smart investment in a little start-up that went gangbuster. *See?* Lucky.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Very lucky.”

“I went to college on a full ride and when I graduated, I sold some of my shares and used the money to start my own company. It took off too. Several years later, I sold my company for more money than I care to admit and retired at thirty. Now, I can use my good fortune to help others.”

Stella’s face felt hot and tingly—embarrassed that she’d inadvertently pried into his finances; feeling like a pauper in her thrift-store wardrobe; realizing how badly she’d subconsciously wanted to find more similarities between them, rather than creating an even wider divide.

And, of course, feeling like shit about the Ethan-styled poppet in her hotel room.

Fortunately, the waiter arrived at that moment, curbing her discomfort. He set their food in front of them, and the rich aroma of tomato sauce, garlic, and melted parmesan filled her senses

“This smells amazing,” she murmured while letting out a small groan. “Other than that breadstick, I haven’t eaten anything today.”

“It tastes even better than it smells,” Ethan said, not wasting any time digging into his own meal. “Why don’t you tell me all about *you* now?”

“Me?” She set down her fork and took another big gulp of wine.

“Yep. Tell me your weird backstory.”

“Uh…” Her personal information wasn’t anything she’d planned to discuss with him, but it wasn’t like he was going to live long enough to use any of it.

Besides that, it was good to keep talking. Awkward silences only gave room for her guilty thoughts to grow louder in her head. She didn’t need that.

“Well… I have one sister. She’s a year younger than me.”

He nodded and took a breadstick from the basket. “And your parents?”

“They’re both dead.” She could have eased into it, but when it came to this kind of news, she’d found it was better to rip off the Band-Aid. The less awkward she made it, the less awkward Ethan would feel for asking.

His head shot up. “Stella, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“It was a long time ago.” She gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “My sister and I were raised by some family friends, and they did a good job.”

His expression filled with concern. “I’m glad you had a larger family to depend on, but that had to be tough, losing both your mom and dad.”

“It was, but I’ve always taken some solace knowing they died together.”

“Car accident?” he asked.

“Yeah.” A car accident was the easiest and safest explanation. In actuality, her mother died after one of her magical experiments had gone badly wrong. Soon after, her dad died of a broken heart.

“Jesus.” Ethan sat back against the booth. “How old were you? Do you at least have good memories?”

Prickly tears pressed unbidden at the backs of her eyes, but she was too practiced to let them fall.

“I was six. I don’t remember much about my dad. My mom though… She

was great. She liked to figure out what made things tick. How the world worked...

She sniffed before her nose started running. She hated when her emotions caught her off guard, and now was not the time or the place. She didn't want Ethan to feel sorry for her. That would make her hate herself even more.

"A true scientist after the truth," he surmised.

Stella smiled despite everything. "That was her."

"Well," he said, "I guess, if you have to go, that's the way to do it—go out with the person you love most in this world."

"I guess so." It made her uncomfortable to talk about love. Love was what killed her father. Love led to pain.

Ethan's eyebrows drew together. "What do you mean you 'guess so'? They did love each other, didn't they?"

"Of course." The two of them loved each other more than any other couple Stella knew. That was the problem.

"Have you ever been in love?" Ethan asked, and his question took her completely by surprise.

She even jerked back as if the question had jumped out from around the corner. "What?"

"It's a simple question, Red."

Stella shook her head. There was nothing simple about it. After what happened with her parents, she'd constructed some seriously solid walls to protect her heart.

No one would get past them, but for some reason, she was embarrassed by the idea of Ethan even learning they existed.

"What's love anyway?" she asked, trying to be glib but only making her throat feel uncomfortably tight. "Does anyone really know?"

Ethan shrugged. "I've heard people say that it's one of those things where you know it when you see it. Or...I guess in the case of love...you know it when you feel it."

Stella stabbed at her chicken and prayed for this conversation to be over.

Ethan didn't push. In fact, he didn't say anything at all for a while, just swirled his wine around in his glass.

Finally he said, "You know...we have that in common."

"Huh?" Oh, God. If he suggested they were both falling in love...

Stella knew she should have left when she had the chance.

And yet, she still found herself asking, "What do mean, 'we have that in

common’?”

He didn’t look at her. He kept his gaze focused on his hands. “I don’t have any memories of my father either,” he said. “No one’s ever been able to tell me where he is or what happened to him. My mother, however... She died when I was seven. *Cancer.*”

There was a familiar yearning in his face—a look Stella had seen in her own reflection so many times.

“*Ethan...*I’m so sorry.”

He nodded. “Unlike you, there weren’t any friends or family members to take me in, so I was in foster care until I aged out. That’s where my full-ride scholarship came from. The Admissions Office loved the angst of my essay.”

His story made Stella want to reach out and touch him again—a feeling that was coming far too frequently.

The strange draw she felt toward him made everything harder.

“It’s like you said, though, right?” He looked up and plastered on a smile. “It was a long time ago. And my life has worked out pretty good.” He held his arms out in a *take a look at me* kind of way.

Stella suppressed a laugh while raising her glass and pretending there wasn’t a stack of unpaid bills tucked inside her cash register. “No complaints.”

He raised his glass and clinked it against hers. “No complaints.”

They both drank.

“And what about your business?” he asked. “What is it exactly?”

“Oh!” She was surprised and more than a little flattered that he asked. It was a much safer topic of conversation, even if her business was struggling to stay alive.

“I operate a retail shop in Salem.”

“Salem?” It was a question, but his tone made her think she’d passed some kind of test.

“Yeah. My family has lived there for generations.”

“So, that’s why you’re so well-versed in Salem history.”

“Something like that,” Stella said.

Ethan pushed his plate aside and leaned his forearms on the table. “And what kind of shop is it?”

“It’s a...um...” God, did she go so far as to admit the whole truth? She decided *what the hell*. “It’s actually a magic shop.”

“Ahhh.” He smiled broadly. “It’s all making sense now, why you’re into

all this witch business.”

Stella took her last bite. She hadn't finished much more than half, but she was stuffed.

“And how's your business doing?” he asked.

“Good.” She slapped on a smile she didn't feel. “*Goodish.*”

Ethan raised his eyebrows, and heat flooded her face.

“I mean, it's been a struggle. It's only me there, so there's not much time off. My sister is watching the shop for me this weekend.”

Stella blinked, startled by the image of Jade behind the cash register, not to mention the reason why her sister was there, and she was here.

Ethan waited patiently for her to say more, and the uncomfortable silence urged her to keep talking.

“I sunk my entire inheritance into the business. Now, I'm finding the business loan tougher to manage than I'd expected, especially on top of my mortgage. If I'm not careful, I could lose it all. But on the bright side...” *Was there a bright side?* “I love being independent, and I love living off ramen noodles. So, there's that.”

Ethan laughed at her joke, but she didn't miss the empathy in his eyes.

“I mean...” She pushed her plate back. “Instant ramen can't compete with *this*, but...”

“You know...” Ethan said, leaning in. “The media would eat us up—two people with long ties to the community—one who's a Mather descendant, and a woman who owns a magic shop in Salem of all places... The headlines practically write themselves. We could both benefit. My candidacy gets a publicity boost. You get increased traffic to your store.”

“Are we back to talking about me pretending to be your fiancé?”

He sat back and smiled. “You tell me.”

“I thought you said you were joking about that.”

“I was, but the idea isn't completely nuts.”

“Uh, *yeah*. It is.”

His navy-blue eyes twinkled with mischief. “But you considered it, didn't you? For a second.”

A waiter cleared their plates and asked, “On your tab, E?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Joey.”

Stella watched the waiter go, then leaned forward. “I don't get it. You don't strike me as someone who has any trouble getting a girlfriend.”

“Oh, I don't. Not usually.”

That flash of jealousy was back, but Stella smashed it down and buried it under a rock.

“Okay... Then why wouldn’t you ask an *actual* girlfriend to pretend to be your fiancé?”

Ethan leaned in closer like he was about to share an earth-shattering secret. “Because an *actual* girlfriend wouldn’t want to pretend.”

A loud commotion at the opposite end of the kitchen had them both leaning out of their booth so they could see what was happening.

Pasquale yelled, “No cameras in my kitchen!”

There was one bright flash, then Ethan was out of the booth and grabbing her hand. “Get up! Time to go!”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Stella's magic surged at the touch of Ethan's hand, and they dashed out the back door and into the alley.

Ethan glanced over his shoulder before pulling her farther away from the restaurant. They walked at a fast clip down one of the many narrow streets in Little Italy.

"You're suddenly camera shy?" she asked.

He grimaced. "You're the one who didn't want a long term connection to me."

"How does not wanting to be a fake fiancé turn into ditching out the back of a restaurant?"

He slipped his arm around her waist and glanced behind him again. "There are already at least two photos of us swirling around out there in the universe."

Stella's stomach fluttered with the memory of the dance floor and Ethan lowering her into a dip, his lips close to her ear.

He pulled her off the sidewalk and along the dark, shadowy side of the Old North Church—the one of Paul Revere fame.

A breeze blew through the deserted, tree-lined pedestrian park, raising the scent of magic into the air. It was the same magic she'd detected around Ethan last night.

It was back. Faint. But definitely there. And it came with that odd knocking sound again.

Ethan seemed oblivious to it all, but she had no doubts.

Without crowds of people, without the overwhelming scent of garlic to disguise it, the faint scent of Ethan's magic was undeniable.

Lovey was right. He was a witch. Though, for some reason, his magic was buried incredibly deep. If she wasn't so sensitive, she might have missed it.

The truth left her so flabbergasted, she stopped in her tracks and pulled back on his arm.

Ethan obviously misunderstood her reaction because he was still thinking about photographers.

"Two photos from one event are interesting. A third photo less than twenty-four hours later, in a restaurant, gives people ideas. And you've made it very clear you don't want to stand in the spotlight with me."

He was right about that. The whole point of the poppet was to work from a distance, to have no connection. But she'd blown that benefit up spectacularly well. *Awesome job, Stella.*

He glanced behind them. "Can't say that I blame you at the moment."

"Ethan, seriously. What's going on?"

He didn't let go of her hand and picked up his pace. She trotted behind for another fifty feet until they finally stopped at the end of the park by the base of the Paul Revere statue.

"Truth?" He glanced back in the direction from which they'd come.

"Yeah." She blew out a breath. "That'd be nice."

Magic pulsed as if it were trying to break out of his skin. It felt...*desperate*. Frustrated, even. She'd never encountered anything like it.

And that damn knocking sound... What the hell was that? Ethan didn't seem to notice it, but did this have something to do with Lovey's warning? She'd said Stella shouldn't trust him.

"I don't mean to sound paranoid," he said, "but lately I've felt as though I was being followed, and not necessarily by reporters and photographers. I think I have a stalker. Possibly more than one."

Stella's back stiffened. "You *feel* like you're being followed, or you *are* being followed?"

He gazed down at her, then returned his focus to the church. "I go to Pasquale's often. I don't want anyone to photograph me there. That place is sacred, and photos would give my stalkers another place to watch for me."

"Who's following you?" she asked.

He bowed his head and ran his fingers through his hair in a gesture of frustration. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't burden you with this."

"Ethan, if you've got enemies, you shouldn't be running around Boston

like this. You should be beefing up your security.”

The irony was not lost on Stella that *she* was his enemy, and here she was, giving him advice about how to keep himself safe.

“It’s okay,” he said. “It’s okay. No one’s following us now. No reporters. None of Patterson’s spies. There aren’t any eyes on me.”

His whole body relaxed as if a giant weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

“You’re that in tune to it?” If he was, it was an interesting development. It gave her at least a *little* insight into his magic. Maybe it was simply an underdeveloped prophetic power.

He gave her a sharp look, and his expression said he wanted to tell her more, while at the same time he was afraid of what she’d think.

“I won’t judge you,” she assured him, even though she’d been assessing—even researching—him since the moment she first heard his name.

“Let’s just say I have good instincts,” he said.

“Have you told your campaign manager about your concerns?”

“No.” His expression suddenly turned embarrassed, like he wished he hadn’t said so much. “You’re the only one I’ve told.”

“Ethan, you put way too much trust in me. You have no idea who I am.”

Ethan’s head jerked as if she’d surprised him with her warning. “I know exactly who you are. You’re beautiful, independent, twenty-seven-year-old Stella Aldren. Lifelong Salem resident. Sole proprietor of the best magic shop in New England.”

“You don’t know any of that is true.”

“Like I said...” He tapped his finger to his temple. “Good instincts. Plus, I have the internet. I looked you up before our date. I liked the photos on your website. It’s a cool looking store. Have you thought about adding e-commerce?”

Stella’s jaw dropped open. “You knew all that before I told you?”

He tipped his head left, then right.

“Then why did you even ask me about it?” Her tone was accusatory, but she really couldn’t fault him for doing his research. He was a public figure. He couldn’t be too cautious about who he associated with, and she’d had plenty of her own suspicions about him.

“To see if you’d be honest,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Why would I lie about that?”

His gaze intensified. “You tell me.”

She stared up at him, trying to read what was behind his words, but asking might give too much of herself away.

“I had to know if I could trust you,” he explained. “And now I know I can.”

Guilt twisted her insides. “What else do you know about me?”

Ethan’s magic pulsed against the air, giving her the most peculiar image of a fist banging against a locked door.

He took a breath, and his earlier anxiety and frustration seemed to dissipate on the night air.

He put his hands around her hips and pulled her closer.

“I know you don’t *want* to like me, but you can’t help yourself. *That’s* what else I know about you.”

Stella’s mouth went dry, and she licked her lips. Her thoughts had been stuck on his stalker and her own guilty conscience. Now, they were being dragged in an entirely new direction.

“Why wouldn’t I want to like you?” Her voice cracked, and her heart pressed against the inside of her chest, like a dog lunging against its leash, as if trying to pull her closer to him.

“I think our conversations have been pretty clear. You have a bias against Mathers.”

“I have a bias against arrogance and abuses of power.”

“Do you think I’m arrogant?” He leaned closer and, damnit, so did she.

“No,” she said, admitting the truth. “I don’t.”

He wasn’t anything like what she’d expected. Maybe even what she’d hoped. Everything would have been so much easier if he’d been an asshole.

“If elected, do you think I’d abuse my power?”

“No.” Which was why it was so hard for her to believe the curse should apply.

There was no way Bridget Bishop was imagining a man like Ethan when the block was knocked out from under her feet.

A gust of wind blew a lock of hair across Stella’s face.

Ethan drew it back and tucked it in place behind her ear.

“I told you before,” he said. “I sensed a connection to you. I sensed it as soon as I laid eyes on you, walking toward me across that ballroom. Though...I couldn’t put my finger on just why.”

Stella had a pretty good idea why. Ethan was a witch. He just didn’t seem to know it. And she wasn’t going to be the one to tell him. Not yet anyway.

“Red,” he said. “Would it be all right if I kissed you?”

“What?” *Oh god.* This was going from bad to worse. Who had the greater magic here? He’d made her mind go completely blank.

“I’m not hearing no, so...” He bent slowly—still giving her time to escape—but she didn’t move.

She really should have moved.

Instead, she stared at his chest. His sweater was navy blue. If she looked into his eyes right now... She looked up. Yep. His eyes were the exact same color as his sweater, and they were looking straight into hers.

Stella panicked, mainly because she knew two things for sure. The first: if she didn’t get away, he was going to kiss her. The second: she was going to like it.

His fingers dug into her hips, firm but gentle, holding her in place. Oh, god. This was happening.

His head lowered, inch by inch.

Being an idiot, she rose up on her toes and combed her fingers into the sides of his hair.

His lips touched hers, and she sucked in a breath—somehow surprised, even though she’d seen it coming.

The kiss was rich and decadent. It wrapped around her and dragged her under, taking her where she’d only dreamed of going—an unfamiliar place that she somehow knew so well.

Stella might have even let out a low moan as she sunk into the kiss, desire flooding through her, wanting more of his touch.

Ethan’s grip on her hips was purposeful and unrelenting, though it caused no pain. Goosebumps skittered over her skin and magic surged in her chest, so powerful she broke the kiss on a ragged gasp.

His eyes widened as he looked down at her. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. Why?” Her heart pounded.

“You look terrified.”

“I do?” She tried to soften her expression into something less revealing. “I guess I was wondering if maybe we were being watched.”

“We’re not,” he said, sounding both sorry for having worried her before and frustrated that the kiss was over.

“You’re sure?” she asked, glancing behind her, though it was merely for show. She wasn’t worried about any stalker. It was that kiss she needed to worry about.

“Positive,” he said. “Don’t laugh, but...” He blew out a breath and bowed his head. “This is going to sound weird, but when I’m being watched, I get this tingling sensation. It...*wiggles* all over my body. And there’s a real weight to it that presses against my back.”

Stella’s throat constricted. That was exactly the way she’d felt when Lovey DuPre had followed her last night. The memory triggered her fight or flight response, and a cold shiver ran down her arms.

“Have you seen anybody?” she asked. “Caught them watching?”

“A couple times. Men. Women. All ages. I don’t even think they have cameras on them. There’s even this one little old lady. I wouldn’t normally notice her, except for this colorful head scarf...”

Ethan caught her eyes, then shook his head as if he were embarrassed for having said anything. “She’s probably just feeding the birds outside my apartment. If you want, go ahead and tell me I’m being paranoid. I know it sounds ridiculous.”

Stella took a step back.

Lovey said Ethan wasn’t to be trusted, but was *Lovey* trustworthy? When Stella stood the two of them side by side, which one did she believe?

Lovey DuPre’s concern about Ethan stealing her power object had never made sense. Stella doubted he’d even know what to do with it.

And if Lovey’s concern was legit, she’d be at the tattoo parlor, guarding it close. Not wandering around the city, following Ethan.

“Quit looking at me like I’m crazy,” Ethan said, stepping closer. “Forget I said anything.”

But Stella, still needing time to think, stopped his advance with a hand against his chest.

“Something else is going on here,” she whispered.

“What’s that?” He brushed his fingers against her jaw.

It was times like this when she wished she could ask her mother for advice. Her mother wasn’t impulsive about anything; she never made a move until she knew everything was in its proper place. That is, right up until that last time.

Stella needed to find the truth.

“What time is it?” she asked.

Ethan’s eyebrows drew together. “It has to be getting close to ten. I’m sorry for freaking you out.”

Stella drew in a deep breath. She hadn’t missed it. There was still time to

accept Antoinette's invitation to join their circle.

"You didn't freak me out. But I'm sorry, Ethan. There's someplace I have to be."

"Wait. *Now?*"

"Yes. And it's important." One way or another, she was going to get to the bottom of this. Lovey was following Ethan for a reason. She wanted to know what it was.

Stella took two steps away, but Ethan grabbed her wrist before she got too far. "Am I going to see you again?"

"If it's meant to be." She bit down on her lip, not wanting to think too much about his future. Or for that matter, her part in it.

Stella didn't know what she was going to learn from Lovey, but she could very well be using the poppet tonight.

"I'm sorry, Ethan. But I really have to go."

"Stella, wait."

She slid her arm free. A second later, she was running.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

It was a six-block run in worn ankle boots through Boston's North End, but Stella finally closed in on the address Antoinette had given her.

She picked her way across the side street's broken bricks and cobblestones until she arrived at a business with a black lacquered door.

The unlit neon sign in the window read *Tattoos*. This had to be the place, though the business appeared to be closed.

Stella grabbed the handle and pushed, putting her weight into it. The door stuck a little at the bottom, but it did in fact open.

She poked her head in. "Hello?"

No response.

Taking a tentative step inside the dark and vacant room, she hoped she wasn't too late for the circle. She needed to understand their interest in Ethan.

"Hello? Is anybody here?"

Nothing about this place felt right.

The moonlit window cast enough of a glow for her to make out three reclining tattoo chairs, some roller stools, and a sales counter. Dozens of art samples, their corners curling, were thumb-tacked to the wall behind the counter.

An old refrigerator buzzed in the back corner, and she could hear water dripping from somewhere.

But beyond all this, her senses were piqued by an odor of sweet decay coming from behind a door on the right-side wall.

As she approached it, the floorboards creaked beneath her feet, and she froze. Soft footsteps ascended, then the door flew open and slammed against the wall.

A white guy in his early twenties stood in the pale rectangle of light. He had brown tangled hair, thick eyebrows, and the wet-earth scent of physical magic mixed with the same aroma of rotting apples Stella had detected on Lovey and Antoinette.

His jeans were grease-stained, and he wore a thin leather cord around his neck. Whatever hung from it was hidden beneath his wrinkled white T-shirt.

“You Stella?” he asked in a strong South Boston accent. An unlit cigarette dangled from between his lips, and it bobbed when he talked.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Wicked.” He looked her up and down, then put the cigarette behind his ear. “Antoinette said you might come. I’m Jean-Paul Baptiste. This way.”

Stella hesitated for a second, before steeling her nerves and following him through the doorway and down a narrow wooden staircase into the cellar. With each step, the scent of decay intensified.

At the bottom was a small storage room, fully lit, with another door on the opposite end. The door opened to reveal Lovey DuPre in a quilted floral housecoat.

“What is she doing here?” she asked Jean-Paul. Her expression and tone were both angry and alarmed.

Antoinette suddenly appeared behind her, wearing the same chic outfit she’d worn that morning. “I invited her, Gran.”

Lovey hissed under her breath, “I told you she had power.”

“Which is why I invited her.” Antoinette put her hand on her grandmother’s shoulder. “We need her help.”

Lovey eyed Stella suspiciously. Then she grunted and said, “*Ou tann*,” before retreating back into the other room.

Antoinette watched her go for a second, then held up her hand, palm facing out. “She wants you to wait here for a sec.”

“Oh,” Stella said. “Okay.”

Antoinette gave her a tight lip-glossed smile while closing the door and leaving her alone with Jean-Paul.

“So...um...is this where you guys always meet?” Stella asked, grateful she was able to provide a clean and welcoming space for her own coven to meet.

At least, until the bank said otherwise with a big fat foreclosure action.

On the other side of the closed door, Antoinette and Lovey were arguing, and their muffled voices were steadily growing in volume.

Jean-Paul hiked himself up onto a stack of empty pallets and a stream of tiny black beetles skittered out from underneath the slats of wood.

They crawled over a few large pieces of broken mirror before disappearing under the stairs.

“My grandfather ran a tavern upstairs for decades,” he said. “Bar’s gone now. Obviously. But he still owns the building. He doesn’t practice magic anymore, but he lets us use the cellar for circles.”

“Uh-huh.” Stella shifted her wary gaze toward the door. There was a strange sort of magic coming from behind it that felt rotten and at the same time...somehow...*hungry*? Like it was missing a meal and pissed about it.

The door opened again, and Antoinette said, “We’re ready now.”

Jean-Paul hopped off the stack of pallets, then led Stella through the door and into another cellar room where Lovey DuPre sat in a folding lawn chair.

In addition to her, Antoinette, and Jean-Paul, there were three other witches present, making six in total, not including Stella.

The room’s damp walls were limestone. The floor was dirt. The only light came from a thin strip of moonlight shining through the egress window and three small candles on a shelf.

There was a tall black candle in the center of the room, but it was still unlit.

One of the three witches Stella had yet to meet—a young woman with a blond pixie cut and dark roots—leaned against the wall. She smelled like freshly baked bread, the sign of a prophetic witch.

She was about seven inches shorter than Antoinette, and she wore a mini-skirt with tall leather boots, a blouse that fell off one shoulder, and a thin gold chain.

Stella presumed she read tarot by the outline of a card deck in her skirt pocket.

She snapped her gum as she looked Stella up and down. “She the one?”

“Stella,” Antoinette said. “This is Madeline Pierce. We call her Mad-Dog.”

“No, we do not,” Madeline said. “She can call me Maddy if she wants to call me anything.”

“Sorry I’m late,” Stella said. “Did you already cast the circle?”

“We were about to get started,” Antoinette said.

Stella looked around, trying to find the source of the strange, hungry magic. Her gaze landed on the last two witches.

They were yet to be introduced, but she guessed the two boys to be about nineteen. One of them was white with shaggy brown hair; the other was black with a close-cut shave. They sat close together on two wooden chairs and watched Stella closely.

She quickly deduced they weren't the source of the hungry magic; their power, even combined, was too immature to be more than a whisper. She couldn't even detect what type of magic it was.

Still, her skin prickled the more she focused on the old armoire behind them. It was tall, made of solid wood, and decorated with fleur-de-lis carvings.

Heavy chains fastened its double doors, and something inside was keen to get out—something so dark, it twisted her stomach and made her feel a little green.

Was Lovey DuPre's power object locked inside?

Stella got the distinct impression the two teenagers had been posted in front of the armoire as another line of defense. Given their low-level magic, she wondered if they might even be armed.

Apparently, Lovey still thought she could be a thief.

Stella forcefully dragged her gaze away from the armoire and pretended she hadn't noticed anything strange. It wasn't easy to do.

"Is this your entire coven?" she asked.

"Everyone except my cousin and her baby," Antoinette said. "The baby was born with a heart murmur, and they're both still in the hospital."

"We cast a circle last night," Jean-Paul said, "but it didn't help the situation."

"Which is *why*—" Antoinette gave her grandmother a meaningful look. "—I thought it would be good to have you come. One more witch should give us the boost we need."

"I'm sorry to hear about your cousin." Stella glanced around at all their faces, finding expressions that varied from hopeful, to curious, to suspicious.

For herself, she was pleasantly surprised that their motives for casting a circle tonight seemed pure.

"Have you thought about expanding your coven for times like these?" she asked. "More members would help if you needed access to greater power."

Perhaps this was why they'd been following Ethan. They were looking to recruit.

Maddy scoffed at her suggestion and popped open a compact mirror.

“We’ll have access to a mighty power boost soon enough,” she said, checking her makeup.

Lovey’s head snapped toward Maddy. She gave the younger witch a sharp look, reached out, and snapped the mirror shut.

Maddy pocketed the mirror and said nothing more.

That was all right. She didn’t have to explain. Stella had a pretty good guess where they expected this mighty power boost to come from. Whatever was in the armoire was pulsing with a dark and troubling sort of power.

It was the source of the decay that permeated this coven.

Antoinette spoke quickly, clearly trying to diffuse the tense moment. “Are you interested in joining our coven, Stella?”

“No, I...I have my own coven. I was just wondering.”

“If a witch came to us needing a home,” Jean-Paul said, “we’d take them in.”

“Or if someone married...” Antoinette added, glancing at Maddy.

“Fuck off,” Maddy said.

Antoinette folded her arms. “Mad-Dog’s high school boyfriend is a talented witch, but he doesn’t come to circles anymore. He went to college then got himself a full-time job in Concord. We think it was a mistake for her to break up with him.”

Maddy popped her gum. “I’m not gonna settle down in the suburbs with a man who works in advertising. I need a man with grit. That’s why I got Jason now.”

“Jason doesn’t have no fucking grit,” Jean-Paul said. “Not only is he no witch, he still lives with his mother.”

“Enough,” Lovey said. “It’s time we cast the circle. Then Stella can be on her way.”

Everyone moved closer around the tall black candle. Everyone, that is, except the two teenage boys sitting in front of the armoire.

Stella glanced over at them. “Aren’t they joining us?”

“They stay where they are,” Lovey said.

“Their power isn’t strong enough yet to make any difference,” Antoinette explained.

That was likely true. Stella couldn’t sense much magic from either of them. But she didn’t believe that was the reason for their lack of participation.

Her initial suspicion that they’d been posted to guard the armoire seemed

spot on.

But she put aside her questions about the armoire and the power object lurking inside, focusing instead on why she'd come.

She was here to understand their interest in Ethan.

"What would you have done if you hadn't run into me this morning?" she asked Antoinette conversationally. "Are there other witches in the city you could have invited for a little extra boost?"

Lovey lit the black candle with a deft flick of her gnarled fingers.

"Try again with the power we have, I suppose," Antoinette said. "I don't know anybody else like you worth asking to join us."

Nobody like me. But that response dodged her question. What about someone like Ethan?

"When you followed me last night," Stella said, addressing Lovey now. "I thought I might have breached some sort of territorial rules."

"Non," Lovey said. "Now, *trankil*."

"Shhh," Antoinette said.

"What would happen if someone did breach your territory?"

Was it possible they weren't interested in Ethan's magic at all? Maybe they were following him simply for the same reason Lovey had followed *her* last night—to confirm he had no interest in their power object.

Maddy popped her gum. "You always talk this much?"

"Sorry," Stella said. "I'm naturally curious."

"Stop being curious and start being focused," Maddy said. "We got a baby to save. Her name's Collette. She's two days old, and she's at Mass General. Focus on that."

This coven didn't cast its circle the same way the Salem coven did, but the principles were the same. Instead of joining up, everyone held their hands at chest level, palms facing forward.

Stella copied their movements, and they processed clockwise around the candle, orbiting it three times. When they stopped, Lovey held what Stella assumed was the easternmost position and everyone's hands remained up.

Instead of the warm pulse of combined magic that Stella was accustomed to with her own coven, the Boston coven's power sizzled like snow on a power line.

Lovey muttered incantations in Creole—so far beyond standard French that Stella understood nothing besides the word *bebe*.

She couldn't tell if any of the other witches understood their high

priestess, but they seemed to trust what she was saying, and the energy in the circle felt balanced and well-designed. It hummed with good intentions, so Stella trusted it too.

It was only that weird, hungry pulse from the armoire that distracted her from concentrating on her spell: *Salutem et potentiam*. Health and power to young Collette. *Salutem et potentiam*.

The candle flickered a few times as magic ebbed and flowed within the circle. She did her part—concentrating all her good intentions for a baby she'd never met—and she felt each of the other witches pushing their own brand of magic into the center of the circle until all the energy within the boundary was equalized and bonded.

Lovey's head bowed forward as a low rumble of indecipherable words streamed out of her.

Stella continued to push her own power into the circle while the other witches punctuated Lovey's spell with shorter spells of their own.

Their volume grew until their words were shouts, and the candle flame surged as if someone had cranked on the gas.

Everyone's hands began to shake—Stella thought their movements were voluntary because her hands remained still—and when everything reached a summit, the candle flickered and snuffed itself out.

She drew in a breath. Was that it?

They all stood there, in the dark and in complete silence for a few heavy seconds.

Then Jean-Paul pulled a thin chain that dangled from the ceiling and, with a *click*, a single light bulb lit the room.

Lovey eased herself back into her lawn chair, and the rest of them lowered their hands, breaking what was left of the circle. Everyone seemed pleased with the results.

Stella had no experience with this coven and nothing to compare it to, so she hoped they were right.

“Thanks, Stella,” Jean-Paul said, then he addressed the group. “That felt better than last night, didn't it?”

“Yes,” Lovey said. “Better.”

Stella cleared her throat and smoothed her hands over her jeans, trying to erase the prickly sensation that continued to cling to her skin. She still didn't know anything about their interest in Ethan, or what powerful object was locked in their armoire, but it gave her a thought.

Blood magic could interfere with positive intents. Maybe that was another reason Lovey kept the thing in the armoire locked up. Right now, it was humming with so much power, it made the small hairs on the back of her neck stand at attention.

“It’s only an idea,” Stella said. “But is it possible you didn’t have much luck last night because there was something getting in the way of your efforts?”

“What do you mean?” Antoinette asked.

“I don’t know.” Stella purposefully kept her eyes locked on Antoinette’s face, refusing to let her gaze slide back to the armoire. “Sometimes other forces can interfere.”

Antoinette looked to Lovey and, when Stella followed her gaze, Lovey narrowed her eyes and stared at her with keen interest.

Stella waved her hand dismissively, wishing she knew how to get answers to her questions while still being subtle. Unfortunately, she’d had zero training in subterfuge.

“I’m only suggesting that it might be worth holding future circles somewhere else. It could make a difference.”

“Is that what you’d like us to do?” Lovey asked in her thick Creole accent.

“What? No. I don’t care where you meet. I was only making a suggestion.”

“We’ll be fine here,” Maddy said. “We don’t usually have any trouble with our magic, and we’ve never needed to invite anyone to join us before, so...”

A pulse of magic made the armoire’s doors rattle, and the two guys sitting in front of it glanced at each other with fear in their eyes.

Maddy’s gaze jerked to Lovey.

Jean-Paul’s eyes were locked on the armoire, and he wiped sweat from his upper lip.

“Thank you for coming,” Antoinette said calmly, as if she hadn’t noticed any of this.

Stella guessed that was her signal to leave. “Right. I’ll just... I hope the baby can come home soon.”

She inched her way toward the exit, feeling Lovey’s gaze on her the whole way.

When Stella reached the door, she stopped. She still needed to know why

they were following Ethan. What did they know that she didn't?

She couldn't leave without an answer, even if she had to be blunt about the question.

“Madame DuPre? Why are you following Ethan Mather?”

All of the Boston witches turned to look at her with eyebrows raised.

Stella blew out a shaky breath. “Last night you told me to be wary of the *kandida*, as if you thought he was dangerous. How dangerous? Are you...are you planning to do something to him? Like...maybe even...*kill* him?”

Jean-Paul's thick eyebrows shot up.

Maddy made a clicking sound with her tongue.

Antoinette's face looked pained and perhaps embarrassed that she'd invited Stella at all.

“Don't be ridiculous,” Lovey said with a slow sly smile. “Dead men don't talk.”

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Dead men don't talk.

Stella never pushed Lovey for an explanation because her meaning was plain enough. If these witches weren't looking to recruit, if their power object was locked up tight, and if they didn't want Ethan dead...then what they wanted from him was *information*. And they wanted it badly.

As she made her way back to her hotel, she groaned in frustration. The more she searched for answers, the more questions she faced.

So far, only one had been resolved; Ethan was a witch, regardless if he knew it or not.

Whether his magical status would make a difference when it came to Bishop's curse and the safety of her coven... She still had no idea, other than what her gut was telling her: that Bridget Bishop had never intended them to kill another witch—even a Mather-born witch—and especially not a man of Ethan's character.

But now she had to question whether Ethan might be connected to the Boston coven and what that might mean. She had a terrible feeling the information they were after pertained to the power object locked in their armoire.

It was the only thing that seemed to matter to Lovey that intensely. And they were definitely planning something. Maddy had said they'd have plenty of power soon enough.

If the power object locked inside that armoire ever escaped...

Stella shuddered. Whatever it was, she didn't see it bringing about world peace.

There was something definitely evil and destructive about it.

Which meant, when it came to all the questions she was facing, the answer to the Boston coven had to be her top priority.

At least for now.

She flung open the door to her hotel room at the same time her phone buzzed in her satchel. She looked to see who was calling. The battery was down to only five percent again, and Marietta's name appeared on the screen.

"Hello?" she said, answering immediately, though her heart was filled with dread. Marietta was obviously calling for an update.

"Honey, what's wrong?" Marietta asked. "You haven't returned any of your sister's calls, but Judith's crystals keep showing that you got a hair for the poppet."

"Well, that's...*sort of* true."

Stella couldn't contradict Judith's crystals. They'd see right through her lies. At the same time, she had to convince them she needed more time.

"Sort of true?" Marietta asked.

Stella sat on the dresser and braced her stocking feet against the end of the hotel bed.

"Judith's crystals were right, but before I could put the hair inside the poppet, I seem to have...misplaced it."

She feigned distress. "I'm sorry, Marietta, but it must have fallen off the dresser and onto the floor. I've been searching the carpet for the last hour."

A sitcom laugh track erupted from Marietta's television, and Stella heard George's muffled voice in the background asking, "Who you talking to, love?"

To George, Marietta whispered, "*Stella.*" To Stella, she said, "Well, don't panic."

"I'm not panicked. Just annoyed with myself." She added on a desperate sigh, "I can't find it anywhere."

Without consciously doing so, Stella picked up the poppet and stroked her thumb over its soft woolen texture.

Ethan's hair was tucked inside. She could stab a blackthorn through the poppet's chest and kill him tonight. She could do it in his sleep. He wouldn't have to suffer.

Then the Boston witches would never get their information. That problem would be solved too.

And she could go home.

To live forever with the knowledge she'd killed a good man.

Air caught in her throat, making a strange sound.

"Deep breath, Stella. Getting yourself worked into a dither won't help you find it. Just keep looking."

"I will. I'll keep looking." *For the truth.* "It has to be here somewhere, right?"

"Right. And if you've *really* lost it, you'll get another one. You can't give up now."

Stella let out a breath. "I won't. I can finish this."

"I know you will. Now, get some sleep. Update me tomorrow."

"Marietta?"

"Yes, honey?"

Stella chewed on her bottom lip, knowing she should quit while she was ahead. But she really needed someone to talk to, and she'd relied on Marietta for so long.

Marietta was the one who'd gotten her through every angsty moment of her teenage years. These days, Marietta was the only mother she had.

"There's something else I should tell you."

"What is it?" Marietta asked.

"Maybe it's nothing, but..."

A wriggling sensation slid over her shoulders, and Stella wandered to the window. She pulled back the curtain, only enough to peek outside.

She didn't know why she expected to see someone looking up at her from the street below. It was after midnight. Of course the sidewalk was empty.

"Stella, you know you can tell me anything."

She let the curtain fall shut. "There's another coven here in Boston that's also interested in Ethan Mather."

"*Interested?*" Marietta's voice was a mixture of alarm and confusion. "Interested how?"

"That's what I've been trying to figure out. I think they're dabbling in blood magic."

Another beat of silence passed between them, and Stella chewed on the edge of her thumbnail. It wasn't lost on her that her coven had sent her to Boston to do her own bit of dabbling in the dark arts. She wondered if Marietta would comment on the irony.

She didn't. In fact, Stella didn't think it even registered.

"Honey," Marietta said, "if that's true, you need to stay far, far away from

them.”

“I am.” Stella closed her eyes, hating how easily she could lie to the woman who’d raised her. “Of course I am.”

Stella sat on top of the dresser and pulled the container of blackthorns from her duffel bag. She gave it a shake.

“Do you need protection?” Marietta asked. “There’s that wolf pack that lives west of Methuen. They provide bodyguard services. Judith could put in a call.”

“No.” *God, no.* Stella didn’t need a bunch of wolf shifters to complicate things.

“Whatever this other coven is up to, it can’t interfere with what you’re there to do,” Marietta said.

“It’s not,” Stella assured her. Then, without really thinking it through, she decided to test the waters. “But...”

“But *what?*” Marietta asked

“But I can’t help wondering if there’s more to Ethan Mather than we know. Is it possible there might be an exception to Bridget Bishop’s curse for...certain *types* of Mathers?”

“Types?” Marietta clicked her tongue. “Stella, the details of that curse have been passed down through a dozen generations in our coven. If there was an exception, we would have heard about it by now.”

“But maybe something got lost in translation along the way.”

Stella hopped off the edge of the dresser and shoved the container of blackthorns deep under her mattress.

She figured, if she had to move a mattress to recover the thorns, there was less chance of her acting impulsively when it came to killing Ethan. Out of sight out of mind, as they say.

“Bridget Bishop spoke in our midst just a few days ago,” Marietta reminded her. “That’s about as recent as you can get, hon.”

“I know.” Stella sat on the end of the bed. “But when Judith summoned her to our circle, Bridget was moaning about ‘regret’ and about ‘turning around.’”

“She was?” Marietta asked, sounding surprised. “I don’t remember that.”

Stella wasn’t entirely shocked. Seeing an actual spectral form wasn’t something that happened every day, even for them. She couldn’t blame Marietta for being so distracted by Bridget’s image that she missed the strange words her ghost had said, especially since they’d held no obvious

meaning.

“I’m just saying, maybe we never heard of an exception to the curse because Bridget Bishop never thought there’d be any need for one. I mean, I wouldn’t blame her for being shortsighted.”

After all, what seventeenth-century witch could have predicted a magical Mather? Even today, it seemed impossible. And yet, the proof had stood right in front of her. Tall. Strong. And devastatingly handsome.

“*That*,” Stella said, “would be reason for her to *regret* her own curse and want to *turn things around*.”

Marietta let out a long breath. “Stella, honey. We can’t afford to waste time on speculation. We don’t know how much time we have before the curse comes down on our heads.”

She was right about that. If there was a ticking clock, they didn’t know where it was or what it said. Still, to Stella, speculating was something they couldn’t afford *not* to do. Once she stabbed the poppet, it was over. There’d be no going back.

“Honey,” Marietta said, her tone soft. “Should we summon Bridget Bishop again? See if there’s someone else she can assign to this task?”

“No,” Stella said quickly. *God, no*. She stood up and walked to the window again.

In the background, she heard George ask Marietta, “Is she okay?”

Stella’s heart warmed at the sound of his fatherly concern, and she wiped her finger against the corner of her eye.

“It’s just that there’s no doubt in my mind that Ethan Mather has something this other coven is after. Maybe it would benefit us to find out what it is first.”

“The only benefit our clan needs is the knowledge that we’re all safe from suffering very painful deaths. So, I’m going to ask you one more time, Stella. Do I need to send in reinforcements? I could easily pull together a poison that would drop him like a stone. Izzy could manage an electrical surge.”

For a second, Stella thought about telling Marietta about the magic she’d detected on Ethan. But she could already see Marietta was losing faith in her, and at this point Stella doubted there was anything she could say that would sway her.

Not without proof anyway. She needed to get more proof. That’s what her mother would have wanted her to do.

Stella’s neck prickled, and she pulled the curtain back again. This time,

her intuition panned out. Jean-Paul was across the street, leaning against the side of the building, his eyes on her hotel.

Stella sucked in a breath and stepped away from the window. She picked up the poppet as if it were a security blanket.

“Stella? Are you all right?” Concern crept back into Marietta’s voice, and George demanded to know what was going on. Marietta shushed him.

“I’m fine.” Stella held the poppet to her chest. “And I heard you. There won’t be any need for reinforcements, Marietta. If I can’t find the hair, I know where to find Ethan Mather again.”

“Okay, honey. Stay on task.”

“I will.”

But by “task,” Stella meant that she’d get her coven the proof they’d need to trust her gut about Ethan Mather. Preserving his life would not get them all killed.

Stella hung up, plugged her phone back in, then got ready for bed.

When she slipped under the covers, she kept the poppet clutched close to her chest.

“Stay on task,” she whispered while stroking her thumb across the soft fabric. And she did this until she fell asleep.

Not realizing that only a few blocks away...

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Ethan took forever to fall asleep. He was beaten and bruised—the result of kicking himself all evening for pushing things too quickly with Stella Aldren. The truth was—though he'd been wanting to kiss her ever since she walked across the ballroom in that tight, red dress—he never should have moved so fast.

Never in his whole life had a woman run away from him, and what happened tonight was no exaggeration. Stella had literally run away.

And then she hadn't responded to his text.

So, that was that. He'd fucked things up spectacularly. And there was no coming back.

Still, he couldn't get her face out of his mind...the way she looked sitting across from him at Pasquale's...the way she touched his hand at dinner...the passionate way she argued with him...and the way she kissed... It was like trying to hold on to a live wire.

When sleep finally did come, was it any wonder she approached him in his dreams, sauntering closer like a temptress, bringing with her the most unbelievable pleasures?

Ethan lay on his back and held his breath as Stella's fingertips brushed softly across his bare chest. She traced each muscle, kissed along each rib, studying him as if he were some strange creature she'd never seen before. Like he was a puzzle she intended to solve.

He wanted to touch her too, but he kept his hands laced behind his head, allowing her to explore, knowing that if he gave her control, she wouldn't disappoint.

After long, torturous minutes of her light touches, her dark auburn hair

fell forward and tickled across his chest.

He watched as she kissed a line down his sternum, taking her time, arousing him in ways he wouldn't have thought possible.

His blood rushed to his groin, and when her mouth reached his abdominals, his balls tightened with need.

She rose up before him like a goddess, kneeling between his spread legs. Her eyes met his and somehow, even though the room was dark, he knew her cheeks were flushed, and her lips plump for the taking.

Of course he focused on her mouth. Kissing her was all he'd been able to think about for the last twenty-four hours. It had distracted him so much, when he was in Pittsfield, he'd had to ask the emcee to repeat a question.

Now, in his dreams, he allowed his subconscious to roam past those initial fantasies into new territories. He wanted to explore this unusual woman whom he'd felt so connected to right from the start, just as she was exploring him.

"Why aren't you running away from me now?" he asked as her clothes miraculously melted away. His gaze traveled over her pale skin and lush breasts. Her nipples were pink and diamond-hard. What would they taste like?

"I didn't run away from you," she said. "I ran away *for* you."

He chuckled. Even in his unconscious state, he was aware that dreams could be funny that way, forcing you to believe that the illogical made perfect sense.

"Does that mean I should thank you for leaving me alone in that park?" he asked.

She frowned. "This is my dream. You can be quiet now."

His muscles were strung painfully taut, but he kept his fingers laced behind his head, squeezing them together. It was the only way he could resist the temptation to reach out and stroke the curves of her breasts.

In the future, if scientists figured out a way where he could order up a custom dream, this would be the one he'd be ordering for the rest of his life.

She seemed satisfied that he was going to keep his mouth shut, and he watched her storm-cloud gray eyes as they traveled his naked body, leaving a path of heat that made his thighs tighten and his balls ache.

Once more, he resisted the urge to reach for her, to trace his fingers along the crease where her leg met her hip, to brush the backs of his fingers across her mound.

“I want to touch you,” he said.

“Then do it,” she replied huskily.

His heart rate increased, and his hands unlaced. He reached between them, cupping her full breasts and stroking his thumbs over the hard nipples. They’d teased him throughout dinner, pressing against her olive green cashmere sweater.

Now, he was the one doing the teasing.

Stella closed her eyes and let out a low groan.

It was all the encouragement he needed. A bead of moisture formed at the tip of his erection. His hands drifted down, over her soft belly and across her hip bones. He lifted up so he could reach all the way around her and squeeze her ass.

“Your touch is like magic,” she murmured, her voice laden with sexual heat.

That last word made his heart jump, then thud against his sternum as she straddled his thighs, bringing her heat directly in line with his aching need.

She didn’t stay in that position for long. When she leaned over him, letting her hard nipples brush against his chest, she slowly worked her way lower until he could feel her warm breath on his groin.

Damn this dream. It had the power to kill him in his sleep.

He combed his fingers into her hair and piled it on top of her head, anticipation making his erection strain upward, closer to her mouth.

“Suck me, Stella. Take me in your mouth.”

She didn’t run away from his blunt demand. In fact, she seemed quite pleased, murmuring, “Best dream ever.”

He couldn’t agree more.

Scooting down ever further between his legs, she lowered her head and did exactly what he wanted.

His fingers tightened in her hair as his hips involuntarily shot upward. What she was doing with her mouth...massaging him with her tongue... sweetly sucking...the pressure creating such an exquisite pleasure he had to clench his teeth to keep from crying out.

He twisted her long hair around his hand and tipped his head to the side so he could watch her work him. His erection had never throbbed so intensely. It was maddening. He didn’t want this dream to end, but the pulsing in his balls told him he’d reached the point of no return.

She sucked hard.

His eyes rolled back, and he came with a groan so loud it jolted him out of the dream.

Blinking...his sheets soaked...Ethan stared up at the ceiling of his luxury apartment, trying to understand what happened. It took another few seconds for him to realize his phone was ringing.

He turned his head toward the nightstand, took another second to come back to reality, then cursed.

He'd been so willing to stay in the dream with Stella Aldren he'd slept through his alarm. And now, he was late.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

*Boston Public Garden
Saturday morning*

Stella's butt was numb. She'd been sitting on a bench in Boston Public Garden for hours. But now, *finally*, she spotted Ethan walking alongside the duck pond.

He didn't seem to have noticed her yet, but he was definitely headed in her direction, and his long powerful strides meant he'd be on her in no time. He'd nearly reached the swan boats.

A squiggle of anxiety snaked through her belly, and she quickly diverted her eyes. Yes, she was hoping to run into him, but she didn't need him to catch her watching. With her luck, he'd be able to see all the pornographic images flashing through her mind.

What had she been thinking, sleeping with the poppet?

Stroking it like she had, she'd practically *begged* for those dreams to come to her, and now, watching Ethan come closer with every step, her face was as hot as a stovetop.

Stella kept her head down and peeked at him through her lashes. He was wearing jeans and a light blue, button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

He sipped from a cardboard coffee cup. The thumb of his free hand hooked into his jeans pocket. He moved with such power and grace, it seemed obvious now, in retrospect, that he had some degree of magic.

The goal for today was to put that magic to the test and—hopefully—catch it on camera. That evidence would be the first step toward convincing her coven that they should question Bridget Bishop further before condemning this poor, innocent, and—“Fuck *me.*”—devastatingly sexy man to death.

When Ethan was twenty feet from her bench, he glanced up and rocked to a stop.

His eyes widened, then narrowed. “Red?”

“Hey.” Stella gave him a pathetic little wave, then gave herself an internal eye roll for trying to sound blasé when her stomach was doing cartwheels.

Her auburn hair was pulled up into a ponytail, and she wore her white, off-the-shoulder peasant blouse. His gaze dropped from her face, down her exposed neck, to the rest of her bared skin.

Her satchel was on the bench beside her with the poppet tucked inside. She was too afraid to leave it behind in the hotel room, in case Jade or one of the others came to check on her.

A muscle flexed in Ethan’s chiseled jaw, and he swallowed hard. “What are you doing here?”

Stella’s heart pounded for no other reason than his proximity. It was going to take a while before she got over that dream.

“Feeding the ducks.” She raised a bag of frozen corn as proof. “Seems like it was meant to be.”

His gaze lifted from her bare shoulder, and their eyes met. “Seems like *what* was meant to be?”

“Last night.” She was surprised he’d forgotten.

“Last night?” His navy blue eyes seemed to turn even darker in their intensity.

“Don’t you remember?” she asked. “Last night, you asked if you’d see me again, and I said, ‘If it’s meant to be.’”

“Oh.” He let out a long breath, and his gaze drifted toward the sky. “Right.”

“Fate’s a funny thing, huh?”

The truth was, at his campaign fundraiser two nights ago, he’d mentioned coming to the duck pond every Saturday morning. So, Stella had known exactly where to find him, though not exactly *when*. She hadn’t expected it to take this long for him to show.

“That it is,” he agreed. “If fate’s going to be this much of a friend today,

my next stop will have to be Jerry's to buy a lottery ticket."

"Do you live close by?" Stella remembered a small market by that name not a block away.

He tipped his head toward the southwest end of the park. "At the Eastwick apartments. *God*, I can't believe you're here."

"Yeah...well...the Public Garden is so iconic, I figured I better see it while I was in town."

Ethan's still-stunned gaze slid from the bag of corn in her hand to the half dozen hungry ducks and swans on the pond. They were all flapping their wings, expressing clear irritation about the interruption in her kernel-tossing rhythm.

"Care to sit?" She moved her satchel and empty coffee cup to the edge of the bench to give him room.

"That'd be great." When he sat, he stretched his long legs out in front of him.

Stella blushed, remembering the feel of those muscular thighs under her dreamland fingertips.

"So," he said. "Did you get done whatever you needed to do last night?"

There was a tension in his voice that made her wince with chagrin. After a nice dinner and an earth-tilting kiss by the Paul Revere statue, she'd basically run away from him. She was pretty sure that hadn't been the response he was used to getting.

"*Yeahhh*," she said, drawing the word out. "Sorry about that. Really. And I'm glad you made it home safely."

He huffed out a laugh and folded his arms over his broad chest.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"Nothing. Just...that was going to be my next line."

Stella gave him a meaningful look. "*You're* the one with the stalker."

A muscle jumped in his jaw. "Maybe."

"Did you feel anyone watching you on your walk over here?" She glanced around the park, halfway expecting to see Jean-Paul leaning against a tree.

"It's only a nighttime thing. That's what makes me wonder if I'm being paranoid."

"You seemed very certain last night."

He glanced down at the coffee cup in his hand. "I'm afraid I said and did a lot of things I'm regretting this morning."

“Like what?” He had nothing to apologize for.

“Like trying to kiss you.”

“You *regret* kissing me?” Stella wetted her lips as her heart squeezed with the pain of rejection.

It was an unfamiliar feeling—not because she was accustomed to men finding her so desirable, rather because she’d never let herself care so much before. When your father died from loving too much, you tended to avoid anything that might lead to a broken heart.

“The kiss?” he said, sounding dumbfounded by her question. “The kiss was amazing. What I regret was that it was obviously too soon. You took off like a bat out of hell. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to connect the dots.”

Knock! There was that sound again—knuckles rapping against a door.

A humming sensation that filled Stella’s heart, and when she looked down, blue threads of magic unfurled from the center of her chest, reached through the distance between them, and wrapped around his body.

She sucked in a breath and glanced up quickly. Again, he didn’t seem to notice.

She looked down again. The gleaming threads were both startling and beautiful.

“Are you all right?” Ethan’s eyes searched her face.

Oof. Talk about irresistible. The memory of her dream hit her like a wrecking ball, and the azure threads of magic lassoed around Ethan, holding him to her, or her to him. She couldn’t be sure which.

Stella leaned in and pressed her lips to his.

“Stella,” he whispered. His lips grazed her cheek, then her jaw, her neck...

With every kiss, every touch of his hand, her magic blossomed in her chest. It grew brighter—*stronger*—until it surged through her so hot and intense it knocked her backward by several inches.

“What the...?” Her nerve endings fired like thousands of exposed wires, and she blinked in complete bewilderment.

Ethan looked as shocked as she felt, and his magic gave one thudding pulse. Once more, it reminded her of a fist pounding against a door.

“Shit,” he muttered. “Did I fuck this up again?”

Stella was still blinking, and though the blue threads of magic were fading away, she could still feel their fluttering traces as they retracted into her chest. What she wouldn’t give to ask Marietta about this, but for now that

was out of the question.

“Ethan...” She took a deep breath. “If you didn’t get the message, that kiss was me *forgiving* you for whatever mistake you thought you made last night. Not that you did anything that requires forgiveness.”

“Well, that’s good to hear,” he said. “My ego is restored.”

They both faced forward and leaned back against the bench. Stella squeezed the bag of corn tight in her fist, even more committed to finding a way out from under Bishop’s curse.

After a few seconds, Ethan asked, “Nice day, isn’t it?”

Stella glanced up at his face, surprised if not confused by the mundane non sequitur.

A broad smile spread across Ethan’s face, either amused by his own small talk or by her reaction to it.

“Yeah,” she said. If he wanted to play it cool after rocking her world, she was happy to play along. “What have you been up to all morning?”

“Every Saturday, I have donuts with some local civic leaders, then I deliver lunches to a half dozen shut-ins who live in an apartment block close to Faneuil Hall. I’ve been doing that for four years now.”

For a second, Stella thought he was joking. What was he going to do next? Rescue a puppy from a sewer drain?

“Why are you looking at me like that?” he asked.

“Like what?”

“Like I’m some kind of freak.” He raised his coffee cup and drank down what was left of it.

“You kind of are. For crap’s sake, Ethan. Is there even one bad-boy bone in your entire body?”

“I don’t know,” he said suggestively. “You could kiss me like that again and find out.”

Stella hadn’t expected him to be so forward, and her mouth ran dry at the memory of one particular ‘bad-boy bone’ in her dream-hand last night. She licked her lips, momentarily desperate to do *exactly* what he suggested.

“But maybe not here,” Ethan said, chuckling.

Her face burned. He’d clearly read her mind as clearly as if her thoughts had been written on her forehead.

“Anyway...” He slung his arm around her shoulders. “After I got everyone’s meals delivered—which always includes letting Joe show me his tattoos from Vietnam for the millionth time, and me reminding Margaret that

her bra doesn't go on the outside of her nightgown—I walk through the park on my way home for lunch. It's a good place to think and... Hey!"

"Hey, what?" she asked.

"How 'bout you have lunch with me today?"

His invitation was exactly what she'd hoped for: an extended amount of time for testing the depths of his magic and hopefully catching some of it on camera.

"Don't bother saying no," he teased. "I can be very persuasive."

Stella looked at him sharply. That gave her an idea for his first magical test. Maybe he was good at compulsion spells.

"Exactly *how* persuasive can you be?" she asked.

"*Extremely* persuasive," he said with a grin.

Stella glanced across the park and spotted another couple walking hand-in-hand. They'd make a good first experiment.

"See that couple walking toward us?" she asked.

"Yeah." He drew the word out suspiciously.

"Compel them to about-face and walk in the other direction."

"What do you mean?"

"Think it. Will it. Make them turn around, and I'll have lunch with you."

He narrowed his eyes on her face—probably wondering if she was being serious and if, maybe, she'd lost her mind.

But then he got an intense look in his eyes and thrust out his jaw in a determined expression.

"Okay. Fine." He faced them directly.

Stella stealthily removed her phone from her bag and held it low by her hip, outside his periphery.

The couple walked straight for them, and Stella opened her camera app.

"You'll have to focus harder than that," she said.

Ethan laughed—he thought she was kidding—but he closed his eyes and furrowed his brow.

For a second, Stella thought she might have felt a faint pulse of magic in the air, but it was too weak to have any real effect on the approaching couple. Too bad a magical pulse wouldn't show up on camera.

She put her phone back in her pocket as the man and woman continued on past them.

Ethan opened his eyes and swore under his breath. "I was really hoping that would work."

“You know,” Stella said. “I think I’ll have lunch with you anyway.”

“You mean you’re giving me an A for effort?” he asked.

“Something like that,” she said.

Ethan sighed. “I’m not usually a fan of participation ribbons, but today I’ll take it.”

He stood quickly and reached out his hand.

Stella looked up at him. “We’re leaving now?”

“It’s almost noon.”

He pulled her to her feet, and her magic surged again, coming so fast it pushed all the air out of her lungs. She coughed and adjusted the strap of her bag across her chest.

As they walked, he held her hand, and she didn’t pull away. What was the point? Besides, she was getting used to the strong magical surges that came every time he touched her.

The surges could be surprising, but they gave her a boost of strength. And there could be a comfortable warmth to them once they settled in.

When they reached the edge of the park, Stella let out a little, “Oh!”

She released Ethan’s hand and ran over to where a beautiful horse-drawn carriage waited alongside the curb.

She loved horses. She loved *all* animals, for that matter. Hell, she had a pet chicken and an indigo snake who ran amok in her store, though the latter was never on purpose.

“Would it be okay if I pet your horse?” Stella asked the driver.

“Sure,” the driver replied. “Her name’s Jessie, and she’s very friendly.”

Stella ran her hand down the horse’s satin nose. “Hey, Jessie. Aren’t you sweet?”

Jessie jerked her head up and made a raspberry sound with her lips, then settled and let Stella stroke her. She pressed the weight of her head against Stella’s shoulder, nearly knocking her off balance.

“Looks like she likes you,” Ethan said. “But then, what’s not to like?”

He slung his arm around her shoulders, and the warm feeling she got whenever he was near flooded her chest again.

“Have you ever taken a carriage ride before?” he asked.

“No. Never.”

“Maybe sometime soon we can change that.”

Another squiggly feeling in her stomach made her heart do a weird little flip. Stella didn’t know why she reacted to this man the way she did. Kissing

and holding hands...these things didn't have to mean anything important. In the past, with other men, they'd never meant anything at all.

But nothing felt the same with Ethan. Maybe it was her guilty conscience getting the better of her because carriage rides were something real couples did—not conflicted magical assassins and their oblivious prey. At this very moment, there was a poppet in her bag, filled with Ethan's DNA.

She turned away from the horse and leaned her forehead against Ethan's chest.

Ethan's hand curved around the back of her neck, and he held her to him. "Stella?"

Those odd blue threads of magic unfurled from the center of her chest again and circled around him. It was a completely involuntary magical reaction on her part, and there wasn't anything she could do to stop it.

She didn't even want to stop it, though she instinctively knew she should.

"It's nothing," she said, trying to come up with a reasonable explanation for her sudden bout with emotion. "I'm just having a moment, and I've got a soft spot for animals."

"Are you saying you're crying because you feel bad for the horse?"

Stella lifted her head to prove she wasn't crying. Her eyes were dry. "No. Jessie likes to pull the carriage."

His eyebrows drew together. "Who told you that?"

"Um..." *Crap*. She hadn't meant to say that out loud.

But Ethan didn't push her to clarify. He didn't laugh at her either.

"For the record... I like it when you show me your soft spots, Red. I can tell you don't do it often, so I consider it a gift. And you can trust me with them. Now, come on. Let's get you some lunch."

Her stomach growled. "Is there someplace good right around here?"

"Yep." He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "My place. I'm an expert sandwich maker."

Well, hell. There was no going back now.

She'd never been one to get emotionally attached to a man, but she'd already had a taste of his kiss. She'd felt the faint pulse of his magic and the responsive surge of her heart. And strangest of all...those blue threads of her magic that kept drawing them together.

And now, she was going to his apartment.

If she wasn't careful, she was going to fall down a well so deep she might never resurface.

Maybe she already had.

“Stella?” he asked, raising his eyebrows in expectation.

“Sure,” she said, giving him what she hoped was an appreciative smile.

“What do I have to lose?”

Fifteen minutes later, as Ethan slid his key into the lock, Stella studied the door to his apartment while clutching the strap of her satchel tight against her chest.

Someone had placed a protective ward around the entrance. It shimmered like a pink and silver curtain, throbbing with power and spiked with defensive magic.

But who would put a ward on Ethan’s door? Or maybe the better question was *why*?

He turned the doorknob, then glanced over his shoulder to smile at her. Had he constructed the ward himself? The magic had a lot of finesse—much more than Ethan seemed capable of.

He pushed the door open and waved her through, but she remained in the hall, her eyes riveted to the shimmering haze that hung across the open doorway.

The protective spell was clearly designed to keep out malicious intent. Did that mean her? She *was* carrying around his poppet.

“Red? Are you coming in?”

She met his eyes. “Are you *asking* me in?”

Maybe that was it. Maybe the witch who created the ward was a vampire fan and designed it so someone would need a direct invitation to gain entrance.

Ethan furrowed his brow. “I didn’t bring you all the way up here to leave you standing in the hallway.”

“Right. Of course not.” She glanced at the top of the door frame, then inched closer.

A witch like Izzy with her electrical charge could burn through a ward like this, no problem. But Stella wasn’t Izzy. And she didn’t like to burn.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

Slowly, Stella pointed her big toe across the threshold, bracing for at least some kind of stinging jinx, but felt nothing. “*Huh.*”

“*Huh, what?*” Ethan asked.

“*Huh, nothing.*”

He furrowed his forehead. “Are you feeling all right?”

People were asking her that question a lot lately. She exhaled and stepped inside, only to suck in that breath again.

“*Holy shit!*”

“*Jesus!*” Ethan whirled to face his living room. Based on her extreme reaction, he was probably expecting to see an intruder—or possibly a blood-sucking demon with three heads.

“*What is it?*” he asked, his gaze flicking wildly around his apartment.

“*This is where you live?*” She entered slowly, as if the place might bite her. She’d never seen anything so...uncluttered. No, not just uncluttered. Clean. Spotless. Completely sterile.

She didn’t know why she was so surprised. The building’s streamlined lobby—more hotel-like than any apartment block she’d ever visited—should have tipped her off to the modern sleek design of the units, particularly Ethan’s on the very top floor.

Inside the door to the right was a large kitchen with stainless steel appliances and a gas range appropriate for a culinary school graduate. Three blown-glass pendant lights hung over a white and gray marble island.

The kitchen was open to the living room with its trio of arched historical windows that overlooked the Park Place castle. Blond hardwood floors flowed throughout the space and were semi-covered by a dove gray area rug,

a white comfortable-looking sectional sofa, and a round black-lacquered coffee table. Paintings of red poppies—the only splash of color in the whole place—decorated the walls.

But where were the baskets of laundry, waiting to be folded? Where was the pile of junk mail that had been collecting all month? It wasn't like Ethan had known they'd be running into each other, let alone that he'd be inviting her up for lunch.

As he closed the door behind them, she asked, "Do you have a live-in maid?"

He blinked, probably surprised by her accusatory tone, then hung his keys on a hook by the door.

"No. Though someone does come every couple weeks to clean. She'll be here later today actually."

"You've kept it looking like this for two *weeks*?"

He glanced around his apartment. "Looking like what?"

Stella gesticulated wildly toward the minimalistic living room. "Like...*this*."

Could she trust someone who didn't have even the slightest proclivity toward hoarding? What kind of psychopath was she dealing with? Had his charitable good-doer activities all been a ruse?

Ethan's gaze shifted from the living room to her. "Is there something wrong with it?"

"It's not natural. Or...normal."

Humor flickered in his dark blue eyes, and the corner of his mouth quirked up. "Am I supposed to gather from your reaction that you, Ms. Aldren, are a slob?"

"You're supposed to gather that I live like a normal person while you, *Mr. Mather*... Well, there is definitely something weird about you."

He opened the fridge, pulled out some packages wrapped in white paper, and tossed them onto the counter. "That's not the first time someone's said that."

"Because of how tidy you are?"

"No." He selected a small loaf of French bread from a basket on the counter, then took a serrated knife from a drawer. "For...other reasons. When I was younger."

Stella arched a brow, curious whether they were venturing into some of Ethan Mather's hidden secrets.

He smirked and cut the bread lengthwise. “Believe it or not, I was kind of an odd little kid.”

“Oh, I believe it,” she said. “You’re kind of an odd adult.”

He looked up again, and smiled. “How do you mean?”

“Well...” Stella drew random circles on the island with her index finger. “For a while there...I thought you might actually be able to make that couple in the park turn around.”

It was as direct a conversation as she was willing to have on the subject. There had to be a way to get to the bottom of Ethan’s magic—particularly the source of that ward on his door—without revealing her own set of skills.

“You thought I had that kind of power?” he asked.

Stella gave him a pointed look. “Don’t you?”

His small smile stretched into a face-splitting grin. “No. But I believe *you* do.”

Stella’s mouth went dry. “Because of my magic shop?”

Ethan abandoned his food prep and walked around the edge of the island. “Don’t laugh. But you’ve been working your spell on me for the last forty-eight hours.”

Those odd magical threads of connectivity unfurled from the center of her chest, humming with energy, stronger than ever, encircling them.

“And now I’m going to show you my own brand of magic.” He wiggled his fingers in the air.

“But...you just said—”

“More than once, I’ve been called a sandwich magician. When I was a kid, I considered opening my own deli.”

“Oh.” Stella’s anticipation deflated like a balloon let loose of its air.

He scoffed. “‘Oh,’ she says. Spoken like someone who’s never had one of my sandwiches. I’ll have you know, I could charge big money for these. And for you...” He glanced up, and their gazes held. “Maybe I should charge a special price.”

“What kind of price would that be?”

“You can start by kissing me like you did in the garden.”

Stella laughed nervously. She would have liked nothing better, but her desire to save Ethan from the curse wasn’t the same thing as allowing herself to fall for the man. The two things were getting dangerously intertwined.

“How ‘bout I help you with lunch instead?” Stella pulled the strap of her satchel over her head and dumped the bag on one of the three bar stools that

were pulled up to the island.

Ethan took a step back as she slid past him to get behind the island. She opened the white-paper packages. One was full of turkey sliced so thin she could see through it. The other had provolone.

Ethan opened the fridge. “I hope you like real mayonnaise. I don’t do that other stuff.”

Stella took out what turkey and cheese they needed, then resealed the packages. She turned toward the fridge just as Ethan spun away from it, jar in hand.

Their chests collided, and Stella gasped. That spark of awareness snapped between them, electric and unmistakable, and the blue threads of magic were back. They wound around their bodies, holding them together, this time unwilling to go slack.

Ethan set the mayonnaise jar on the island. Stella tossed the meat and cheese to the side.

He bent at the waist, grabbed her behind the knees, and hoisted her onto the island. This put them at eye level, and their gazes held steady as Stella’s heart clenched.

It was the good kind of clench—scared, but hopeful she could really pull this off because there *had* to be a way to convince her coven that Ethan should be spared. Bridget’s curse couldn’t possibly apply to this man. This oblivious witch.

“You don’t have someplace to be again, do you?” He was making a joke, but she could tell by the tightness at the corners of his eyes that he was only halfway teasing.

“Not today,” she assured him.

“Good.” He pulled her knees apart and yanked her forward on the counter, positioning himself between her thighs so her body was completely pressed against him—hitting every possible point of contact.

Oh my god. This man was definitely dangerous.

“Christ, you’re beautiful.”

That was nice.

“Not of this world beautiful.”

That was even nicer.

His hand slid up her back, her neck, and combed his fingers into her hair against her nape.

“And this hair...” He twisted her ponytail in his fist. “So damn sexy. All

done up and an evening gown... Jeans and a ponytail... It's hard to know what I like better."

His eyes changed from awed exploration to steely determination, and he was leaning in.

The first kiss was gentle. Tentative and sweet.

"Well." His lips were still so close they brushed against hers. "That was a delicious start."

He was correct about that. In fact, she could barely think straight, which was probably why she murmured, "Potato-chip kiss."

He pulled back.

Stella's eyelids fluttered open.

"I'm sorry, what?" he asked, his eyes twinkling with humor.

"You know. The kind of kiss where you can't stop at just one."

It was then that the smile in his eyes made it to his mouth.

He leaned down again, and this kiss wasn't gentle. It was a serious kiss. Totally hot. He angled his head, and his mouth opened.

Her lips parted, and his tongue touched hers.

The blue threads of connectivity broadened from shimmering threads to strong thick ribbons.

Oh, God.

This was bad in all the best ways. There was no way to break through them.

Ethan's fingers dug into her hips, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, holding him to her, kissing him back as urgently as he kissed her. She couldn't help it.

His responding groan made his chest vibrate against her breasts. It was the best sound. He was the best *kisser*. And if she wasn't dumbfounded enough by this day, Ethan's lips were scrambling her brain and making her completely dizzy.

A dull pulsing filled her ears, then her chest, moving lower through her body, even down to her toes. No one had ever made her feel like this. It was unreal. It was dark and silky... It pounded through her.

She could feel her pulse in every part of her body. Ethan's heartbeat was just as strong.

And then...there was a *third* pulse. Deep. Slow. Dark. And Ominous.

Stella tore herself away from the kiss, and her head snapped to the right.

The blue ribbons of their connection dissolved, but that strange third

heartbeat continued—independent of her and Ethan.

“What’s in there?” she asked, wondering if this had something to do with the protective ward on his door.

He glanced in the direction she was looking. “Uh...the second bedroom, but I use it as an office-slash-library.”

Stella bit down on her bottom lip. Ethan’s kiss may have caused her blood to pulse in her ears and other parts more southern, but that was only part of the throbbing sensation she’d been experiencing.

There was something else in the apartment. Another beating heart, thumping like a drum. And it was coming from Ethan’s office. “Can I see it?”

“My *library*? Now?” He sounded incredulous, and she couldn’t blame him for that.

“Yeah,” she breathed. “Now.”

She hopped off the counter, barely giving Ethan enough time to step back.

As soon as her feet hit the floor, she grabbed her satchel off the bar stool and headed for the library with Ethan right behind her.

“You like books?” he asked.

“Love books.” But she loved answers even more, and she needed to find them as badly as she needed to breathe.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

Power snaked around the edges of Ethan's office. It slid eerily across the book shelves and in and out of the curtains, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact location of its source.

The air was thicker, heavier in this room than it was in the living room. It reminded Stella of the cellar beneath the tattoo parlor. But that kind of oppressiveness didn't make sense here—not in an apartment high above the city. Not in a place so impeccably clean.

Whatever the cause, there weren't a lot of places for the magic to hide. The most obvious options were the wall of crowded book shelves or inside Ethan's massive desk.

It was a strange piece of furniture in that it didn't fit with Ethan's modern streamlined aesthetic. This desk was an antique—maybe even colonial—primitive and bulky in style.

It had to have been a bitch to move up here.

She slung her bag across her chest more out of nerves than anything else.

"Are you leaving?" he asked, noting her bag.

"No." She walked toward the book shelves. "Just a habit. Sometimes I feel naked without it on me."

He didn't question her, but she was pretty sure he was adding it to his growing list of weird things about Stella Aldren.

She touched her hand to bottom bookshelf and dragged her fingers along the hundreds of spines—some new, mostly old with mottled edges to all their pages.

She pulled a thick volume off the lowest bookshelf. *The History of Art: Cave Drawings to Jean-Michel Basquiat* by J. P. Donovan. She halfway

expected a blue snake to slither out from the gap, and she hoped Darren was behaving back at the store.

“You like art?” Ethan asked.

“Not particularly.” She shelved the book and closed her eyes, trying to pinpoint the source of the power. Unfortunately, it was coming from everywhere all at once, sliding around the room like an oily coating.

“Why so many books, Ethan? There have to be over three hundred.”

“Close to four. I haven’t read more than a hundred of them myself, but I had to fill the shelves with something. I don’t collect figurines and snow globes, but books... Well, they have a certain staying power, you know? I like that about them.”

Ethan had told her his mother died of cancer when he was young, and that he’d spent his youth in foster care. She could imagine how a man who grew up in the system would like anything with staying power.

“The desk too? Do you collect antiques?” Stella didn’t think so, judging by the rest of the apartment, so she was particularly curious about this singular item.

“That’s actually a more interesting story.”

“Consider me intrigued,” she said with a smile, though her mind spun with grim possibilities.

Maybe it belonged to the same witch who put the ward on his door. Maybe it had belonged to Cotton Mather himself. It was certainly old enough.

“Well, when I turned eight, I got a delivery.” He gestured at the desk.

“Someone sent this desk to a child?” Stella slid her hand over its worn and nicked surface. “Why would an eight-year-old need a desk this big?”

“I didn’t *need* it. But it came with an anonymous note that said it was important, that I should hang on to it, and...get this...guard its secrets.”

A spike of adrenaline made Stella’s skin itch, but she resisted the urge to scratch and kept her voice even.

“Weird. I’m a little surprised your foster parents would even allow this thing in their house.”

“They initially balked, but the person who delivered it was very convincing.”

That gave Stella pause, and it gave more credence to her theory that a witch was behind it. A good compulsion spell could have convinced his foster parents to accept the desk, even if it took up half of Ethan’s room.

“So...what secrets is the desk supposed to have?” she asked.

“No clue.”

“And that’s all it took?” she asked. “One anonymous letter and you’ve been lugging this monstrosity around like an albatross nearly your whole life, no questions asked?”

“Oh,” he said, looking surprised. “I’ve had plenty of questions, but I never doubted the instructions. Right from the beginning, the thought of getting rid of the desk seemed so...wrong. *Unnatural*. Like cutting off my own arm or something.”

He watched her closely, and Stella wondered if he was trying to gauge her reaction.

“That’s some intense connection to an old piece of furniture, Ethan. I bet whatever friend helped you move it in here hasn’t spoken to you since.”

Stella leaned all her weight against the desk, but it didn’t budge.

“That’s no joke,” Ethan said, chuckling. “Which is why it’s been in this exact spot for the last ten years.”

“Wait.” Ten years? That couldn’t be right. “You’ve lived in this luxury apartment since you were *twenty-two*? How does a twenty-two year old afford this place?”

“I told you about my investments and about selling off my business.”

That’s right. He had. But she’d never stopped to imagine what that kind of life would look like up close.

She glanced wildly around the room. It was deluxe, while she lived in an attic where she had to duck to avoid bashing her head on a beam. She was just scraping by to pay her mortgage, and she was behind on her business loan.

“So...this anonymous note that came with the desk...do you still have it?”

It was a long-shot, but maybe the note still held a magical residue that could give her a clue—something that might help her convince her coven that Ethan was a witch who should be spared.

“It got lost somewhere along the line, but the message was clear. I won’t be getting rid of this desk. Ever.”

Stella believed he wouldn’t get rid of the desk. She was less convinced that he’d lost the note. Maybe it wasn’t even anonymous. If the note was signed—even by someone whose name Ethan didn’t recognize—maybe it was from one of the many names she’d researched in his family tree.

It all made her supremely curious. But she couldn't search Ethan's office with him standing there.

Stella wandered over to the window and faced the city. She slipped her hand into her bag and covered the poppet's ears with her thumb and the tip of her middle finger.

"*Ryngyng*," she whispered, her breath fogging the glass with the Old English spell. If the magic she'd put in the poppet hadn't faded yet—and with her track record, that was questionable—the spell should put a ringing sound in Ethan's ears.

Ethan stilled behind her. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" she asked, though her heart beat with triumph.

He turned over his shoulder, staring toward the living room. "That ringing."

"Sounds like a phone," she suggested, though, for herself, she heard nothing.

He glanced back at her. "That's strange. No one ever calls my landline. Would you excuse me?"

"Of course."

He left, and Stella quickly pulled the poppet from her bag. When she heard Ethan pick up the phone, she whispered into the poppet's ear, working a *probleme* spell. She needed to buy herself as much time as possible, and she needed Ethan out of his apartment.

"Okay. I'll take care of it," Ethan responded from the other room.

Stella put the poppet back in her bag and waited for him to return.

"That was the building manager," he said, appearing in the doorway to his office. "Someone tripped the alarm on my car. I have to go down to the garage and shut it off. Are you okay here alone for a few minutes?"

"Plenty of books to keep me busy."

He glanced at the shelves, then back at her, hesitating for a second. Stella understood completely. They were getting along great, but he didn't really know her. He probably felt conflicted about leaving her alone in his private office, but that was exactly what she needed him to do.

"Would you rather I wait in the living room?" she asked, trying to sound completely innocent.

That snapped him out of whatever moment of doubt he was having about her—something more to add to her growing list of things to feel shitty about.

"Wait wherever you're most comfortable," he said with a smile. "I'll be

back in a few minutes.”

As soon as Stella heard his front door open, then close, she approached the desk.

There was definitely some kind of spell on it. It was old, fading, but it still repelled her like a physical shove.

“Okay,” she said to the bulky monstrosity. “You’re shy. I get it.”

The magic swirled in the room, snaking between a few books and even knocking one of the smaller ones onto the ground.

The desk had three drawers—two shallow, one deep. She knelt in front of the latter. Someone had carved the initials J.S.M. onto the front of it, and it was, thankfully, unlocked. She pulled it all the way open.

Inside, the drawer contained file folders labeled with the words *taxes and insurance*, *home owner’s association*, and *campaign benefactors*.

She wouldn’t have time to see if any of them contained information about Ethan’s magical identity. Ethan would be back in no time.

But maybe the drawer itself held a clue. She slid her palm along its interior.

When she felt the back of the drawer, her fingertips slid into three subtle indentations in the wood. It reminded her of the fireplace brick that unlocked the magical registration room at the public library.

She pressed in, and her heart leapt when she heard a soft click.

The back panel of the drawer sprang open, revealing a thin compartment—only an inch or two deeper than the main drawer.

From this angle, it was impossible to see inside the secret compartment, but when she reached into it, her fingers found a piece of velvet wrapped around something hard with an unmistakable shape.

Stopping long enough to make sure Ethan wasn’t at the door, she yanked it out and unfurled the velvet wrappings. Inside was a bejeweled *athame*—a short, dagger used in magical rituals. The blade glinted in the light. The handle was set with a blood-red ruby.

This was the source of the heartbeat she’d heard earlier and, just to be sure, she pressed her thumb to the gemstone.

It pulsed in response, surprising her so much that she jumped.

“Yikes!”

The blade slipped from her hand, slicing across the tips of two fingers. *Oof*, that stung.

“I’m back!” Ethan called from inside his front door. “Should we make

lunch now?”

Shit! She clumsily rewrapped the blade, tossed it back into its hiding place, and closed the drawer.

Ethan appeared in the doorway, and his eyebrows pinched together. “Why do you look so guilty?”

“I don’t look guilty.”

He glanced at the book on the floor.

“Oh,” she said quickly. “I’m sorry. It fell. I was going to put it back before you got here.”

He glanced up, and his gaze went to her hand. “You’re bleeding.”

“What?” Two fat droplets of blood were welling at the ends of her fingertips. “Oh. Paper cuts.”

“I’ll get you a couple of bandages.”

“It’s fine,” she said, but he was already gone.

When he returned, he ripped open the bandages and gently wrapped one around each fingertip, then raised them to his lips and kissed them.

Stella’s lips parted, moved by his tenderness.

He smiled, clearly knowing his impact on her, then released her hand.

“So, are you ready for lunch?” he asked.

Stella followed him back to the kitchen and hoisted herself onto one of the bar stools. Ethan made sandwiches as good as any deli—thick piles of meat, plenty of cheese, and juicy slices of tomato. But when he was done, he stared down at his masterpieces as if he didn’t recognize what they were.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He looked up. “Are you even hungry?”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “Truth?”

“Always.” He touched his hand to his heart. “You won’t hurt my feelings. Nothing but the truth between us.”

She laughed nervously because, one, she was the biggest lying sack of shit ever. Besides that, her stomach was tied up with too much excitement over her discovery of the athame.

She wasn’t sure how food would sit.

Stella hadn’t answered his question yet, but he seemed to know the answer. He set their plates aside and moved around the end of the island.

She spun her stool to face him. Ethan pulled her knees apart and took up his place again, standing between them.

“Maybe we should work up our appetites first,” he said.

The brush of his lips was gentle and unhurried. Nibbling and sucking until her lips parted for him on a gasp. He made a low appreciative sound that sent shivers racing down her spine.

He captured her lips, deepening the kiss with a touch of his tongue.

Stella's senses went into overdrive, synapses exploding like fireworks.

Like all his kisses before, this one was also, quite simply, magic. Gentle entreaties, followed by sublime, decadent explorations, finished off with explosive, panty-melting deep dives.

Stella's heart spasmed wildly from a yearning so deep in her soul that it spiked her blood with abject terror.

She pulled back and stared up at him with wide eyes.

"Are we done so soon?" he asked. "I was thinking I needed more of that." His fingers trailed over her cheeks, and she decided he was absolutely right.

Stella pulled him back to her, moaning at the taste of him while a cocktail of pleasure and panic infused her blood. Her magic sparked inside her chest, and her heart thundered—both from desperation and fear.

He hooked one of her legs over his hip and pressed his body tight against hers. She gasped against his mouth as his fingers toyed with the bottom edge of her shirt, his fingers skimming over her skin, sending a hot rush of blood to the apex of her thighs.

"Oh, god," she moaned, breaking the kiss for a second time, but leaving a hair's breadth of distance between their lips.

She needed an escape route before she dragged him into his bedroom, tore off his clothes, and did unspeakable things to him. If she stopped now, there might be time to save her sanity.

"Maybe we really should eat those sandwiches," she suggested, sounding like a nervous teenager.

Ethan smiled against her lips. "You've already worked up an appetite?"

"I mean..." She exhaled loudly feeling like an idiot for playing it hot and cold. "You went to all the trouble to make them."

"*You're* what's trouble," he teased. "When it comes to you, I may have bitten off more than I can chew."

Stella gave him a playful shove backward, and she hopped off her stool. "You, sir, are not wrong."



LATER, after they'd eaten and the dishes were washed and put away, Ethan kissed her again. It was just as delicious as before, just as addicting. Staying any longer at his apartment would be a colossal mistake.

"I better go," she said.

"Really?" he asked.

"I'm afraid so." She grabbed the front of his shirt and held him to her.

"Okay" he said, "but I *will* be seeing you again, right? This time on purpose?"

At first, Stella didn't know what he meant, then she remembered that he thought their duck pond meeting had been totally by chance.

"Yes," she said. "I'd like that."

"I have a campaign breakfast tomorrow at the South Street Diner with some community leaders, then I'll be out of town the rest of the day. I won't be back until late, but the *next* night..."

"The next night?" she asked absentmindedly.

Ethan didn't answer right away, and when she looked up, he was smiling down at her.

That's when she realized she'd been running her fingers along the waistband of his jeans. She yanked her hands away and laced them behind her back.

"There's a cocktail party starting at seven," he said, concluding his sentence. "It's with some of my biggest donors, but it'll be much more casual than the other night. Dress up, but no tuxes and evening gowns. Would you be interested in going with me?"

"I've only got that one dress with me."

"That red one that could stop traffic? You won't need anything that fancy. But go buy yourself something nice. If you go to *Le Trois* in Beacon Hill, I'll tell them to put it on my tab. It'll be my treat."

"Seriously?" Who ran a *tab* at an upscale boutique?

"Seriously." He smiled broadly. "The event is at a restaurant that's also in Beacon Hill. I'll text you the address."

After that, Ethan accompanied her down the elevator and to his building's front door. There, they kissed again, nearly as passionately as before, despite

the few people walking in and out.

When they finally broke apart, he checked his watch. "I'll see you again in fifty-four hours."

"How will you survive?" she teased.

"Sheer willpower."

Stella gave him one final kiss, then exited the building. When she glanced back, he was still standing there, watching her go.

She waved goodbye and headed north. She'd only made it half a block when a new presence slinked out of an alley and sidled up beside her. When she looked to see who it was, she jumped.

"Shit!" She slapped her hand over her heart. "Have you been following me this whole time?"

"Be serious," Jean-Paul drawled. "Believe it or not, little witch, I have better things to do."

"*Shhh.*" She glanced around. "Keep your voice down."

He flicked ash from his cigarette and clucked his tongue. "Just speaking the truth."

Like hell he was. Stella refused to be gaslit. Jean-Paul was definitely following her. "I saw you standing outside my hotel late last night."

"*Psh.*" He flicked his hand through the air like he was swiping left.

"I know I did."

He shook his head. "I didn't even know you were staying at a hotel."

"You know I'm at the Liberty. I saw you standing below my window."

"The Liberty?" He stroked his chin. "Oh, yeah. I caught an Uber around there sometime after midnight."

He was a terrible liar. "Right. And *this* is a chance encounter."

"I'm picking up her boss's dry cleaning." He pointed toward a sign for a dry cleaner a few doors up.

"And I work at a garage two blocks back that way." He hooked his thumb over his shoulder.

"Uh-huh," she said. Under any other circumstances, it may have been a plausible explanation, but it didn't explain last night.

Her suspicions amplified when Antoinette stepped out of a coffee shop two doors ahead of them. She made a quarter turn to face them, and her expression opened into a happy surprise. "What are you two doing?"

And the Oscar goes to...

"I'm picking up dry cleaning," Jean-Paul said. "*Stella's* accusing me of

stalking.”

“What?” Antoinette looked at her with disapproval.

Stella rolled her eyes. She wasn't buying any of it. The chance of running into Jean-Paul in a city this size was slim to none. Running into both of them... And so close to Ethan's apartment...

“Are you picking up your dry cleaning too?” she asked Antoinette. “Or maybe you can cut to the chase and tell me why you're both following me. And for that matter what you want with Ethan Mather.”

“Who?” Jean-Paul asked.

The corner of Antoinette's mouth tightened. Even she knew his lies had just gone a step too far.

““Dead men don't talk,”” Stella reminded him. “And Lovey already told me she'd been watching him, so quit jerking me around.”

“Did she also tell you not to trust him?” Antoinette asked.

As a matter of fact...

“And yet you spent the day with him,” Antoinette said.

“So you *have* been following me.” Stella knew it. God, vindication felt good.

“You want us to cut to the chase?” Antoinette asked. “Okay. We're looking for an athame. Nine inches. Silver blade. Jewel in the handle.”

A shiver ran down Stella's spine. She hadn't expected Antoinette to be so direct, and a terrible thought occurred to her. Had the athame she found hidden in Ethan's desk drawer left a magical residue on her? Was it so strong she'd become, like, some kind of magical magnet for the Boston coven?

“We don't know how or why,” Antoinette said, “but we believe Ethan Mather is our path to finding it.”

“He's not a witch,” Stella insisted, testing them to see how much more they might know.

“Should that matter?” Antoinette asked. “Now, where is it?”

Stella sputtered and took two steps backward. “You're asking me? How should I know? This is the first I'm even hearing about it.”

She pushed around Antoinette and tried to break away, but Antoinette grabbed her wrist and pulled her back.

“Nice,” Stella said. “This is the thanks I get. How's your cousin's baby, by the way?”

“She's good. Much better actually. And I do thank you, but now, you have to help us find that athame.”

For the first time, Stella noted a sense of panic in Antoinette's voice.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because we can't open our grimoire without it," Antoinette said.

"Fuck!" Jean-Paul spun in a circle of intense frustration and punched his fists toward the sidewalk.

Apparently, he and Antoinette hadn't discussed making this particular disclosure, and it was clearly a big one.

"A grimoire?" Stella asked, looking from Antoinette to Jean-Paul and back again. "That's the *objè pouvwa* Lovey was afraid I'd steal? *That's* what's in the armoire?"

Antoinette and Jean-Paul stared at her as if the answer should be obvious, but it wasn't. Stella's coven already had its own book of spells that had been passed down through the generations. Why did they think she'd care about theirs?

"Where's the blade?" Antoinette asked again—this time in a low steady, almost fatigued-sounding tone.

"I haven't seen any athame," Stella told her.

"You've been with Ethan Mather all day," Antoinette said. "Were you in his apartment?"

"Of course she was in his apartment," Jean-Paul said. "She was up there for nearly two hours."

"Doesn't mean she got inside," Antoinette said. "Gran's never been able to figure out the ward."

Huh. So, apparently they were giving up on all their lies and laying their cards on the table. They had been following her, and they'd been following Ethan.

"We had lunch," Stella said, feigning patience. "That's all. We talked about his campaign."

"Gran told us you can feel magic," Antoinette said. "*Think*. You probably would have felt the blade if you got within ten feet of it. It would have pulsed. Like a heart."

Sweat prickled on the back of Stella's neck. "I haven't felt anything unusual today."

"Stella, we need that blade to unlock our spells. Our whole history is wiped out without it."

That hit a little too close to home. Her own coven was under threat of obliteration—that is, if her hunch about an exception to Bishop's curse didn't

pan out.

“Maybe...” Stella hedged, an idea coming to her.

“Maybe what?” Jean-Paul asked.

Maybe that grimoire contained more than hidden spells. Maybe it held the secret to everything, including Ethan himself. Was that what this was about?

Was Lovey trying to keep Ethan from learning the truth? She wasn't concerned about him stealing the grimoire. She didn't want him to use the athame to unlock something about himself. To unlock his magic.

If Stella was right, this was exactly the evidence she needed to prove Ethan's worth to her coven.

And Lovey was right about something else too. Stella *could* read magic.

If she could get close enough to the book, it might answer all these questions for her.

“Nothing,” Stella said, trying to be cagey. They wouldn't really let her see their grimoire, would they?

“Whatever you're thinking, it's *not* nothing,” Antoinette said. “So spill.”

Stella hesitated. “I was just thinking... It's possible the grimoire could give me a clue. If the athame gives off the same kind of power as the book itself... It might help me find it if I had a better sense of how the grimoire's own magic felt.”

Antoinette and Jean-Paul exchanged a glance, and Stella saw the desperation in their eyes. Were they actually going to give in and let her see the book?

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

Antoinette and Jean-Paul stared at each other for what felt like forever as a silent conversation passed between them in their wide, panicked eyes.

“I don’t know...” Antoinette said.

“I don’t like it either,” Jean-Paul said, “but she may be our only shot at finding the athame.”

Antoinette pressed her lips together. Apparently, they didn’t have any other leads.

“Okay,” she said on a desperate exhale. “But don’t either of you *dare* say anything about this to Gran. I’d like to live long enough to see my next birthday.”

“Word,” Jean-Paul muttered.

The side street that led to the tattoo parlor wasn’t as creepy in the daylight, but that didn’t make it any easier for Stella to pick her way over the broken bricks and cobblestones.

“How do you walk on these things in stilettos?” she asked Antoinette.

“Swag,” was Antoinette’s simply reply.

Jean-Paul used his shoulder to push the black lacquered door open, and he waved them through. Unlike the night before, the business wasn’t deserted. Two of the three tattoo chairs, plus a table Stella hadn’t noticed before, were occupied by customers and their artists—none of them magical. *Normies*, as Antoinette called them.

They didn’t seem to notice that the air was heavily laden with the sweet, rotting-apple scent of decay. If Antoinette and Jean-Paul noticed, they didn’t care. For herself, even though she’d known it was coming, it still took her

breath away.

And it was made all the worse by knowing its cause.

Jean-Paul gave one of the artists a wave, and the three witches headed down into the cellar with Stella sandwiched between her two hosts.

At the bottom of the stairs, Jean-Paul hit the light switch and they filed through what Stella now considered the antechamber. Light bounced off the broken pieces of mirror that lay on the ground.

In the second larger room, daylight filtered through the dirty egress window. Antoinette reached up to pull the chain that lit the single lightbulb that dangled from the ceiling.

There were no guards posted in front of the armoire this time, but the same dark, hungry magic pulsed from behind its double doors, which were still secured by the heavy chain.

“So...your grimoire’s inside there,” Stella said unnecessarily; the whole place pulsed with the spell book’s power, even stronger than the other night. “Why was it left unattended?”

“Gran only made Simon and Jeffrey sit in front of the armoire because *you* were here. She was still suspicious. The chain is sufficient for normal situations and most people who venture down here are happy to stay as far away from it as possible.

“Understandable.” Stella wasn’t keen on getting any closer either, but she was here for a reason.

She needed to understand the connection between this coven and Ethan. Maybe their grimoire would even provide a clue about who’d sent Ethan that desk.

“Open it?” Jean-Paul asked Antoinette.

“Open it,” she said, but she didn’t sound happy about it.

Jean-Paul moved forward.

Antoinette turned Stella around so she couldn’t see Jean-Paul work the combination lock.

At first, Stella didn’t hear any noises—no *clicks* or *snicks* of a lock opening.

But a second later, the chain slinked through the handles and pooled onto the floor in a dull clanking sound. Stella and Antoinette turned around again just as Jean-Paul grabbed hold and, putting all his weight into it, yanked on the armoire’s double doors.

They made a terrible groaning sound before coming open, and he stepped

aside as Stella and Antoinette moved closer.

The armoire had three shelves, but there was nothing stored inside except for the grimoire—a very *old* grimoire by the looks of it.

The Salem coven's spell book was over four hundred years old, but this one beat it by at least two centuries.

“Go on,” Antoinette said. “If you're going to get any information about the athame, you'll have to touch the book, right?”

Stella didn't want to touch it. She didn't want to go anywhere near it. She could feel the gnawing hunger coming out of the book, wanting to destroy everything in its path.

“This book is full of blood magic,” she said, low under her breath in case the book could hear her.

“What are you talking about?” Jean-Paul asked.

“You can't feel it?” she asked.

“We don't feel magic,” Antoinette said. “Only Gran can do that.”

“Then, she knows.” The words came out as little more than a whisper.

“Power doesn't necessarily mean it's evil,” Antoinette said. “Just because you don't understand something, doesn't make it bad.”

“You're too close to it to see the truth,” Stella explained. “You're desensitized.”

“And I think you're stalling,” Jean-Paul said. “We didn't bring you all the way down here for nothing.”

Stella shot him an annoyed glance, but he was right. She'd given them hope that she could find their missing blade if they let her touch their grimoire. Even though she was now regretting that suggestion, she couldn't back out now.

Cautiously, she approached with her hand extended, as if afraid the book might bite, and that was no act. Then, after glancing at both of them to make sure they really wanted her to open it, she gently lifted the cover.

As it fell open, Stella jerked back, halfway expecting demons to fly out. When that didn't happen, she took a peek.

The title was written in a language she couldn't read but whose accent marks she recognized. “Creole?”

“Old French,” Antoinette said. “It's been in our coven since Margot de la Barre.”

“The fourteenth-century diviner?” Stella asked. *Holy shit*. The book was seriously old.

Antoinette lifted her chin in confirmation. “The grimoire came to America in the seventeenth century. Gran’s mother brought it with her when she moved our coven up to Boston after the 1915 New Orleans hurricane.”

Stella returned her gaze to the book with renewed respect, though she was no less wary.

Based on some English notations in the margins, she reasoned that the next few pages contained ingredient lists, most of which could be found in the average garden.

Slowly, she turned the pages, running her palm over each them. The earliest spells were written in the same Old French, then, over time, they switched to a more standard French mixed with what she presumed to be Creole. There were even a few spells written in English.

In addition to the languages, the words changed in style and color, depending on the type of ink and the writing instrument used at the time of their recording. The oldest spells were clearly written with a quill, judging by the tight, scratchy penmanship, the frequent ink splotches, and the considerable fading. The newest spells were written with a fountain pen and a more sprawling hand.

“You said you need the blade to unlock the most powerful spells?” Stella asked, continuing to turn the yellowed and foxed pages. The deterioration worsened the closer she got to the back of the book, as did the stench of decay.

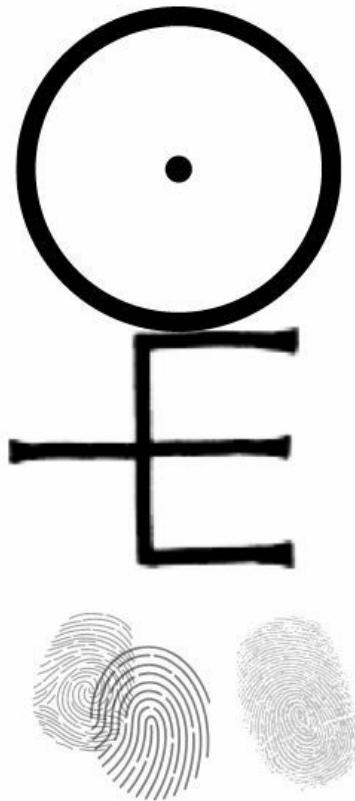
“Blood unlocks the spells,” Antoinette said. “But the blood has to be drawn by one specific blade. The missing blade.”

Stella’s fingertips throbbed under their bandages, and she curled her hand into a fist lest she inadvertently unlocked any spells.

Halfway through the book, the writing stopped, and the pages went blank.

“It *looks* like that’s where the spells end,” Antoinette explained. “But Gran says the blank pages used to have writing on them too. These blank pages are what we need the athame to unlock.”

The last visible notation in the book was an image she’d never seen before. It was made from a combination of two alchemical symbols: a circle with a center dot—representing the sun—resting atop an E with an elongated middle bar—the symbol for ashes.



Beneath the image were several bloody fingerprints, the marks now brown with the passage of time.

Stella shuddered, realizing that beyond these two joined symbols was where the greatest evil lay.

The book tugged at her, drawing her closer, but she held herself back, refusing to respond to its allure.

“Are you sure you want to unlock these hidden spells?” she asked. “The ones you *can* read feel powerful enough.”

“Lovey wants the grimoire completed,” Jean-Paul explained.

“Why?” Stella asked, wondering why anyone would want to get closer to such darkness.

“What do you mean, *why*?” he asked.

“What’s her intent with this book?” Blood magic caused problems for all

witches. It attracted unwanted attention from nonmagical folk and was the trigger for all witch trials in history.

There was a reason why, years ago, the Salem coven had cast out a witch who was caught practicing blood magic. They wanted to live in peace.

“This grimoire is our coven’s legacy,” Antoinette said. “Gran’s intent is to have our coven fully restored. According to her, we haven’t been the same since the athame was lost.”

The grimoire’s magic tugged at Stella, urging her forward. She closed her eyes, needing a break, though the two alchemical symbols continued to swim in her mind’s eye. They were definitely important.

“Not lost,” Jean-Paul said. “The athame isn’t lost. It’s *stolen*.”

Stella rested her hand on the book’s open pages. “And you really believe Ethan Mather, *a non-witch*, stole it?” She cranked the attitude up to full blast. “What would he want with it? He wouldn’t even know what it was.”

Antoinette leaned back. “We didn’t say he stole it.”

Stella blinked. Didn’t they? “You said—”

“The athame’s been missing for longer than he’s been alive,” Antoinette said, giving Stella a look that questioned her intelligence.

“He didn’t steal it,” Jean-Paul said. “He just knows where it is.”

“You *think* he knows where it is,” she said, pointing at him with her free hand. “If we’re going to be accurate, let’s be accurate.”

Jean-Paul shrugged.

Stella’s bandaged fingertips pulsed, and she glanced back at the book where she’d lain her palm flat against the page.

Right before her eyes, a pale indication of words, a mere shade darker than the paper itself, was slowly filling the empty space.

Most of the words were far too faint to read. The only legible word was *death*. Not a great omen.

Even more concerning: other words could materialize if she left her fingers on the page any longer because she’d been right when she characterized the book’s magic as *hungry*.

Though dried and wrapped in bandages, the tiniest drops of her blood—*blood drawn from the athame*—were slowly waking the book’s blank pages.

Stella slammed the grimoire shut before Antoinette and Jean-Paul could notice the words appearing on the page.

“Is that it?” Jean-Paul asked.

Stella casually laid her uninjured hand over the book's cover, holding it closed.

"Did you get any information out of it?" Antoinette pressed.

Stella hadn't, at least, not in the sense Antoinette meant. The only thing she knew for sure was that there was too much power in that book to be unleashed, and there was no way she'd ever let the athame fall into the Boston coven's hands.

If the spells got out, they could mean trouble for all witches.

Surely, this threat was more pressing than the matter of Bishop's curse. Because even if Ethan was killed and they were saved from the curse rebounding, they'd be left to deal with the fallout of this blood magic. That could be a fate far worse than anything Bridget Bishop could unleash from the grave.

Or was that just her messed up logic? Would anyone in her coven see it that way? Or were both fates equally horrible? Maybe, when it came to Ethan, she was developing a terrible case of tunnel vision.

"I felt...*something*," Stella said, knowing that right now, she needed to be a better actress than a witch.

"What did you feel?" Antoinette asked, sounding hopeful, like maybe her gamble had paid off.

"It's...in water." Stella yanked her hands away from the book and staggered back. She always did enjoy a little theatrics. She hoped it was a convincing show. "Or near it."

"Water?" Jean-Paul asked.

"That's right," she said. "Salt water."

"Are you saying the blade is in or near the ocean?" Antoinette asked.

"That's the most obvious conclusion." Stella couldn't have given them a bigger haystack for their needle.

"Jesus Christ," Jean-Paul muttered. "This is Boston. Everyone and everything is either in or near the ocean."

Antoinette eyed Stella suspiciously.

"I'm sorry," Stella said. "That's all I can feel from the book. Is there anything else around here that might give me more clues?"

She let her question hover in the air as she looked innocently back and forth between their faces.

Antoinette and Jean-Paul exchanged a glance, then Antoinette said, "You're sure you got nothing more specific than that?"

“I’m sorry,” she said again. “That book is very secretive.”

They couldn’t argue with her about that.

“Damn,” Antoinette said. “I really thought you could help.”

“Maybe another clue will pop up. I’ll keep an eye out. Until then...be careful with that book.”

Jean-Paul grumbled something and bent to pick up the chain.

As he threaded it through the armoire’s door handles, Stella headed for the stairs. She needed to let Judith know what was going on ASAP.

A grimoire full of blood magic and a coven committed to unleashing its power was a far bigger problem than one ambitious Mather. Surely, she’d be able to see that.

“I guess I’ll see you later?” Stella said as she slowly exited the room.

Antoinette and Jean-Paul watched her, but they didn’t say anything.

They didn’t do anything to stop her from going either. When Stella reached the antechamber, she picked up her pace and rushed upstairs.

As she passed through the tattoo parlor, she thought she’d made a clean, calm getaway, but the sound of high heels coming up the stairs made her heart race.

“Hold up,” Antoinette said.

Stella grabbed the door handle and yanked, but red sparks sizzled around her grip, and the door wouldn’t budge. Stella put her back to the door.

Antoinette glanced around at the customers, then met Stella at the door.

She leaned in close. “You breathe a word of this to anyone...”

“I already promised not to mention it to your grandmother.”

“What about Ethan Mather?” she asked, arching a brow.

Jean-Paul emerged from the cellar, and Stella’s stomach squeezed into a tight knot.

She scoffed, trying to play it cool. “I barely know him. And why would he even *want* to know anything about this?”

By that time, Jean-Paul had joined them. He folded his arms. “You tell us.”

“That book...” Stella pointed toward the stairwell behind them. “It’s making you all a little nuts.”

“We’re serious, Stella,” Antoinette said. “We trusted you with this information. Don’t betray that trust.”

“I won’t!” She threw her arms out in exasperation.

“Good,” Antoinette said. “We’ll be watching you.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY

“Go ahead and watch,” Stella said, leaning in with her own feigned menace. “But prepare to be bored out of your skulls.”

She hoped they couldn’t hear how loud her heart was pounding. She could play it cool on the outside, but her insides were harder to control.

When neither Antoinette nor Jean-Paul had anything more to say, Stella realized their threats were over, and she was free to go. She hightailed it out of there, feeling their eyes on her back all the way to the corner.

By that time, her phone battery had already dropped to five percent, but it was enough to get Judith on the line, which she did as soon as she rounded the corner.

“Is it done?” Judith asked, meaning Ethan.

“Hello to you too,” Stella said, breathing hard as she picked up speed.

“I’m sorry, honey. We’ve all just been so worried.”

Stella glanced over her shoulder, halfway expecting to find Jean-Paul still following her, but there was no sense of magic nearby. “We’ve got bigger fish to fry, Judith.”

“What do you mean?”

Stella dropped her voice. “Did Marietta tell you about the other coven in Boston yet?”

“The one you thought might be dabbling in blood magic? Yes. She told me this morning.”

“Well, there’s no ‘might’ about it, and it’s bad, Judith. This is real trouble.”

“Tell me.”

A loud creaking sound came over the phone line, which meant Judith had

gone out her back door and onto her patio. She never liked to worry her partner, Linda—one of the few nonmagical people intimately involved in their lives. Linda preferred to be blissfully ignorant whenever possible.

Stella glanced back one more time, then filled Judith in on the grimoire and the blood magic she could feel in its pages.

She refrained from telling Judith about the athame—*especially* the part about knowing where it was—because she didn't want anyone to overhear. She also didn't want to put Ethan under a greater microscope than he already was.

“Who's their high priestess?” Judith asked.

“A witch named Lovey DuPre.”

“I've heard of her. She flies under the radar mostly. Something this dangerous would be out of character for her.”

“I think she's been flying under the radar so she could hide her plans. I don't get a good feeling about this situation at all.”

“You focus on your work. I'll call everyone else together and let them know about this new threat. We'll address it head-on once I have everyone organized.”

“Okay. Let me know.”

“And Ethan Mather?”

“I haven't seen him again, so still no hair. He's been busy doing a lot of charitable work.”

Stella hoped this gave Judith a different picture of the man. Maybe it would help her to reconsider the curse.

When Judith didn't respond, Stella added quickly, “But I plan to see him tomorrow.”

“Good,” Judith said. “Get this done, then get as far away from him as possible. I want you to have an alibi when he finally drops.”

A feeling of doom descended over Stella. Was there no way she was going to get out from under Bishop's curse? Would she have to explain everything to Ethan, fake his death for the sake of his safety, then pray her hunch about there being an exception to the curse for Mather-born *witches* was correct?

It was a shit-show of a plan.

“I'll give you a call later about the Boston coven,” Judith said. “After I've had the chance to consult with everyone.”

“Okay,” Stella said. “In the meantime, I'll get as much information as I

can on the Boston coven's grimoire.”



IT WAS three o'clock when Stella reached the Boston public library. She raced up the steps and past the stone lions without a thought for how she might look to the other patrons. All her focus was on those alchemical symbols and what more they might mean.

She stopped at the second-floor delivery desk and braced her hand against the wall. “I need the—” She sucked desperately at the air. “Oldest books you've got on—” She kept panting. “Alchemical symbols.” One last gasp. “As soon as possible.”

She really needed to spend more time on her cardio.

“Do you have a library card?” The young librarian surveyed her with a mostly amused expression. Stella guessed alchemical books weren't usually a rushed request.

“Uh...no. No card.”

Two vertical lines formed between his eyebrows. “Titles and call numbers for the books you want?”

A prickly feeling crawled up the back of Stella's neck, and she glanced over her shoulder, still expecting to see someone watching her. But no one was there.

“I don't have those either.”

“I see.” The librarian rose from his chair and pointed in the direction she should go. “Borrower services is downstairs. They'll help you get a library card. The books you're looking for will be in our special collections, so you can't take them out, but you can look at them here.”

“That's fine.” She had no interest in lugging books all over town. If she bumped into another one of the Boston witches, she preferred to be light on her feet.

“When you come back with your card, I'll find a research librarian to help you.”

Stella did as he said and after about an hour, she was sitting at one of the many long tables in Bates Hall. The barrel vaulted ceiling and high arched windows resembled a cathedral—the busts of famous Americans standing in

place of the saints.

There were only a few other patrons in the room, all of them with tables to themselves. Stella was glad for the privacy.

She deleted a text message from her bank—kindly reminding her about another late payment—and promised herself that once this Ethan debacle was over, she'd schedule a meeting with the banker. She'd make things right.

She couldn't risk losing the store. It represented everything she'd inherited from her parents. If the bank took it away, it would be like losing them all over again.

It couldn't come to that. Which meant, she needed to work on the ever-expanding Ethan problem even faster than before.

Stella opened the first book the research librarian had helped her find and positioned it under the glow of a green-shaded reading lamp.

The pages were filled with block calligraphy that was impossible to make out, but she was mainly after the images, hoping to find a reference to that combination of alchemical symbols she saw in the grimoire: sun plus ash.

Those two symbols had marked the beginning of the grimoire's locked pages, and when you were looking for answers, you had to start somewhere.

Unfortunately, she didn't find anything that looked even close to that image in the first library book, or in the second for that matter.

By the time she was flipping through the third book, the light outside the windows had faded. This was her last-ditch attempt, and she didn't hold out a lot of hope.

The third book was tiny—barely bigger than her hand—with a worn leather cover and typeset so small you'd think the printing press had been run by insects.

But then, right as she was about to give up, she found it. A circle with a center dot resting atop an E with an elongated middle bar.

Stella adjusted the lamp so the light shone straight down on the page, but the words beneath the image were still too small and faint.

She pushed off the table with so much force her chair scraped backward across the floor, making a terrible sound that echoed around the room. One person ducked and covered her ears. A few others whipped their heads around and scowled.

Giving them all a sheepish apology, Stella stood and went in search of the research librarian.

She found her and asked if she had a magnifying glass, a pen, and a piece

of scratch paper. The librarian opened her drawer and handed Stella what she needed.

Back at the table, she studied the words written beneath the image, working them out letter by letter, making some guesses based on context clues when the ink was too faded, and wrote it all down on the scrap paper.

When she was done, she read what she wrote.

Hitherto, the sole instances of this extraordinary conjunction of alchemical hieroglyphics hath been discovered graven upon stones upon the Isle of Skye in the Inner Hebrides of Scotland. The radiant orb, perched atop a heap of cinders, doth signify the Phoenix, or perchance the reanimation of departed souls.

“Holy shit!”

“Shhh,” said an old man sitting two tables up.

“Sorry.” Stella bent over the book. Was Lovey’s coven trying to raise the fucking dead?

This whole time, had she really been dealing with a coven of resurrectionist wannabes?

Stella turned the page, but she wasn’t able to read any further because right then, her phone rang. It was a miracle it still had a charge.

It rang a second time before she could locate it in her bag.

“Do you *mind*?” asked the same old man.

Stella mouthed the word “sorry,” then held up one finger. It took a few more seconds, but eventually she found her phone and saw that it was her sister calling.

“*Jade*?” she whispered into the phone.

“Why are you whispering?” she asked. “Are you in danger?”

“I’m in a library,” Stella said, a tiny bit louder, while keeping her eye on the man who was now frowning at his book, clearly contemplating reporting her to the biblio-cops.

There was a pause, then Jade asked, “Don’t you have bigger things to be focusing on than the latest bestseller?”

Stella tried to ignore her sarcasm and turned another page. It bore an image made from a wood engraving: two barefoot witches hanging by their necks. A shiver ran down her spine.

“I *am* focused, Jade. What’s going on?”

“Judith called us all together. She said there’s another coven interfering with the Mather situation.”

Was that how Judith had put it to them? Clearly she’d missed the point she’d been trying to make, that this was *bigger* than Ethan. This new development put the whole Bishop curse on the back burner.

“It’s more serious than that, Jade. This other coven is trying to interfere with the laws of nature.”

Stella swore she could hear her sister’s eye roll over the phone line.

“Whatever else they’re into is their business,” Jade said, “but they won’t be interfering in ours. I wanted to assure you, help is on the way. It’ll just be an hour or two, and we’ll get your mess cleaned up.”

“My mess?”

“You’re the only one in Boston, aren’t you?”

“I don’t think you fully understand.”

“There’s more than one way to skin a cat, Stella. Or in this case...a Mather. This other coven will understand he’s ours, and we’ll get you home safe. See you soon.”

“Jade!” Ice water trickled through her veins. What did Jade mean, *we’ll* get you home safe? “*You* can’t come to Boston. You’re supposed to be taking care of my store.”

“I know, I know. Stop worrying. Everything’s under control.” Jade hung up before Stella could ask anything more.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Liberty Hotel
8:00 PM

S tella's knee wouldn't stop bouncing. The heel of her shoe made a *tap, tap, tap* that reverberated across the hotel lobby's marble floor.

Her coven would be arriving soon, and she still had the creepy sensation that someone else was monitoring her every move. It didn't help that two of the lobby's walls were made of floor-to-ceiling windows, requiring her eyes to remain in constant motion.

The only reprieve for her growing anxiety was that Ethan was far, far away from all of this. *One problem at a time, thank you.*

She chewed on her thumbnail and watched the windows that faced the valet station at the front of the hotel. Though several cars pulled up, their occupants weren't anyone she recognized.

Unable to sit any longer, she got up from the long upholstered bench that ran down the center of the lobby and paced toward the hotel bar. For a second, she considered getting a stiff drink, then thought better of it. A clear head was required.

She turned in time to see Ethan striding across the floor, having come through the door that led to the parking garage.

Oh, no. Nonono. What was he doing here?

There were only a few other people in the lobby, so his gaze landed on

her straight away. A triumphant smile spread across his face, making those damn blue ribbons of magical connectivity unfurl from her chest. They stretched out toward him, humming happily and thicker than ever, wanting to draw them closer together.

Stella gritted her teeth, wanting nothing more than to be close to him, but knowing she had to resist.

It was a struggle, but she reined it all in.

“Red!” he called out warmly.

A chill ran through her as her gaze darted to the windows. *Please, don't let this be the moment my coven decides to show up.*

“If I didn't know better...” Ethan reached her in record time. “I'd say you had a premonition I wouldn't be able to wait two days to see you again.”

“Uh...not exactly.” She wasn't a prophetic witch. If she'd gotten any premonitions about this disaster, she wouldn't be here.

If the Boston witches were spying, she didn't want them to see her with Ethan. Similarly, when her coven showed up, they couldn't get sight of him.

“Okay.” Ethan laughed a little, though his smile was fading. “If you can't read my mind, why are you waiting around in the hotel lobby?”

The revolving front door spun into action, and Stella jumped.

But it was only a young couple, dragging two suitcases and a toddler behind them.

“I think the better question is, what are *you* doing here?” She made eye contact with him, but only briefly, before scanning the windows again.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him rock back on his heels. Clearly, after their time together, she'd surprised him with her less than friendly greeting.

Maybe he also felt the disturbance in their magical connection, though if he did, Stella doubted he understood what it meant.

“Like I said...” He frowned. “I wanted to see you again before I left town. I tried to call, but it went to voicemail. If you haven't had dinner yet...”

There were far too many windows in this place. Disaster could come at her from any angle. Stella bit down on her bottom lip, then let it go.

When she faced Ethan, her heart squeezed painfully. “How did you know I was staying at the Liberty? I never told you.”

“Oh...” His smile was gone completely now, and she knew he heard the subtle accusation in her voice. “At the fundraiser, your pocketbook was so

small, I saw the outline of a hotel key inside. I thought that might mean you were staying here. And...when we accidentally met at the duck pond this morning, your to-go coffee cup had the Liberty Hotel logo on it. I put two and two together.”

“Well...” Stella returned to lookout mode. “You can’t be here.”

“What do you mean?” His dark eyebrows lowered over those damn navy-blue eyes.

“I’m...” Sweat popped up along her hairline. “Meeting someone. And I don’t want them to see me with you.”

Honesty was the best policy, right? God, what a joke. She’d been lying to him since the beginning.

Ethan gave her the side-eye. “You mean...like a *boyfriend*?”

All right. That would work. “Something like that.”

There was a flash of anger in his eyes. “You could have told me before.”

Suddenly, she wished he’d suggested a different explanation. She didn’t want him to think badly of her. Not like that anyway. She wanted to go back to this afternoon. She wanted to go back to his apartment. She wanted this whole debacle to end.

“Kissing me wasn’t fair to me *or* to him,” Ethan said.

Immobilizing panic gripped Stella by the thighs. She wanted to explain, but she didn’t have time to do it. She needed an even better lie to get rid of him before it was too late.

“I don’t have a boyfriend. I didn’t lie to you. We’re not together anymore. But he is insanely jealous. He’s likely to make a scene if he sees me with you, so you need to go. Now!”

Ethan grabbed her shoulders—not too hard but not gentle either. “Is this guy dangerous to you?”

“No! *No*. But...” Stella spotted Judith’s beat up Vista Cruiser at the corner, stopped at a red light. The woodgrain station wagon was unmistakable. “You need to go.”

“What about the cocktail party in Beacon Hill?” he asked. “Are we still on?”

“I don’t know.” Stella wrenched herself free of his hold. “But, *please*, would you just go?”

He grabbed her wrist and squeezed.

Judith drove through the intersection and pulled into the valet station in front of the hotel.

“Ethan, would you just—”

He released her, practically tossing her arm away. “Fine. I get it.”

Stella closed her eyes. He absolutely did not get it.

When she opened her eyes again, he was storming off in the direction he’d come.

He’d barely exited through the parking garage door when a waft of rich, wet earth hit her nose. It was the telltale scent of physical magic, and when an electrical hum buzzed over her skin, she knew it was Izzy.

“Stella!” Izzy yelled as the rotating doors continued to swing behind her.

Stella’s heart crumbled into a cold, dark pellet, but she somehow managed to slap on a smile.

“Hey, Iz—” Stella turned around right as Marietta and Jade made it through the revolving doors. “Jade? What the hell?”

The pain that came from lying to Ethan came out in a burst of angry frustration.

“You’re supposed to be watching my store. I can’t afford to be closed on a weekend. That’s when all the tourists come through.”

On top of her concerns about retail economics, Jade was the last person Stella wanted to see in Boston. Her sister had always been a shoot-from-the-hip-ask-questions-later kind of witch.

“Relax,” Jade said, rolling her eyes. “You’re not closed. That Moseby kid’s filling in.”

Stella blinked once. “*Magnus Moseby?*”

Was she serious? Stella loved the kid, but didn’t Jade realize she’d put a bear in charge of the honey pot? For a kid like Magnus, Broomstix was too much sweet temptation and gave him too much room for trouble.

“Who was that man?” Izzy asked, smoothing her hands over the static in her hair. She was wearing faded Levi’s and a plain white tee.

“What man?” Stella glanced around the lobby, pretending not to know.

“That man you were talking to,” Jade said, pushing up the sleeves of her oversized cardigan. It hung to mid-thigh, and there was a small hole in the knee of her leggings. Her scuffed Doc Martens looked ready to kick some ass.

“Oh.” Stella glanced in the direction Ethan had disappeared. “That was one of the concierges. I was having trouble with my air conditioner. He was checking to make sure someone had fixed it for me.”

“Everyone’s been briefed on your discovery,” Marietta said.

Two hotel guests passed behind Marietta, not so subtly checking out her blue, batik-dyed dress and crocheted duster jacket. Out of all of them, Marietta always looked the witchiest, but in a carnival fortune-teller kind of way.

Jade glanced behind her as Judith—our high priestess and only real fortune teller—finished her business with the valet attendant and entered the hotel. She was dressed in a sweatshirt with a bouquet of flowers embroidered on the front and jeans with an elastic waistband. Sensible shoes.

A yeasty fresh-bread scent filled Stella's nose, the anticipated result of being in the presence of prophetic magic.

Jade waved Judith over to where they'd gathered, and Stella gave Judith a hug.

"Now that we're all here," Izzy said, "Let's see what trouble we can get up to with this Boston coven, huh?"

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

Stella paced between the king-sized bed and the bathroom, while the new arrivals found places to sit in her now crowded hotel room. Alerting them to the danger posed by the Boston witches had been the right thing to do, but at the same time, Stella wished they'd all stayed home in Salem.

Ethan's apartment was only a short distance from her hotel. Hopefully, he'd get a terrible case of the flu and stay indoors for however long it took them to put a stop to the Boston witches.

Marietta perched on the end of the bed, watching Stella like a hawk.

Izzy sat in the only chair and examined the room service menu. Little flecks of her glitter makeup were already sparkling against the desk's walnut-patterned laminate.

Judith stood by the window, peering down at the sidewalk through a gap in the curtains. "Is that where you saw the male witch watching you?"

"He wasn't watching *me* exactly. He didn't know what room I was in. More like, he was watching the hotel and waiting for me to come out."

Since entering the hotel room, Jade had been scooping Stella's discarded clothes off the floor, hanging them in the closet, and otherwise tidying the room.

"Did you tell Magnus to make sure Darren stays in his terrarium?" Stella asked.

"Of course," Jade said, getting down on her hands and knees. "Everything's taken care of until you get home."

Jade found a pair of dirty socks under the bed. She balled them up and unzipped Stella's duffel before Stella could stop her.

Jade froze, her gaze glued to the contents of the bag.

“Jade,” Stella said warningly.

Jade removed the poppet and studied it for several long seconds, before glancing over at Stella.

The bottom of the poppet was no longer loosely basted like the last time Jade saw it. Now, it was sewn securely shut. Jade had to know what that meant—that Stella had gotten what she needed from Ethan and put it inside. Jade knew Stella had lied about losing the hair.

Jade stared at Stella with wide eyes.

Stella stared back.

“What’s going on?” Izzy looked up from the room service menu, and her eyes settled on the poppet in Jade’s hands. “Oh, is that it?”

“You got another hair?” Marietta asked. “It’s done?”

“It’s not done,” Jade said. “Not really, right? The poppet is finished, but Stella can’t bring herself to use it.”

Jade’s switch to third person—as if Stella were an outsider, or not even in the room—made a prickly sensation run over Stella’s scalp and down her arms.

“The poppet is done, but Ethan Mather’s still alive?” Judith’s face twisted with incredulity.

“Stella?” Izzy asked, sounding both sad and disappointed.

“Where are the blackthorns?” Jade asked, digging through the duffel. “Give me one, and I’ll do it myself.”

“You don’t understand.” Stella took a step backward. The hotel room was growing increasingly cramped.

“You better explain,” Judith said.

Izzy rose from her chair.

Marietta remained seated at the foot of the bed, her hands twisting.

Jade stopped rummaging through Stella’s bag, obviously realizing she wasn’t going to find the blackthorns in there.

Stella forced herself not to look at the mattress and give their hiding spot away.

“They’re...connected somehow,” Stella said. “Ethan and the Boston witches.”

Everyone exchanged confused glances before Judith asked, “What would the Boston coven want with a Mather?”

“I don’t know. *Yet*. But if we kill him without knowing the connection, it might make the Boston coven angry and therefore...more *dangerous*.”

“Maybe,” Izzy said. “Unless getting rid of the Mather hampers whatever blood magic they’re planning.”

“It’s more like...” Stella’s panic was rising. “The Boston coven thinks Ethan has valuable information. Maybe it’s information that would be useful to us too.”

She knew the others would see this as a stretch and wonder why she was working so hard to delay using the poppet. She held her breath. Jade had already insinuated she was too weak for the job.

“Maybe it’s not information,” Marietta said. “Maybe they want him for a human sacrifice. Lots of blood magic calls for a sacrifice.”

“If they mean to kill him,” Judith mused, “that could interfere with Bishop’s curse. We don’t know how the curse would be impacted if someone *else* killed him. It could still rebound on us if we aren’t the ones to do it.”

Stella pressed her lips together. That was a legitimate theory and one that would hold weight with everyone else. They’d want to speed this up, which made Stella wonder if she had enough magic to grab Ethan and run away with him somewhere safe—somewhere where no one would find them.

“Judith’s right,” Marietta said. “Whatever benefit Ethan Mather has to the Boston coven doesn’t excuse us from our part in Bishop’s curse.”

Filled with desperation, but trying to sound as reasonable as she could, Stella played her last card. “But killing Ethan doesn’t get us out from under what chaos Boston is brewing with that grimoire. What good does it do us to survive the curse, only to have blood magic put a spotlight on every witch in Massachusetts? It’ll be history repeating itself all over again.”

They all fell silent and bowed their heads as they considered their options. Finally, Judith spoke.

“We have no expressed time limit on fulfilling the curse. Maybe Stella’s right. It could make much better sense to get all the facts before we do something we can’t undo.”

Stella let out a breath.

“Then let’s get on it,” Jade said. “Let’s go find those witches and see what they’re all about.”

“How do we do it?” Izzy asked Judith. “Will you go alone to meet with their high priestess?”

“No,” Judith said. “We go together. There’s power in numbers. Stella, how many witches did you say they had?”

“Six. Three female, three male.”

“Well balanced,” Marietta mused.

“But we’re not,” Jade said. “They’ve got us outnumbered. What types of magic do they have?”

Stella glanced quickly at her sister, then directed her answer to Judith.

“Lovey DuPre is their high priestess. She’s got a lot of physical magic. The first time I met her, she flattened me with a wind she’d conjured. She can also read another witch’s magic, like I can.

“Then there’s Lovey’s granddaughter, Antoinette. You’ll know her because she’s the tallest and dresses like she stepped out of a magazine. She’s never demonstrated any of her magic to me, but it’s definitely personal.”

Jade folded her arms and muttered, “I’m thinking everything’s got a little *too* personal with you.”

Stella shot her younger sister a look meant to turn her to stone, then continued.

“Next up is Jean-Paul, physical magic. The shorter blond witch is named Madeline. I think she reads tarot. Last, there are two boys, ages eighteen or nineteen. I don’t remember their names.”

“Strength levels?” Judith asked.

“Mid to high for all of them, save for the two youngest. Their magic hasn’t fully matured. There’s actually another witch, but she’s just had a baby. I don’t think she’s out and about yet.”

“Lovey’s probably got her tarot reader monitoring any threat against their coven or their grimoire.” Judith pulled two barrettes from her pocket and clipped back the sides of her hair—a familiar sign of battle readiness. “If that witch is worth her salt, she’s got a bead on us. I say we go to their meeting place. They could already be waiting.”



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Stella, Judith, Marietta, Jade, and Izzy stood in a straight line at the mouth of the dark side street, their gazes fixed on a dark tattoo parlor.

A cat ran out from behind a dumpster, stopped momentarily in the middle of the street, then hissed at them before dashing behind a pile of soggy liquor store boxes.

“Light it up,” Judith said as she pulled something from her pocket.

“The cat?” Izzy asked, horrified.

Judith sighed. “The street. And give us one of your defensive bubbles.” She closed her eyes and rubbed her thumb against the facets of a crystal she held in her hand. “They already know we’re here. So, let’s go.”

Izzy rubbed her palms together, first slowly, then more quickly, building friction. As the night air charged with electricity, everyone’s hair lifted off their scalps and the overhead power lines snapped and sparked.

A few seconds later, Izzy threw her hands up and a burst of white light filled the narrow street before settling around them in a bubble of shimmering energy.

It was impressive and would give anyone who touched it from the outside a nasty shock. But there were five of them trying to stay underneath it, and the magic stretched thin in a few critical areas, especially where it tried to anchor itself to the ground.

Of course, there was Lovey’s magical wind to contend with too. No bubble of electricity would stand up to that.

The door to the tattoo parlor was unlocked, probably the Boston witches’ way of showing no fear, except that Lovey, Antoinette, Jean-Paul, and Maddy were all gathered upstairs and blocking the cellar door.

Antoinette glared at Stella. Clearly, when Maddy foresaw the Salem witches’ approach, Antoinette and Jean-Paul had been forced to confess that they’d let her see the grimoire.

Lovey looked like she was going to be writing Antoinette out of her will.

“No good deed goes unpunished,” Jean-Paul muttered, his lip curling.

“I’m sorry?” Stella asked. “When did you ever do *me* a favor?”

“So, this is it then?” Lovey asked in her heavily accented English. “You lied to me. You do intend to steal our *objè pouvwa*, you only waited for your coven to arrive.”

Judith stepped forward, though still within Izzy’s protective bubble. “We don’t want anything to do with your grimoire.”

The corners of Lovey’s mouth tightened.

“But then,” Judith added, “according to Stella, neither should you.”

“My own *manman* brought the book with her when we moved north and joined this coven. The old leaders, they were like you.” She pointed at Stella with a gnarled finger. “They were afraid of the book’s power. They refused to let us use it.

“And now look at us,” Lovey continued. “Those old men are all gone, and our coven is reduced to this.” She gestured at the three other witches by her side.

Stella guessed that the two younger boys were downstairs and stationed in front of the armoire again, just in case.

“Maybe it’s the book that’s holding you down.” Stella moved forward to stand beside Judith.

Judith glanced down at her, likely confused by her taking a position of authority.

“You can be afraid,” Lovey said. “But we are not.”

“You should be,” Stella said.

“You don’t know what you cannot understand,” Lovey countered.

“I know that you want to unlock its blood magic,” Stella said.

Lovey’s keen eyes sharpened on her. “I did not realize you were also a mind reader, *mezanmi*.”

“She’s not a mind reader,” Maddy said. “And she’s not your *friend*, Lovey. She’s a snoop and a snitch.”

“We came here to ask you about your intentions in regard to the book,” Judith said.

“We have no plans,” Antoinette said. “Like Stella said. It’s locked.”

The alchemical symbols—the sun rising from the ashes—came to mind and made Stella’s stomach turn. “They want to raise the dead.”

All four of the Boston witches turned toward her in unison. Jean-Paul’s eyes widened, while the women’s eyes all narrowed.

“If that’s what you believe,” Lovey said, “then I understand why you have dragged your family to the city. But we have no plans to do such dark deeds.”

“Not yet,” Stella said, correcting her.

“Even if we wanted to, we couldn’t,” Jean-Paul said, and Maddy hissed at him to shut up.

“What?” he asked. “She’s the only one who knows where to find the athame. Without it, we can’t do shit.”

Stella’s blood ran cold. She hadn’t said a word to her coven about the blade. “I told you. I don’t know where to find your athame.”

“No,” Maddy said, snapping her gum. “But your *boyfriend* does.”

“What boyfriend?” Izzy asked.

“Your little witch has been spending all her time with a certain political

candidate,” Maddy explained with a smirk. Clearly, the little blond witch was enjoying herself.

Judith tipped her head to the side. “That’s because I tasked Stella with seeking him out.”

“Oh, she’s sought him out all right,” Maddy said, taking a step closer.

The edge of the electrical bubble sizzled with her approach.

“The two of them have been seen canoodling all over town,” Maddy said. “Going out for dinner. Kissing in the park. Making plans for carriage rides. Lunch at his apartment. And she’s been looking like she’s been having a *real* good time.”

All eyes landed on Stella, and her body temperature spiked. God damn, Maddy. She’d thrown her under the bus.

“Stella?” Marietta asked. “Is that why you haven’t used the poppet?”

“She’s exaggerating,” Stella said. “She’s also misinterpreting. I had to be near him to get what I needed.”

“And you got it,” Jade said. “You just can’t pull the trigger.”

This was not a discussion to be had in front of another coven.

Judith must have agreed because she cleared her throat and addressed Lovey. “You know as well as I do the damage blood magic can do to a magical community, not to mention every witch within a hundred-mile radius. Promise me you have no intention of creating that much chaos.”

“I don’t know you,” Lovey said. “I don’t owe you any promises. And now, I think, it’s time for you all to leave.”

Judith’s spine stiffened. Both high priestesses knew that problems within their own covens needed to be addressed before dealing with outside complications. Clearly, Lovey was using Maddy’s canoodling accusations for leverage.

“We’ll be going,” Judith said, the wind going out of her sails

“But—” Jade said.

Judith raised her hand to silence her. “Madame DuPre is right. We’ve said what we came here to say. Now it’s time we go.”

“But what about—?” Jade pressed.

“Now,” Judith said, and her dark eyes turned cold.

With no further room to argue, they left, but the chilly glare was now focused on Stella. She’d have to answer for all she’d done, and for all she’d failed to do.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

“I can explain.” Stella walked behind everyone as they traipsed through the night on their way back to the hotel.

“What do we plan to do about the grimoire?” Marietta asked Judith, not even acknowledging that Stella had spoken. It wasn’t a side of Marietta that Stella was used to seeing, and her disregard dug deep.

“They’ve been stalking me,” Stella said, trying again. “It’s like I told you. But they misunderstood everything they saw with me and Ethan Mather.”

“The book definitely exists,” Judith said in response to Marietta. “And they’re keeping it in that building. The crystals told me so.”

“I told you so,” Stella reminded them. “And I’ve only delayed because I wanted to understand what they wanted with Ethan.”

“It’s definitely powerful,” Izzy added. “They wouldn’t have blocked the door if it wasn’t.”

“It is.” Stella picked up her pace so she was walking beside Izzy and Jade. “That’s what I’ve been telling you. Destroying the grimoire has to be our first priority.”

Still, they ignored her.

“Every grimoire is powerful,” Jade said. She reached forward and touched Judith’s shoulder. “And every coven has a grimoire. So why should we be worried about this one?”

“I need a drink,” Judith said.

“Me too,” Marietta replied.

After thirty minutes, they made it back to the hotel. They were definitely a motley crew, and a few people looked up as they entered. Judith’s basset-hound eyes appeared more haggard than usual. Stella was obviously to blame

for that.

Marietta's long cotton dress and crocheted jacket hung like damp butterfly wings behind her. Izzy looked like she'd recently stuck a fork in a light socket. Jade's expression said she felt completely betrayed.

Stella was sure she looked like a dead man walking, and she had half a mind to walk away from all of them. But that would mean not being privy to their plans. And she couldn't afford to be left in the dark.

They headed straight for the lobby bar and found seats at a round table in the back corner. A waitress appeared immediately to take their drink orders.

"It's not uncommon for a grimoire to have dark spells," Marietta said, belatedly agreeing with Jade. "Maybe we're overreacting to the threat."

"Overreacting?" Stella asked, leaning forward against the table. Marietta couldn't be serious. "The Boston coven plans to raise the fucking dead."

No one looked at her. *Unbelievable*. She sat back against her chair and folded her arms.

"I don't know about overreacting," Judith said, "but there's nothing for us to do if they can't access the book's darkest spells. They need some kind of athame."

At the mention of the blade, they finally looked Stella's way.

Stella raised her eyebrows. "What? *Now* you're ready to talk to me?"

"Where is it, Stella?" Judith asked.

She rolled her eyes and looked toward the bar. "I have no idea."

"They seemed to think you do," Marietta added.

"Well..." Stella's throat thickened, but she held firm. "They were wrong. I don't know."

She didn't dare tell them it was at Ethan's apartment. If they knew he had the key to unlocking the Boston coven's grimoire, it would only give them more reason to kill him.

"Who cares about ceremonial blades?" Jade asked, tossing her arms out in exasperation. "The more pressing conversation we need to be having is how to best protect Stella."

Stella's head jerked in surprise. "Protect *me*? From what?"

"You've been a good big sister. You've always protected me," Jade said softly. "But now, you need someone to protect you from yourself. You're clearly refusing to do the job that Bridget Bishop *herself* entrusted you to do."

"I'm not refusing," Stella said. "There have been...unexpected delays."

“By the sound of it,” Izzy said softly, “delays of your own making.”

Stella glanced at her, responding to the gentleness in her voice.

Izzy leaned forward. “Seriously, Stella? *Kissing in the park?*”

Stella silently implored Izzy to see things her way, but Izzy shook her head and looked down at her lap.

“Stella,” Jade said. “When Bishop’s curse rebounds, who do you think is going to get hit the hardest?”

Stella stared at her sister blankly. How were any of them supposed to know the answer to that?

“*You,*” Jade said. “The one who doesn’t follow through would naturally get hit the hardest. The rest of us will be collateral damage. We’re just trying to protect you.”

“I don’t need your protection.” Stella said, hating this reversal of their roles. She was the big sister. Jade didn’t take care of *her*.

Their drinks arrived, and they all focused on their glasses for a while. Stella had ordered a whiskey, neat, and the alcohol burned her throat before lighting a fire deep in her belly.

Jade stabbed her straw through the ice in her glass. “What do you think Mom and Dad would have to say about all this?”

The implication that their parents wouldn’t have had Stella’s back—especially *their mother*—made her temper flare. “Leave them out of this.”

Jade moved her glass to the side and met Stella’s eyes. “*Why?* Do you think they’d like the idea of you running all over town with a Mather?”

“Mom would at least take the time to find out all the critical facts before she stuck a blackthorn in someone’s chest. That’s what I’ve been doing.

“Bridget Bishop herself stood in the middle of our circle and expressed ‘regret’ about the curse. She wished she could ‘turn’ the whole thing ‘around.’”

Stella made a swirly, reversal gesture with her finger.

“What are you talking about?” Jade asked. “You’re filling in blanks the way you want to fill them in. Your thinking is as disorganized as everything else in your life.”

“At least I don’t shoot first and ask questions later.”

“*Girls,*” Marietta said in a worried tone. “Lower your voices.”

They both ignored her.

“Everyone always thinks you’re the responsible one,” Jade said. “But it should have been *me* assigned to saving our coven. I would have the job done

by now.”

“And you would have been careless and implicated us all,” Stella countered.

Jade pounded her fist on the table, and the vibration made her drink slosh over the rim. “Just answer the question, Stella. Do you plan to kill Ethan Mather?”

“Oh my god.” Stella glanced around the bar, expecting the patrons to be staring at them in shocked astonishment. What was Jade thinking, yelling like that?

“Would you both, please, settle down?” Judith hissed through her teeth.

Everyone squirmed, and Izzy’s hands snapped with electricity. Their coven was usually so copacetic.

Stella and Jade fell silent.

“Deep breaths now,” Judith said. “Stella, explain the difficulty you’re having. Perhaps we can help figure out a way for you to get past it.”

“He’s a good person,” she said quietly.

“That doesn’t factor into Bishop’s curse. It directs us to put an end to any Mather who seeks political power.”

“I know. Which is why I suggested he not run for office at all, but he’s doing it because he wants to help people. He looks out for small business owners. He helps feed the elderly.”

“He’s good looking,” Jade said with a sneer. “That’s what this is about.”

“He is,” Stella said. “But there’s more to him than that.”

Jade rolled her eyes. “Do tell.”

Stella glanced around the table. “He’s a witch.”

A simultaneous intake of breath cut through their circle.

“It’s true,” Stella said. “I can feel it.”

“She’s lying,” Jade said. “She’s making things up to rationalize her stalling.”

“You must be imagining it,” Judith said. “You’ve convinced yourself of something you want to be true.”

“No. It’s not my imagination. I felt it. And there’s a ward on his apartment door.”

“Really?” Izzy asked, her interest clearly piqued.

“That doesn’t mean he’s a witch,” Judith said. “It could have been there for years. The previous tenant could have been a witch and didn’t bother to take it down.”

“Well...” Stella was desperate to convince them. “There’s something else too. It’s like... The only way I can describe it is a thread.”

“A thread?” Judith asked.

“Or ribbons. They’re thicker than threads now. They’re blue, and they’re powerful. They connect Ethan to me, or me to him. They feel independent of me, like they’re their own living things. I don’t control them.”

Marietta and Judith exchanged a nervous glance that Stella didn’t miss. Something about it made a cold shiver slide down her spine.

“What?” she asked. “What’s wrong?”

“You said these ribbons connect. Do they also draw you closer?” Judith asked.

“Yes,” Stella said excitedly. “Exactly.”

Whatever it meant, Judith’s curiosity gave her hope that she’d stumbled onto something that could actually save Ethan from this mess.

“Judith,” Marietta said, sounding incredulous. “You don’t think Stella and Ethan Mather are meant to be paired witches.”

“Paired?” Stella asked, horrified by the thought. She held up her hands. “Whoa, whoa, whoa.”

Marietta couldn’t possibly be suggesting that Stella and Ethan had the potential to *pair* their magic. The fourth P of magical specialties was completely rare.

Plus, fusing their magic would only make them both more vulnerable because a paired witch could never survive the death of the other. That’s what happened to Stella and Jade’s own parents—the last paired witches their coven had ever had. Once their mother died, their father only lasted another forty-eight hours.

Still...Marietta’s suggestion offered the easiest explanation as to why she found it so difficult to do what she’d been chosen to do—kill Ethan and save her coven from Bishop’s curse.

They all turned to look at her. Everyone that is, except Jade, who slapped her hands down on the table and glanced wildly around the table.

“They’re not meant to be paired,” Jade said. “That would be impossible because he’s not a witch. Don’t fall for this.”

Izzy didn’t say a word, only stared at Stella with an open mouth.

Stella bowed her head. This was a nightmare that kept getting worse.

“When you fire scried,” Jade said, leaning toward Judith and grabbing her wrist. “You asked Bridget Bishop who she chose to kill Ethan Mather.”

“Actually...” Judith said.

Stella lifted her gaze to their high priestess.

“If we’re being technical about this, I asked Bridget Bishop ‘whose path was intertwined with Ethan Mather.’”

Jade swallowed so hard Stella heard it.

“So,” Marietta asked, “you posed the wrong question? If you asked who was supposed to *kill* Ethan Mather, it could have been someone else who was chosen?”

“It could have been me?” Jade asked.

“But Ethan and I...our magic is meant to be paired.” As scary as the idea was to Stella, their knowing he was a witch should have been enough to save him. Or at least to make them all question the curse. They couldn’t still intend to kill him.

“You’re not supposed to be paired,” Jade said. “This is about you making things up because you want to be like Mom. You’ve always wanted to be like her. That’s what this is about.”

Stella sucked in a breath because that was a lie. Sure, she wanted to be like her mother in a whole lot of ways, but being paired to someone else was the one thing she’d always known to avoid.

“What do you mean?” Marietta asked Jade.

Jade rotated her chair toward the woman who’d raised them. “Stella’s always wanted to be just like Mom—a *paired witch*.”

Marietta opened her mouth to say something, but then snapped her mouth shut. She shot Judith a furtive glance.

Judith gave her head an infinitesimal shake.

What the hell was that all about?

“Are you...in love with him?” Izzy asked.

Stella shook her head, trying to clear away all the confusion. “What? No. Of course not.”

Love only brought pain. She’d known that since she was a little girl.

“We shouldn’t even be talking about Mom and Dad,” Jade said glumly.

“You’re the one who brought them up,” Stella reminded her.

Jade ignored that. “It dishonors their memories to even *talk* about them in the same breath as a Mather.”

Stella stood up.

Jade stood up.

The energy between them made the table rattle against the floor.

Everyone lifted their drinks before they spilled. Izzy grabbed Stella's, and Marietta grabbed Jade's.

"Manager's coming," Izzy whispered.

Stella let out a long breath, as did Jade, and the table settled with no time to spare.

"Ladies," the manager said. He was a balding man in his early thirties. The top button on his shirt was undone, and his necktie hung askew. "I'm gonna ask you to take whatever disagreement you're having somewhere else. You're disturbing my other customers."

Judith pushed her drink toward the center of the table. She'd barely touched it. "We were just leaving."

The bar manager nodded, gave each of them another look of concern, then retreated.

"Finish your drinks quickly or leave them unfinished." Judith rose from her chair. "It's time for us to go."

Stella left hers without finishing. Her stomach was already tied in knots.

Jade, Izzy, and Marietta tossed theirs back.

They all followed Judith into the hotel lobby.

"You're driving back to Salem now?" Stella asked. "In the dark?"

"Yes," Judith said. "Everyone except Jade."

Jade smiled, and ambition flared in her eyes. It was a look Stella had never seen on her little sister before, and she could tell—if Jade was left to her own devices—Ethan's death would be neither quick nor painless.

"But..." Stella looked to Izzy for help.

"No buts," Judith said. "Here." She handed the valet claim ticket to Izzy. "Take this to the attendant and have him get my car."

Judith returned her focus to Stella. "I don't know what's going on between you and this Mather descendant, but I'm not taking any more chances. I can't play Russian roulette with the future of this coven. It's your call, Stella, but one way or another, this ends tonight."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

“Okay.” Stella let out a breath. “Okay. I’ll do it. Tonight.”
Jade threw her hands up in exasperation.
Judith pressed her lips together.

“It *has* to be me,” Stella said. “Bridget Bishop said Ethan and I were ‘intertwined.’ We have to interpret that as liberally as possible, right? We have to assume she meant that in every way possible. In our potential pairing—okay, sure—but also in who is supposed to kill him, right?”

She turned toward Marietta in desperation. “Right?”

If Ethan had to die, Stella couldn’t let anyone else do it. She would at least be merciful. Jade would only make him suffer.

“Right,” Marietta said. “But *can* you do it, honey? Especially now.” The doubt on her face, it was another look Stella had never seen before. Tonight, her own coven was almost unrecognizable.

“I can,” she said. “I have to.” For Ethan’s sake.

“Well, there *would* be some poetic justice in it,” Izzy offered. “His intended pair being the one to kill him.”

“You’re right,” Stella said, grasping at the hope Izzy’s comment provided. “Of course, you’re all right. There would be some kind of poetic justice in it. I’ve been stupid. Our coven comes first, and I won’t let the curse rebound on any of us.”

They all exchanged a glance, which ended with Judith’s reticent consent.

“Twenty-four hours,” Judith said. “That’s it. No more playing with dynamite.”

Jade looked pissed that she wouldn’t be staying behind in Boston.

“Okay,” Stella promised.

They all left. Only Izzy gave Stella a backward glance and a tentative wave.

The valet pulled Judith's Vista Cruiser up to the hotel's front doors, and they piled in. As soon as they drove away and were through the intersection, the Cruiser's taillights fading away, Stella ran for the elevators and up to her room.

She'd left her phone behind to charge, and she immediately grabbed it off the nightstand to text Ethan. Her heart needed to leave him one last message, and she needed one from him in return.

Sorry if I was rude to you earlier. Please forgive me.

An automatic response popped up right away.

Sorry to have missed your message. I am preparing for a campaign event and cannot be disturbed. I will get back to you as soon as I am able.

Shit. He'd told her what was on his schedule tomorrow morning, but she was too stressed to remember what it was.

Her gaze landed on the poppet. It was on the dresser, right where Jade had left it. Stella shoved it into the drawer and slammed it shut.

She stared at the drawer for a few seconds, then opened it again and grabbed the poppet. She clutched it to her chest. "Oh, Ethan."

Could she really do this? Was their connection so strong that she could send him an apology telepathically? Could the poppet even work that way?

She paced the room for who knew how long, muttering things into the poppet's ear. Things like, "I'm sorry. Where are you? Take your phone off mute. Call me."

Eventually, she dug the tiny bottle of blackthorns out from under her mattress. She pressed down on the cap and twisted, opening the bottle. She removed a single thorn and examined the tiny weapon that could push Ethan over the edge.

She stared at it for several seconds before taking a deep breath and hovering the point of the thorn over the poppet's heart. *Ethan's* heart.

Her hand shook violently. God, she was so incredibly weak. She had to do this. If she failed, Jade would be back within twenty-four hours.

Her sister would release the brakes on Ethan's car. Or she'd hurl a pebble through the air—so fast it would act as a bullet to his heart. She could shatter glass and rain it down on top of him.

Stella touched the point of the thorn to the center of the poppet's chest and closed her eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

She pressed in—just the tiniest bit—and a force exploded out of the poppet, so strong, it threw her backward across the room.

Her skull bashed against the wall beside the window.

“*Oomph.*” She slumped to the floor, her arm half caught in the curtain. “*Ow.*” She rubbed the back of her head.

Well, that confirmed it all. She and Ethan were meant to be paired witches. Killing him meant killing her intended other half. Her own magic would never allow it.

It took her a second, but she spotted the poppet lying ten feet away where it had fallen from her hands. It didn’t look worse for wear. Not like her. Stella’s head was pounding.

She got onto her hands and knees and crawled over to where the poppet lay on its back. It looked okay. No scorch marks. No rips. Not even a loose thread.

She groaned and reached up onto the mattress. She patted her hand around until she found her phone. The battery was already down to fifty percent. She texted Ethan again.

Are you okay? Please let me know you’re okay.

She had to imagine he’d experienced something similar. Maybe she’d knocked him unconscious.

Sorry to have missed your message. I am preparing for a campaign event and cannot be disturbed. I will get back to you as soon as I am able.

“Damnit.”

Struggling to her feet, Stella staggered to her right, caught her hand on the dresser, then scooped the poppet off the floor.

Red ribbons of power unfurled from the center of the poppet. They lengthened and swirled, lassoing around her chest, trapping her arms to her sides, and binding her legs all the way down to her ankles.

Stella swayed again but, unable to catch her balance, she toppled like a tree onto the floor, smacking her head for the second time in as many minutes.

“Fuck. I’m concussed.”

The room spun. She clutched the poppet to her chest. It was a carnival ride she couldn’t get off. Then darkness enveloped her.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

Etan Mather switched on the treadmill and started his run at an easy five miles per hour. It was late. But he couldn't sleep. So, he'd come down to the exercise room in the basement of the Eastwick apartments.

He just couldn't make sense out of what happened between him and Stella earlier in the evening. He'd expected her to be happily surprised to see him at the hotel. Maybe even excited. Instead, she'd acted like he was some kind of stalker.

For a second, he thought he'd even seen a flash of fear in her eyes, as if she contemplated calling hotel security.

That would have been a fun headline. *Young Gubernatorial Candidate Harasses Woman in Hotel.*

Doherty would've had a heart attack, as would all of the campaign donors. It wasn't hard to imagine the sucking sound of his coffers running dry.

He increased the treadmill's incline setting to two percent.

But if Stella wasn't interested in him, why had she gone to dinner with him? Why would she agree to come back to his apartment? Why had she let him kiss her?

Or maybe she hadn't *let* him kiss her. Had he *pushed* himself on her? Was that what had happened?

No. He didn't think so.

That wasn't how he operated. Not ever.

The thought of touching her again made his chest feel tight—not unpleasantly so, more like he was hyper conscious of his ribs. Like his heart was trapped in a cage and desperate to get out.

The feeling might have scared him. Might have made him feel weak. Instead, he always imagined a surge of strength whenever they touched.

He shook out his hands, realizing he'd been clenching his fists.

Sweat prickled along his hairline, and he wiped his wrist across his forehead.

Maybe he was cracking up. When he thought back on her being in his apartment, there was a fog over some of that time. It was like looking back on everything through a hazy filter that blurred all the sharp edges.

Maybe the reason Stella had reacted so negatively to him tonight was because of something that happened during the time he'd left her alone in his apartment.

Was that it? Had she snooped and found something that changed her opinion of him?

Ethan did a mental tour, trying to think what it could be. But there were no weird ointments or fungal creams in his medicine cabinet. For that matter, no lipsticks left behind by other women.

No skeletons in his closet—literal or figurative—unless you counted his unsettled childhood, but he'd shared most of that history with her at Pasquale's.

Pete from the fourth floor entered the exercise room with a towel wrapped around the back of his neck. He headed straight for the rowing machine.

“What's up, Ethan? Haven't seen you in here this late at night before.”

Ethan maintained his pace but opened his mouth to answer.

Before he could get a word out, Spandex Jeanine from the tenth floor entered the room and answered for him. “Ethan's more of a morning guy. Aren't you, Ethan?”

Her tone suggested a sexual innuendo, but Ethan didn't acknowledge it. Jeanine had been hitting on him for years.

“Had some unexpected free time,” he said. “Needed to run off some pent-up energy.”

“Good way to do it,” Pete said.

“Lots of ways to burn off energy,” Jeanine said.

It was another innuendo, clearer than the first.

Ethan doubted Jeanine would've been repelled by anything she found in his apartment—not that he had any interest in finding out.

Ethan increased his speed to six miles per hour.

And—*Christ*—it wasn't like there were disgusting piles of used condoms

in his trash. Though there was a decent sized box of Trojans in his night stand.

But still...Even if Stella found his stash, she shouldn't have been upset about that. That only meant he was a prepared and conscientious partner.

If they ever got to that point in their relationship—*Could he even call what they had a "relationship?"*—then he was ready. Though, right now it wasn't looking good.

Too bad.

He hadn't had time for a sexual partner in months. Not since the campaign got up and running. Which was probably why the erotic dream he'd had the other night had been so detailed.

God...If *reality* Stella was even ten percent the woman that *dream* Stella had been in bed, God help him.

Ethan felt himself hardening with the memory—something that he preferred not happen in public. He had to see Pete and Jeanine in the elevator every morning.

If only he had a crystal ball to see how it would all play out with Stella. Maybe he should see if he could find that psychic again. The one who'd given him that reading years ago. What was her name? Crystal something?

With a grunt of frustration, Ethan cranked the belt speed up to eight, and pounded out the last five miles of his run.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

Blinding light streamed through the gap in the stiff hotel curtains, and Stella brushed her hair out of her face. Her head still pounded from that thrashing the poppet had given her last night.

Judging by the sun, a lot of time had passed, though she didn't know how much.

She needed to get up. Clearly, she couldn't kill Ethan. Their connection wouldn't allow it. She needed to find him before anyone else did. She didn't know what was worse, a coven that would torture him for information about their athame, or her own coven that wanted him dead.

She looked around and found her phone. As she opened her messages, the screen went black.

"Are you kidding me?"

Stella plugged her phone into the charger, but no lightning bolt. *Nada*. The thing had waited for the most inopportune moment to give up the ghost. Now, it was nothing more than a very expensive paperweight.

She threw it toward her duffel bag, but her phone bounced off the dresser and landed on the floor.

Stella's stomach growled. She hadn't eaten since lunch at Ethan's apartment the day before, but there was no time for breakfast.

She frowned. Something swam on the edges of her memory. Ethan's face. Words. He was talking to her. *I have a campaign breakfast tomorrow at the South Street Diner with some community leaders, then I'll be out of town the rest of the day. I won't be back until late.*

Stella picked up the hotel phone and dialed the lobby.

"Liberty Hotel. Front desk. How can I help you?"

“I need a cab. I need to get to the South Street Diner.”

“Certainly. When would you like to be picked up?”

“Now. Immediately.” Stella checked the clock. It was ten o’clock. Was she already too late?

She picked up the Ethan poppet, fixed her gaze on its blue button eyes, and whispered, “Please, *please*, don’t be dead.”

Then, in record time, she shoved everything inside her duffel, including the evening gown, which she rolled into a ball. The poppet went into her satchel, and when she closed the zipper, she left a little opening for air, just in case.

Half an hour later, she’d checked out of the hotel, crossed town, and was exiting her cab in front of the South Street Diner. She dashed inside, her bags bouncing off her hips.

She’d expected to see Ethan right away. His dark hair... Those amazing, wicked smart, navy-blue eyes... He couldn’t hide in a crowd, even if he tried.

But he wasn’t there. Had he already come and gone?

Stella turned in a circle, checking every booth.

Three men and a woman dressed in business attire sat in one of them. A stack of brochures lay in the center of the table. Their coffees were nearly empty and no one was refilling their cups. Something about the scene put a pit in Stella’s stomach.

She approached.

“Excuse me. Are you by chance here to meet with Ethan Mather?”

They looked up expectantly.

“Yes,” said the woman. “Or rather, we thought so, but...” She checked her phone. “He was supposed to be here an hour ago. I hope he wasn’t in an accident or something.”

One of the men shook his head. “He’s a no-show. He forgot about us.”

“No.” Stella said, feeling compelled to defend him. “He didn’t forget. Something must have held him up.”

“Are you his assistant?” the woman asked.

“Am I his...? Yes. Yes, I’m his assistant. And I need to find him right away.”

“Well, obviously he’s not here,” the other man grumbled. He downed the last of his coffee.

“And he hasn’t called or texted?” Stella asked.

“Not a thing,” the first man said.

Stella's stomach twisted into a knot as she took another glance around the diner. "Okay. Sorry to bother you. I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation, and he'll be getting back to you soon."

Grumbly man raised his hand in a we'll-see gesture.

Stella left the diner having only one other idea about where he might be.

Fortunately, her cab driver was still at the curb, checking something on his phone. She knocked on the window, and he jumped.

Seeing it was her, he rolled down his window. "Did you leave something in the backseat?" He turned over his shoulder to look.

"No, are you still on duty?"

He pointed to the ceiling of the cab, suggesting she check out the sign on the cab's roof. "Says off-duty, right?"

"Yeah...but could you *please* give me another ride? It's urgent, and it's not far. The Eastwick apartments."

"Off-duty means—"

With a sigh, Stella raised her hand and flourished her fingers, casting a compulsion spell through the open window.

Getting a person to do something against their will had never been her brand of magic, but desperate times called for desperate measures, and a five minute ride wasn't asking too much.

"Those the apartments near the duck pond?" the driver asked.

"That's right."

He flipped a switch, and the Off-Duty sign went out. "Get in."

"Thank you!" Stella tossed her bags onto the back seat and jumped in.

As soon as she had the door closed, she leaned forward between the two front seats, focusing her magic on the driver's right foot. It stomped down on the gas.

"Christ!" He tightened his grip on the steering wheel as they zipped out onto the street.

Several cars laid on their horns.

"Gotta step on it," Stella explained. "Something's not right."

"You bet your ass it's not right."

But by then, they were only picking up speed.



SEVERAL MINUTES LATER, they were at the curb with the Eastwick's fourteen stories rising above them. Stella handed almost all her remaining cash to the driver, then threw open her door.

She rushed to the apartment building's arched entrance and pulled the handle. Locked. *Damn*. Of course she'd need some kind of keycard to get in, and her physical magic didn't include picking locks.

She cupped her hands around the sides of her eyes and peered inside. The lobby attendant was behind the desk, watching her. He didn't look like the same guy who'd been there when she'd visited with Ethan, the last guy having been a woman.

Stella waved, communicating her urgency.

He shook his head.

She waved more insistently.

With an obvious sigh, he came to the door, opened it a few inches and said, "I'm sorry, miss. But only residents and their guests are allowed inside."

"I *am* a resident."

He forced an impatient smile. "I've worked here for six months. I've never seen you before, and our residents have keys."

"I'm brand new, and I can't find my key." Stella tossed the same kind of magic she'd used on the cab driver through the small gap in the door.

The attendant's eyes widened, and he pulled the door open while stepping aside.

Nice. Maybe compulsion spells weren't so bad after all.

The elevator doors were closing. Stella dashed forward and at the last moment had to turn sideways to slip inside.

"Fourteen," she said to the man standing in front of the buttons.

He pushed the button for the top floor, though he and his wife eyed her suspiciously.

Stella's chest heaved. She really needed to start running more if a little anxiety was going to get her so out of breath.

The couple got out on the ninth floor, and Stella continued her trip to the top. When the elevator doors opened, she rushed down the hall to Ethan's door, lugging her bags with her as she ran, her apprehension rising with every step.

She knew something was wrong right away. "Oh, no. No, no, no."

The hum of magic was still there, but the protective ward around Ethan's door hung in tattered fragments. Lovey must have finally figured out how to

tear it down.

Stella pushed at the door with her fingertips, and it fell open. The pristine order of Ethan's apartment was destroyed. The refrigerator door hung open. A floor lamp angled over the arm of the sofa, its silk shade having rolled across the floor. A potted plant lay on its side, black dirt marring the dove gray area rug.

The whole place smelled vaguely of physical magic—confirmation that Lovey had been here, and not too long ago.

“Ethan?” Stella gripped the doorknob.

No answer.

She pressed her fist to her chest as if that could steady her heart's pounding rhythm. “Ethan!”

She stopped and took a breath. Lovey could still be here.

She reached out with her mind, searching for the presence of other magic. There were the thin traces of Ethan's magic, along with another more powerful witch.

One thing was for sure, whoever'd come, they were no longer here.

Stella dropped her duffel and her satchel by the door and headed straight for Ethan's office. Nearly all the books were pulled off the shelves. The desk drawers were open, their contents thrown onto the floor.

“Shit.” *Please, tell me they didn't find the athame.* If they had, their grimoire could already be unlocked. At this moment, blood magic could be spreading across Boston. They could be raising corpses from their graves, like the sun out of ashes.

Stella got down on her knees and reached for the back panel of the drawer. This time, she knew what she was looking for, and her middle fingertips easily found the three indentations. She pressed in until she heard the soft click.

The back panel sprang open, and she reached into the thin space of the secret compartment. Desperation rising, she felt around, her fingers searching for the blade's velvet wrappings.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

When Stella's hand closed around velvet, she felt the shape and weight of the hilt and the throb of the ruby beneath her thumb. Though she let out a sigh of relief, it wasn't complete. Ethan still wasn't here, and the demolished state of his apartment, not to mention his failure to meet those community leaders at the diner, did not bode well for his safety.

Antoinette didn't strike Stella as the type to torture anyone for information, but Jean-Paul was way harder to read, and Maddy seemed capable of turning the screws on someone. Stella doubted her magic stopped at tarot reading in the park.

Then there was Lovey. She was small and physically weak, but her magic wasn't, and she was desperate to unlock her grimoire. She had big plans, and she needed the athame to draw magical blood and unlock its hidden spells.

The only questions Stella had: did Ethan even know about the dagger hidden in his desk? Had he been the one to hide it there? Or had it been stashed there by someone else?

And if the latter, who was this witch who put a target on his back?

One thing was for sure, standing in the debris field that had once been Ethan's immaculate office wasn't going to give her any answers. She needed to get out of there. She needed to find Ethan. And now that the ward was down, she needed to get the athame out of here before someone came back to look for it again.

But she couldn't simply take it with her when she left.

Lovey could feel magic as well as Stella could. In fact, it was a miracle

the older witch hadn't sensed the athame hidden in the desk.

If the Boston coven had staked out Ethan's apartment—and Stella had every reason to believe they had—then they definitely saw her come in here. One step outside...one pulse of blood magic from the athame...and they'd descend on her like birds of prey.

Stella pulled back the curtain and looked down onto the sidewalk. There were plenty of cars and pedestrians. She didn't see anyone lurking.

Damn. She didn't have time for this. Ethan didn't have time for this. She let the curtain fall back into place.

Lovey could be torturing him for information at this very moment. Stella should be out there looking for him.

But the situation left her no choice. Before she could find him, she had to protect the athame. They would have no further use for Ethan if they got their hands on it. So long as they thought he had information to give them, they'd keep him alive.

Dead men don't talk.

Stella bolted the front door. It wouldn't keep out a physical witch with even medium-level power, but it would buy her a couple extra seconds if it came to that.

There was a spell she'd used in the past when she wanted something to disappear. She'd used it in middle school when she wanted to mask a bad report card from Marietta and George.

She'd used a version of it each morning when she reconstructed the ward over her store's sagging staircase. It caused curious shoppers' eyes to slide by, as if the stairs weren't there at all.

It was a serious spell, and one that she prayed wouldn't fizzle too quickly.

She unwrapped the blade and set it on the coffee table. Next, she ran around Ethan's apartment, collecting her ingredients. She placed a handful of dirt from the overturned plant along the northern edge of the blade.

At the western tip of the blade she set a glass of water.

Along the blade's southern edge she positioned a candle she found in the bathroom. The candle had never been lit before, so it was about to get christened in a gargantuan way.

Three out of the four elements now in their proper places, Stella knelt at the eastern side of the table and called on her ancestor, Samuel Wardwell, to help her.

He'd been a prophetic witch. What she was about to do wasn't his

magical specialty. But he'd been able to protect his family, and Stella needed to protect this blade. She figured a little help from her bloodline couldn't hurt.

She lit the candle with a snap of her fingers. Then, holding her hands over the athame, she closed her eyes and added the fourth element by blowing a steady stream of air from the east onto the end of the handle.

"In virtute terra, aer, ignis, et aqua, rogo te evanescet." By the power of earth, air, fire, and water, I demand you disappear.

Stella didn't use Latin spells very often, and she had to say it twice before the candle flame flared higher.

On the third recitation, the glass shattered and water pooled on the table. The pile of dirt soaked up most of the mess, but some of the water dripped onto Ethan's rug in muddy splats.

Stella tried not to let that distract her because the blade was rattling against the table, clicking like a castanet.

"Come on," she whispered, coaxing the magic. "A little bit more." She blew another stream of air, and the candle flame shot up like a blow torch. The blade jumped.

And then it was gone.

Stella sat back on her heels, and the flame snuffed out.

Biting down on her bottom lip, she reached forward. Not only could she not see the blade, she couldn't sense any magic coming from it. That was the most important part.

Slowly, she lowered her hand—hoping she hadn't gone too far and made the whole thing disappear completely. If she'd done that, the athame could be anywhere.

Her shoulders relaxed when her fingertips found the smooth steely texture of the blade, the carved handle, and the ruby near the hilt. She let out a breath. She'd done it.

Now, it was time to find Ethan before the Boston witches did him permanent harm.

Stella rushed for the spot where she'd dropped her bags and was shoving the invisible blade into her satchel when the wet-earth scent of physical magic hit her harder than before.

She rose out of her crouch just as something sparkly caught the light.

A telltale trail of glitter on the kitchen counter. Her heart sunk, and goose bumps rose on her arms.

Izzy had been here. She'd left traces of her glitter makeup behind. And she'd demolished Ethan's ward.

Stella's coven hadn't trusted her after all. They'd taken matters into their own hands.

Which meant...Ethan probably wasn't in Boston.

In fact, by now, he might not be anywhere at all.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

Stella used Ethan's landline to call for another cab—this one to Salem. While she waited, she second-guessed her decision to stash the athame in her satchel and moved it to her back pocket.

It wasn't very comfortable, but she was sure the Boston witches were on to her. If she got stopped, they'd look in her bag first. This way, she could shove her bag at them and take off at a run.

She glanced at her ass in the living room mirror.

Just because the blade was invisible, that didn't mean it didn't have bulk. There was an obvious knife-shaped outline in her back pocket. Not exactly as stealthy as she'd hoped.

"*Levelen*," she murmured, remembering the spell she'd used on her tiny purse at the fundraiser. Flatten now.

A blue orb of magic formed in her hand, and when she squashed it over the athame, her palm landed flat against her denim-clad ass. Perfect.

The phone rang to let her know the cab was out front.

Cautiously, she left Ethan's apartment, boarded the elevator, and made her descent. Every time the car stopped, she held her breath, but eventually she made it to the lobby.

Tingling with apprehension, Stella exited the building and peered left, then right, before darting across sidewalk and toward the cab that was parked out front.

There was a shout to her left, and she spotted Jean-Paul and Maddy in her periphery.

They ran toward her at full speed.

Stella wrenched open the cab door, tossed her bags inside, jumped in, and

slammed the door shut.

“Stella Aldren?” the driver asked, confirming she was the one who’d ordered the ride.

“That’s me. Drive!” She probably looked as frantic as she felt, and that panic amped to terror when Jean-Paul started banging on her window.

“Christ!” the driver cried out. “Are you in trouble?”

“Just drive!”

He hit the gas and pulled away from the curb.

Stella turned around to look out the back window.

Jean-Paul and Maddy stood in the vacated parking spot, their hands on their hips.

“Looks like we gave your friends the slip,” the driver said, sounding proud of himself.

“Not my friends,” she said.

“No kidding,” he replied. “Dispatch said you wanted a lift to Salem. Is that still right?”

Stella confirmed the address for Broomstix. “And please hurry. It’s an emergency.”

“I kinda got that too,” he said.

As they made their way through the city streets, driving as quickly as traffic would allow, Stella craned her neck to make sure they weren’t being followed.

She no longer knew where her sensitivity to magic ended and her paranoia began. Maybe they were one and the same.



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, the cabbie stopped in front of Stella’s store and, more importantly, her coven’s headquarters.

A rain drop splatted against the tip of her nose as she exited the car. Three more hit the top of her head before she’d dashed inside.

“Stella!” Magnus Moseby, her sixteen-year-old temp employee, shouted with gleeful surprise from behind the sales desk. “You’re back!”

His thick forelock of brown hair was swooped to the side over his bright green eyes. He was well dressed, as per usual, in a dove-gray sweater and

pressed black jeans.

“Hi, Magnus.”

Alice rushed up in a flutter of feathers, scolding Stella for having been gone for so long and tattling on Darren for escaping his terrarium.

Stella scooped Alice up and kissed the top of her head, feeling both the rush of euphoria to finally be home, as well as the flash of despair that Magnus was alone in the building. Ethan wasn't here.

“Did you have a nice vacay?” Magnus asked.

“What?” she asked distractedly. God, she was such an idiot.

Ethan was already a public figure. They wouldn't chance bringing him to the center of town, let alone into her store with Magnus behind the counter.

They would have taken him somewhere more private. But where?

“I asked if you had a nice vacation,” Magnus said.

“Oh,” she said numbly. “Yeah.”

Stella scrambled for another alternative as to where Ethan might be. Could he still be in Boston?

“I know the store looks empty now,” Magnus said, “but we had a really good couple of days. I did tricks on the sidewalk to lure people inside, plus a whole bus came up from the retirement village in Swampscott.”

“That's nice.” Stella set Alice on the counter.

“Did I do something wrong?” Magnus asked. “I thought you'd be happy.”

“No. You did great.”

Stella's thoughts swirled as she looked around at the crowded bookshelves, the sagging staircase, and the hundreds of battery-operated candles.

Ultimately, she decided Ethan couldn't still be in Boston. They'd meant for her to kill him quickly while in the city. But now that so much time had passed, they wouldn't mind waiting a little longer. They would have taken him somewhere that mattered.

They'd want... Izzy's words, uttered back in the hotel lobby, echoed in Stella's ears. They'd want *poetic justice*.

And there was one place where they'd find that for sure. It made so much sense Stella kicked herself for not having thought of it sooner. The portal at Proctor's Ledge... George Jacobs' old barn... Why hadn't it occurred to her before?

Not only was Proctor's Ledge the site of the 1692 executions, but the barn was where their coven always celebrated the solstice and other special

events.

“Sorry, bud. I gotta go. Here.” Stella hoisted her bags over the sales counter and shoved them into his arms. “Hide these in the storage closet for me. I’ll be back for them later.”

“You’re leaving?” he asked, sounding confused if not disappointed. “You just got here.”

Even from inside her cozy store, Stella could hear the pounding splats of cold rain against the sidewalk.

She didn’t want to go back out there. Now that she was home, she wanted to burrow under her covers and pretend her life was the way it used to be.

But not even the most powerful witch could rewrite the past. She had to deal with the realities that were right in front of her.

“Magnus, I need your car.”

“What?” he asked.

“I need your car. It’s an emergency.” Her heart pounded against her chest as if it were trying to escape its cage, much like Ethan’s magic had always felt to her. Trapped. Frustrated.

Magnus wrung his hands. “It’s my *mom*’s van, and she said—”

“Let me borrow it, and I’ll give you a one hundred-dollar store credit.”

Magnus pinched his lips together, clearly conflicted.

“Two hundred,” she said, upping her bid.

“It’s parked around the corner.” He stuffed her bags in the closet behind him and handed her his keys.



RAIN SPLASHED off the hood of the Mosebys’ mini-van and onto the already soaked windshield. The wipers were doing double duty, but sadly losing the war. Fortunately, Stella didn’t have far to go.

Within seven minutes, she reached Proctor’s Ledge, the spot of the 1692 executions. It was a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it kind of memorial to the nineteen men and women who lost their lives, just a crescent-shaped bench made of granite blocks, set on a vacant lot and nestled within a residential neighborhood.

The bench contained a name plate for each of the damned. Bridget

Bishop's plate was positioned first and on the far left. Samuel Wardwell's was the last and on the far right.

Stella would have to be quick. Normally the coven didn't come here in broad daylight. Any of the surrounding neighbors could be watching out their windows.

Stella slammed on the brakes, put the van in park, and jumped out. She was instantly soaked, and her hair plastered to her head.

Pushing the strands out of her eyes, Stella ran straight for Samuel Wardwell's plaque while uttering the incantation of the descendants: "Cursed by the past. Magic thou hast. Take me now to the place first cast."

Stella slammed her palm against the Wardwell plaque and closed her eyes as a rush of magic swept through her.

When she opened her eyes, the portal had opened. On this side of it was the modern world. Beyond it was the way things were. No time travel was involved, rather the magic created an alternate plane.

Once she went through the portal, the modern-day neighborhood would disappear, and she'd be on a wooded and rocky, rain-soaked ledge halfway up an uninhabited hill.

She'd crossed the portal many times before, though never alone and always on foot. The only question she had was whether the Mosebys' van could pass through with her.

She hopped back into the driver's seat, feeling the sharp edge of the athame in her back pocket. Her flattening spell was fizzling.

Then, after whispering a quick pep talk, she hit the gas. The van made a hard bounce as it entered the portal but other than that, it came through unscathed, though she had to swerve to miss a tree.

A narrow, muddy, pot-holed road cut through the thick forest that became thicker and darker the farther she went.

Marietta's bedtime stories about the Collector had given her a healthy fear of the woods, but she gripped the steering wheel and clenched her teeth, knowing that whatever lay ahead of her was more important than silly childhood fears.

The road made a sharp curve, leading toward the farm belonging to George Jacobs, Izzy's ancestor.

Another fifty feet, and she felt the swell of defensive magic. It grew in power the farther she drove, until a barricade of beautiful blue and silver magic bloomed brightly in front of her—completely captivating and not easy

to penetrate.

Stella hit the brakes and shifted into park, but left the engine running as she climbed out to inspect.

“Stay back, Stella.”

She recognized the voice before she spotted Marietta emerging from behind the barricade.

“Is Ethan in Jacobs’ barn?” Stella yelled over the rain that pounded against the compacted ground.

“If you’ve come this far,” Marietta yelled back, “you already know.”

Stella swallowed hard, and panic nearly buckled her knees. “Is he dead?”

Marietta diverted her eyes. “I’m only the lookout. I don’t know what’s happening up there.”

Stella glanced past her, though the trees and rain obscured her view of the Jacobs’ farm.

“Get out of my way, Marietta. Drop this barricade and let me pass.”

“I can’t do that, honey.”

Stella stared back at the witch who’d raised her after her parents’ untimely deaths. Her heart squeezed with pain and betrayal. “Don’t make me go through you.”

“You’ll do what you need to do. You always have.”

In the past, comments like that had always felt like praise. Today, she heard the disappointment in Marietta’s voice.

“I need to get to Ethan.”

“As I said.”

“Damn it, Marietta. I don’t want to do this.” The thought of hurting her went against every fiber of Stella’s being.

“You know she’ll never let you go through the pairing ritual, Stella. You have to know that.”

“Who? Who won’t let me?” Did she mean Jade?

Stella may have had zero intention of actually becoming a paired witch—it scared her enough just to have that *potential*—but Jade didn’t have that kind of say in her life.

Marietta raised her arms, preparing to attack.

That mere gesture triggered Stella’s self-defense magic that, fueled by fear that Ethan could be hurt, came out more powerfully than either witch anticipated.

Like a slingshot released, Stella’s magic sped forward, sending a volley

of blue sparks and missiles headed directly for the barricade.

Marietta screamed and ducked behind a tree as the shield shattered like glass.

For a second, Stella thought the shards were raining down on her, but it was only the real precipitation pelting the top of her head. The cold had soaked through her clothes and into her skin, making her shudder as a second explosion of magic rocketed straight for her.

It had some power, and it seemed like it would burn, but Marietta's specialty was potions. She hadn't made the shield Stella had just dismantled, and whatever Marietta had thrown at her was no match for Stella's response.

Stella didn't know why she hadn't realized it before, but the surges of power she'd felt every time she was with Ethan hadn't been her imagination. Her magic's endurance might still lack heart, but its muscle had grown in strength.

Even with Ethan's magic trapped and their pairing not being consummated by the ancient ritual, they still fueled each other in ways that would take time to understand—more time than Stella had right now.

When Marietta's magic reached her, Stella sliced through it with the side of her hand. It fell apart, dissolving in the rain.

Before Marietta could get off another spell, Stella hopped back into the van. The seat squelched, and the athame dug into her ass.

Stomping down on the gas, she rocketed forward just as Marietta lunged for the vehicle.

Stella swerved, but the side mirror clipped Marietta's shoulder, and the impact threw her to the ground.

Guilt clenched Stella's heart, and she cursed. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

Never in a million years did she think she'd hurt Marietta. She glanced in the rearview mirror and, though the rain obscured her view, she saw her adoptive mother struggle to her feet.

Another blast of magic chased after her, up the gravel road, but the spell was too late and too weak to do anything more than exhaust its caster. Marietta slumped to the mud.

Stella refocused on the old barn ahead of her as the athame's ruby pulsed in her pocket. Its blood magic sent shockwaves down her legs and up her torso.

Could she blame what she'd done to Marietta on the blood magic imbedded in the Boston coven's lost dagger? Or was she simply a terrible

person?

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

Stella didn't race up to the Jacobs' barn with guns-ablazin'. She approached in stealth mode. Slowly. Quietly. And having cut the headlights.

She parked and jumped out of the van again. Here, the trees were thick enough to block most of the light and some of the rain. Squinting, she crouched low and moved swiftly, covering the final thirty yards that were thick with brambles. Muddy water splashed onto the backs of her jeans.

As she reached the clearing, she stopped her momentum by catching her arm around the trunk of a slender tree. The Jacobs' farm was ahead, and the barn's wide front doors were open several inches, maybe enough for someone to slip between them undetected.

For centuries, the Salem coven had gathered here to celebrate the winter solstice with bonfires and apple cider. Happier times. Now, the place simmered with distrust and vile-tasting vengeance.

Stella could sense several sources of magic in and around the barn. Her only solace: one of those sources, though faint, was Ethan.

Or at least, she hoped it was. There was a fair chance that was only wishful thinking. He'd been in enemy hands for hours at this point. She wouldn't put it past her imagination to convince herself of things she wanted to be true: that Ethan was alive and holding his own.

Movement at the corner of the barn.

Stella jerked back as someone emerged and passed in front of the building's large doors. Whoever it was, his face was obscured by a hooded raincoat, but she could tell it was one of the Bly brothers by his tall stature.

Another brother—similarly dressed—emerged from around the opposite

corner. The two of them had clearly been posted as sentries. After Marietta, this was the second line of defense.

The Bly brothers stopped in front of the barn to exchange a few words, which were drowned out by the pounding rain. One slapped the other on the shoulder, then they continued on their crisscrossing paths around the barn.

Neither of them could detect magic like Stella could, so they likely had no idea she was there. As soon as they were both out of sight, she made a run for it.

Drenched to the bone, she kept low and made a bee-line for the opening in the barn doors. She could barely see where she was going, but it got a little better once she was under the barn's eave.

Stella turned sideways to slide through the gap, but it wasn't wide enough for her boobs *and* her ass. She could pick a body part to sacrifice, but she liked them both. She put her hands to the edge of the door that was in front of her and pushed.

The door's iron rollers squealed as they moved stiffly, no more than an inch along the overhead track. The air solidified in her lungs, and her body went stiff. There was no way in hell the Blys didn't hear that.

She squeezed through and found cover behind one of the barn's support posts.

From inside the barn, the rain was muffled enough for her to hear the Bly brothers shout. Their footsteps pounded around the sides of the barn until they met at the open doors.

Stella held her breath and dug her fingers into the post's rough hewn texture, praying they didn't come inside to investigate.

"Did you hear something?" Charlie Bly asked.

"I thought so," said his younger brother, Dan. "You too?"

"I thought I heard someone open this door, but it doesn't look like it's moved." Charlie curled his fingers around the edge of the door, and Stella sucked in a breath.

"Should we say something to the others?" Dan asked.

Others. As far as she could tell, he was referring to Jade and Izzy, whose physical magic was unmistakable. They were in the cellar with Ethan, beneath the trap door on the opposite side of the barn from where Stella was hiding.

"No," Charlie said. "Jade and Izzy might ask us for help, and the last thing I want to do is be down there with all that mess."

Bile rose in Stella's throat. Was she too late?

"Same," Dan said. "It was probably the tree branches we heard anyway."

"A hundred bucks Stella's still in Boston. And she hasn't used the poppet yet, or they wouldn't still be down in the cellar. That guy would be dead, and this would all be over."

"Hopefully soon," Dan said. "I'm hungry."

"Just keep a lookout," Charlie said. "See you on the back side."

They passed each other, a blur of dark green rain coats across the opening. When Stella felt they'd moved far enough away from the door, she left her hiding spot.

She wanted to run across the barn floor to the trap door, but she didn't dare let her footsteps sound too loudly against the floorboards. She didn't dare make too much dust sift through the cracks and alert Izzy and Jade to her presence.

So, she slowly made her way across the floor, until she could crouch beside the trap door that led into the cellar. Right as her fingers touched the latch, she heard the first scream.

CHAPTER
THIRTY

“**S**how it to me, Mather!” Jade sounded both tired and hysterical. “If you’ve got magic, show it to me.”

Stella had a flash of hope. If they were asking him questions, Ethan was definitely alive. Maybe Jade and Izzy were even having the same reservations that Stella had about killing a fellow witch.

Unfortunately, Ethan wasn’t helping matters.

“I told you,” he slurred as if he had barely any strength left. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

There was a sizzling sound of electricity, then a powerful *zap* followed by another of Ethan’s agonized cries of pain.

Anger flooded Stella’s chest, and though she wanted to rip the trap door off its rusty hinges, she’d have to open it slowly and silently. It would be two against one in the cellar, and she needed every advantage she could get—like a surprise attack or another invisibility spell.

The latter would definitely give her the advantage, but while she’d used the spell on objects before, she’d never tried it on herself. A spell *that* big would definitely require each of the four elements, and this time where would she find—

Wait a second.

She released the latch on the trap door and looked down at herself. She was soaking wet and splattered in mud. That accounted for two elements.

She could blow a stream of air.

So, all she needed was fire. She grabbed a handful of straw from the barn floor and snapped her fingers to light it.

It only smoked at first, then the tiniest spark caught hold. Hopefully, that

would be good enough.

“*In virtute terra, aer, ignis, et aqua, me evanescet,*” she whispered, breathing on the flame. By the power of earth, air, fire, and water, let me disappear.

The spark flared, and the straw burned down to her fingers before going out. She smothered her yelp of pain and dropped the straw onto the barn floor as the spell tickled over her skin, sliding around her like a thin silk veil.

She could feel everything, but she couldn’t see herself. The spell had worked, but she had no idea how long it would last. Knowing her, not long.

With no time to waste, Stella quietly opened the hatch and crept down the ladder, landing softly on the cellar’s dirt floor.

The room was about twelve square feet and dimly lit. Ethan stood spread-eagle, his wrists and ankles secured to the wall by ropes. A dozen flickering candles were set on the ground in front of him. He was dressed in a button-down shirt—now stained with blood—dress pants, brown leather shoes.

His head hung forward, listing to one side. His right eye and cheek were grotesquely swollen, and black char marks darkened the edge of his jaw.

Izzy and Jade stood on either side of him—Jade with her hands on her hips, Izzy with her palms raised in front of her.

Stella saw red—a blazing fury—and a bitter taste filled her mouth as she pressed her back against the wall and worked out what to do next.

She was cloaked in her protective spell—completely invisible. None of them knew she was there. *Yet.*

But all that could change if Izzy or Jade took more than a few steps backward. Even invisible, she took up physical space. She wasn’t about to push her luck and try flattening herself like she had with the blade in her pocket.

“Should we just get this over with?” Izzy asked. “It doesn’t look like he’s going to tell us anything.”

Ethan lifted his chin a few inches and slowly opened his eyes. His gaze pointed directly at Stella’s face.

He might not have been able to see her, but she could tell that he felt her close by. She knew that for sure because she too felt the ribbons of their connection. They were no longer one-sided.

Just as they unfurled from her chest, reaching for him, she could feel his magic pressing against the inside of his chest, trying to find her.

Please don’t give me away, Ethan. Please don’t give me away.

His eyes widened. “Red?”

Damn. She’d fallen for an idiot.

Jade and Izzy turned, and even though they couldn’t see her or feel her magic, their expressions said that they knew she was there.

“*Nochd an fhìrinn,*” Jade demanded, using a Gaelic spell. Reveal the truth.

Shit.

Jade sliced her hand through the air between them, and Stella’s cover was blown. She was totally visible again.

“Stella, this is for your own good,” Jade said.

“Since when were you two fine with torture?” she asked.

“This isn’t about torture,” Izzy said, sounding pained. “I thought we should at least give you the benefit of the doubt before we kill him. But he’s not a witch. If he was, he would have saved himself by now.”

“You can’t kill him,” Stella said. “You kill him, and you’ll kill me.”

“Even if he was a witch,” Jade said, “it’s not like you’re already paired. His death wouldn’t affect you. He’s just a Mather, and I won’t let you shoulder the brunt of Bishop’s curse. You’re my sister.”

“Please,” Stella begged. “You don’t understand. If you’d only listen.”

Izzy looked apologetic. “This really is for the best, Stella.”

“Not for him it’s not. And not for me. You’re making a mistake.”

Before they could respond, Stella raised her hands and cast the only spell that might save Ethan, the same freezing spell she’d done to give her and Antoinette time to exit the registration room at the Boston Public Library. The barn’s cellar, however, was a much smaller room.

Ice-blue sparks sprayed from her fingertips, illuminating the cellar. She directed the spell with a surgical precision, hitting Jade and Izzy but missing Ethan.

The force of the spell threw Jade and Izzy backward. Their bodies smashed against the stone wall and slid to the dirt floor. They lay motionless as the cold blue magic pooled around them.

Stella staggered. In retrospect, her freezing spell was a stupid move.

Yes, it bought her the time she needed to untie Ethan. But it sapped so much of her physical strength, she wasn’t in much better shape than Ethan.

And there was the matter of climbing the ladder.

Not to mention the Blys.

And the van was parked so damn far away.

“Red,” Ethan murmured. “Funny meeting you here.”

“Hold the jokes for later, Casanova.” She pulled the athame from her pocket. The invisibility spell she’d cast on it had also worn off. She used the blade to cut through the ropes that bound him. “We gotta move fast, and you need your strength.”

“No problemo,” he slurred. “I’ve been working out.”

Stella stopped sawing at the ropes around his wrists and looked up. “This isn’t funny.”

His eyelids were half closed. “Tough crowd.”

His breath smelled like henbane, and Stella realized what was going on. Apparently Marietta hadn’t been merely a lookout. She’d totally drugged him. He was as high as a kite.

Stella squatted to work on the ropes around his ankles. “You’ve been drugged.”

“It was good shit too. Almost dulled the pain. Right up until Electra Woman and Dyna Girl got all crazy.”

“Oh, boy.” She made it through the last rope and pulled it from his ankles. “Can you walk?”

“Can I walk? *Pffft*,” Ethan scoffed.

Stella rose from her crouch.

Ethan took one staggering step, then pitched forward and face-planted on the ground.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE

Stella safely sheathed the athame in her back pocket and, *somehow*, got Ethan to stand up—though maneuvering a six-and-a-half-foot man off the ground was no small feat. It took a lot of grabbing and swearing and leveraging to do it, and even then, Ethan rested most of his weight on her.

“See that ladder?” Stella asked, glancing over her shoulder to make sure Jade and Izzy were still down.

“We needa climb outta here?” he slurred.

“Yes. And quickly.”

“Take my hand.” He wrapped his fingers around hers.

“I can’t *pull* you up a ladder, Ethan.”

“Feel stronger. When you touch...” He squeezed her fingers hard. “Powerful. Might...help.”

Stella stared at him for a second, amazed that he’d noticed it too. If she coupled that magical surge with the fear and adrenaline coursing through her blood, maybe she could *fly* them both out of there.

Okay, flight was a gross exaggeration, but that’s what she imagined.

Ethan apparently had similar thoughts because he said in a cheery, semi-drugged voice, “Up we go!”

Stella took hold of his other hand too and dragged him closer to the ladder.

“There it is,” he murmured, his whole body jerking at their contact. “Boom!”

Ethan was right. The familiar surge of magical power that she felt whenever he touched her, heated her from the inside out. It made her chest warm and her head buoyant, while still lucid enough to tackle the world.

“What is that boom?” he asked.

“We’ll talk about it later,” she said, struggling for patience in the midst of an escape.

“Later?” he asked.

“Later.” Like when there was time to admit what she was, tell him what he was, and explain the magical principles of their potential to become paired witches. That is, if they survived this.

Stella got Ethan to the base of the ladder and moved behind him to push him up, putting her shoulder under his ass.

He climbed. Slowly. But surely. Better than she could have hoped, and her own strength was returning too, more quickly than the last time she’d done the freezing spell.

Behind her, Jade groaned but didn’t move. Stella didn’t know how she felt about that. She didn’t have room in her head to think about anything except getting Ethan out of there.

“Hurry,” she hissed, urging Ethan to get up the ladder. “Climb.”

He grunted. “Smells smoky.”

“What?”

“Barn’s on fire.”

“*What?*” She thought the flame she’d created had gone out. She’d made sure of it.

Ethan coughed, then made it out through the trap door, landing prone on the barn floor. A few seconds later, Stella made it through and was pulling him to his feet.

The air was smoky, and some of the straw was on fire. But the rain leaking through the roof made the floorboards too wet to ignite. She doubted the Blys had noticed anything amiss.

Ethan bent over and coughed again.

“Quiet,” she whispered, stomping out the remaining flames. The rain had stopped. There was nothing to drown out their voices anymore. “There are guards posted outside.”

“Two dudes. I remember.”

She pulled the athame from her pocket.

“Cool,” Ethan slurred, apparently noticing it for the first time. “Where’d’ya get the knife?”

“I’ll explain later.” Right now, she needed to be as much of a threat to the Blys as possible. Because even if they didn’t know she was weakened, they

probably assumed Ethan would slow her down. They'd want to take advantage of that.

Stella stopped at the barn doors, flattening herself against one of them so she could peer through the widened gap. She'd fit through before. Was it wide enough for Ethan?

"They're going to pass in front of the barn," she whispered. "Once they've cleared and have rounded the corners, we need to make a run for it. I have a mini-van parked down the road."

"Yep," Ethan said. "Totally. Makes sense."

Stella glanced over her shoulder to see if he was comprehending, being sarcastic, or still a little loopy. His expression was serious, though his sagging posture left her concerned.

The Bly brothers passed across the gap, bumping each other's shoulders in a sort of greeting.

Stella gave them enough time to round the corners of the barn when she heard movement coming from the cellar.

Her freezing spell had faded fast.

"All right," she said. "Suck it in and slip through this gap. The track is squeaky and we can't call any more attention to ourselves."

"Sucking it in," Ethan said, and they'd barely squeezed through before Charlie Bly cried out, "Hey! Where did you come from?"

"Shit!" Stella muttered. "Run, Ethan. Down the road. I'll catch up."

"Not a chance," he said. "We fight together."

Ethan grabbed onto her hand, and she wielded the blade. The ruby pulsed beneath her thumb, throbbing with dark power, hungry for blood.

It lifted her hair off her scalp and blew it back. It wasn't her imagination. The brothers' eyes widened, and Dan Bly retreated.

"Stella," Charlie said, fear in his voice. "What the hell?"

Even a witch who generally couldn't feel magic had to know something dark was in the area.

"I don't want to hurt you, Charlie, but you need to let me and Ethan go."

"You're going to take us all down," Dan said. "Bridget Bishop suffers no fools. You know that. Her curse will destroy us."

"I think Bridget has something else in mind when it comes to Ethan."

"He's a Mather," Dan said.

"Why does everyone keep saying that?" Ethan asked.

"Shhh," she told him, jerking on his arm to get him to shut up. She could

handle this.

The athame's handle scorched her hand, and it pulled more power from every witch in the area: Charlie, Dan, Izzy and Jade—who were now standing in the barn's open doorway—Stella, and even from Ethan.

She glanced up at him, nothing more than a flick of her eyes before firming her resolve. Ethan had witnessed too much already for her to be subtle. There was only one way out of this and that was through.

Her arm moved of its own accord, looping and slicing the tip of the blade through the air, each stroke leaving a comet's tail of red light between them and the barn.

When she was done, two symbols glistened in the humid air: a circle with a center dot. An E with an elongated middle bar.

The sun rising from the ashes.

The symbol from the grimoire.

Lightning flashed, but it wasn't Izzy's magic, and it wasn't nature either. The Blys flinched, dropping into defensive crouches and looking up at the sky.

Stella cocked the athame over her shoulder, then flung her arm forward. She didn't release the blade, but the action sent the symbols flying. They exploded in a shower of red sparks that rained down on the Blys and blocked the barn doors.

This was their chance. There might not be another.

“Run, Ethan!”

He didn't question her, and her terrified tone must have knocked some of the cobwebs out of his head. They took off running down the gravel road.

From the barn's doorway, Jade yelled, “Don't let them get away!”

But there weren't any footsteps behind them. Not yet anyway.

Something launched over their heads, fueled by a projection spell. Jade was clearly doing what she could to get them to stop. A long splinter of barn wood impaled itself like a spear into the ground in front of them.

“They're trying to kill me,” Ethan said.

“By now, they probably want to kill us both.”

“Your van?” Ethan asked, breathing hard.

Stella looked up and spotted the Moseby mini-van twenty yards ahead.
“Yes.”

“Keys?”

“Got 'em.”

Lightning struck. This time, an electrical bolt of Izzy's making. Her magic sliced through a huge oak tree and toppled half of it across the road in front of them. It landed with a tremendous crash.

Ethan threw his arm across Stella's chest.

They stopped and staggered a few steps backward, then Ethan leapt onto the top of the fallen tree like some kind of superhero in Italian leather shoes. It was a wonder he didn't slip off and break his neck.

He reached down to haul her up and over, and Stella used his arm like a climbing rope.

"You've recovered nicely," she said, reaching the top.

They jumped down onto the other side of the tree, and Ethan sprinted to the van's passenger door.

She clicked open the locks before he got there, and he wrenched his door open and hopped inside.

Stella got to the driver's side a second later and had just gotten her hand on the door latch when the scent of freshly baked bread rose in the air. Prophetic magic!

She spun and flattened her spine against the driver's-side door. A powerful magic surrounded her, enveloping her like a blanket.

Judith emerged from the trees.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO

Judith, Stella's high priestess, held up a tarot card. It wasn't a gun or an attack spell, but it hurt just as bad because the card was Death.

In any other circumstances, Stella would know that the card rarely referred to someone's actual death. It meant a transition or a change was coming. Right now, a literal meaning felt too close for comfort.

"I see it all, Stella. Your path is, indeed, intertwined with Ethan Mather's. But every way I look at it, the path always leads in the same direction. Straight to death."

"The death of Bishop's curse?" Stella asked hopefully while pressing her back against the van's door.

Judith's lips thinned into a hard, straight line, and her gaze slid to Ethan who was sitting in the passenger's seat.

"Death of the Boston coven's grimoire?" Stella asked, trying to drag Judith's attention off Ethan and back to her.

Judith still didn't say anything. She didn't even move.

"Death of prejudice?" Stella ventured.

"Stella," Judith said with deep disappointment.

"I can't let you have him. I won't let anyone harm him."

"Instead, you want to kill us all? Bishop's curse will not be merciful."

"I don't believe it."

"So, you're going to roll the dice with our lives?"

Stella shook her head slowly. "I don't have any other choice."

"You always have a choice," Judith said.

Stella took a step to the side, preparing to wrench open the van door. "Not this time."

“If you do this, there’s no going back.”

A lump formed in Stella’s throat, but she jumped in the van and started the engine.

Judith didn’t try to stop her, but by no means did Stella think this was over. Her headlights illuminated several dark forms running in their direction.

“Got any aspirin?” Ethan asked more calmly than the situation warranted. Obviously, the henbane had affected his mind far more than it had impaired his physical abilities. Thank the universe for small miracles.

Stella put the van in reverse and sped backward several feet, spraying mud onto Judith, who didn’t even flinch.

Stella cranked the wheel and banged a U-ey, skidding on the soft shoulder and narrowly missing a tree that grew close to the dirt road.

Marietta stood on the edge of the woods as they sped past, and a few moments later, the mini-van blasted through the magical portal.

The gateway closed behind them, and the van’s tires spun as Stella swerved to miss the memorial wall.

Ethan’s phone pinged immediately. Apparently his texts and calls hadn’t been getting through while he was on the other side of the portal.

He reached into his mud-splattered pants pocket and pulled out his phone like it was a trout he’d caught with his bare hands. “I got it!”

He frowned at his phone screen and squinted through his one swollen eye. “I can’t read any of this.”

“I’m guessing several of the messages will be from the people you were supposed to meet for breakfast.”

A few beats of silence passed as he presumably tried to pick his memories out of the remaining cloud of henbane.

“I made an excuse for you,” Stella said.

He turned in his seat to look at her. “You saw them?”

She glanced quickly at him, then back at the road. Talking about text messages and missed meetings seemed out of place, but it was preferable to discussing his torture and her being kicked out of her coven.

“You told me you’d be at that diner, so I went looking for you this morning.”

“But...you tore me down in that hotel lobby. You told me to get lost. I didn’t think you wanted to see me again.”

Stella winced. Of all the memories to break through the haze, why did it have to be that one? “I was trying to protect you from getting kidnapped.”

He leaned back in his seat and tipped his head back, groaning. “I got jumped when I left my apartment.”

“Drugged with henbane by the smell of you.”

“Bad?” He sniffed his arm.

“No, just...not *you*.” She glanced over at him again. “You’re being remarkably calm. You were nearly killed.”

“They were witches, weren’t they? They had me pinned to the wall like an insect on a board.”

Memories of the scary bedtime story Marietta told her and Jade when they were children, rose up in Stella’s mind and sent a shiver down her spine. The monster collected those children who wandered too close to its lair, pinning them like insects in his macabre collection. They’d been warned to stay out of the woods.

Stella gripped the steering wheel even tighter. “We’ll talk about witches after I get you cleaned up.”

“And so are you,” he said. “You’re a witch too.”

She didn’t answer that, and he didn’t push.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“You need first-aid. We’re going somewhere safe.”

He scoffed. “Does such a place exist?”

Stella bit her lip and pressed down on the gas.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE

“Come on, come on. Can’t you go any faster?” Stella slapped her hand down on the steering wheel and pushed the borrowed minivan to its limit as they raced toward the center of Salem.

Ethan had asked if a safe place existed and, frankly, she didn’t know much of anything anymore. Her heart still pounded from their narrow escape, and they were running for their lives.

They went around a corner, making Stella’s ass even more keenly aware of the razor sharp blade in her back pocket. The invisibility and flattening spells she’d put on it had worn off, and it was extremely uncomfortable to go around curves at top speed.

Ethan groaned and rubbed his head. Jade and Izzy had put him through their own version of a meat grinder, and his face was a mess.

“Hang on,” Stella said. “I’ll get you fixed up as soon as I can.”

He sat slumped against the passenger-side window, holding his head. He was really banged up, and now that his burst of adrenaline had faded, he looked half stoned.

Stella blamed the lingering effects of henbane.

“Can you call my store for me?” she asked. After days of barely holding on, her phone’s battery had permanently died.

“Number?” he mumbled.

She gave him the number while turning left on Essex and nearly hitting a car that was double parked.

Its owner gestured rudely at her and yelled, “*Masshole!*”

Stella flipped him the bird.

Ethan dialed clumsily. Either his fingers or his brain weren’t working

properly yet. He had to make a few attempts before he handed her his phone.

“Broomstix,” Magnus Moseby answered cheerily. “Where the magic never stops.”

“Magnus?” Stella asked.

“Stella!” he cried out anxiously. “You’ve been gone for almost two hours.”

“Is that all?” It felt like a week had gone by since she’d returned from Boston, dumped her bags at the store, and begged Magnus to let her borrow his mother’s mini-van.

“Is the van okay?” he asked.

“It’s fine,” she said. “Not a scratch.” Though it was a tad muddier than before—both inside and out. “But what’s this about the magic never stopping?”

“Oh.” He sounded a little embarrassed. “I thought the store needed a slogan. Do you like it? I’ve got some other options. How about, ‘Broomstix. Amazing tricks. Average treats?’ Or... ‘Broomstix. Blink and you’ll mystic.’ I’m actually kinda proud of that one.”

Stella shook her head. She couldn’t deal with marketing strategies right now.

“Magnus, you know that disappearing trick you’ve been working on?”

The kid had been trying to make himself disappear for months. No surprise, but so far, no luck. Magnus had as much magic in him as a rock. Actually, *less* than a rock. Some stones held a good amount of power.

In fact, Magnus didn’t even know magic was real. He was only in it for the sleight of hand card tricks.

“Yeah...” he said hesitantly, clearly not liking her disregard for his puns or her bringing up his failed attempts at magic.

“How do you feel about making *two* people disappear? Like, pronto.”

Ethan’s seat squelched when he turned to look at her. They were both still soaked from the rain and racing through puddles. Confusion crossed his expression.

Magnus scoffed. “I feel like I’d have better luck going to the moon. Or getting a girl to go to HoCo with me.” It was true. Magnus was sweet, but teenage wannabe magicians who asked people to call them Magnus the Magnificent weren’t every girl’s cup of tea.

“Does your dad still have that hunting cabin in Ipswich?”

Magnus had complained to her more than once about his dad’s

disappointment that he wasn't into the sport. Camo and blaze orange had never been Magnus's colors.

"Sure." Magnus clearly didn't understand her segue. She couldn't blame him for that.

"Is he using it right now?" She cranked the wheel and headed toward the touristy part of town.

"Dad's on a business trip this week. Besides, deer hunting season doesn't even start until October."

Good to know. As much as Marietta's bedtime stories had taught her to fear the woods, the Moseby cabin would give her and Ethan some time to figure out their next move.

"Do you happen to have a key to the place?"

"No, but there's a spare one up there."

"Perfect. My friend and I need to hide out for a while. *Disappear*. You understand? Can we use your cabin, and do you have time to drive us?"

Ethan's eyebrows were now drawn together. They hadn't discussed a hideout, but after what he'd been through, he had to see the wisdom in it.

"Stella," Magnus said, "you're scaring me."

"You and me both, bud." Her heart was pounding so hard, she was afraid it was going to escape her chest and fall into her lap.

"Mom's got bunco tonight at seven," Magnus said. "She needs the van, and I'd have to ask about the cabin."

"Nope," she said. "This would have to be our secret, and you could be there and back in an hour—well before seven."

"How long would you need to stay?" he asked.

"Red," Ethan whispered, sounding like he was having a moment of lucidity. "What's going on?"

Stella spared him a quick glance, then refocused on the narrowing road in front of her, as well as Magnus's question.

"Don't know how long yet, bud, but it's a matter of life or death."

"Oh my god," Magnus whispered into the phone.

"You could keep working at the store while I'm gone, full-time until school starts up again. You can be my assistant manager."

"I g- guess so, but I thought Alice was your assistant manager."

"You don't need to share our arrangement with her," Stella said. Alice's authority and control over the store was mostly in her tiny little chicken head.

"I'll be driving by the front door in less than five. Lock up and meet me at

the corner. My friend and I can't waste time coming in. And grab my bag."

"Yep," Magnus said. "Got it."

Stella was driving so fast, it took only two minutes to get there.

Fortunately, Magnus was already standing at the corner, wringing his hands. The strap of Stella's satchel was slung across his chest.

Stella put the van in park, hit the button to open the sliding door, and said, "Get in!"

"Shit." Magnus threw her bag inside, then climbed onto the seat. He slammed the door shut. "What did you do to my mom's van?"

"It's been raining. Where's my duffel?"

"You said to grab your bag. I thought you meant this one."

"Didn't I say *bags*? Plural?"

"No. You said, 'grab my bag.' How am I supposed to explain the van to my mom? It looks like you went off-roading."

"Something like that." Stella shifted into drive and banged a U-ey. She'd have to figure out the clean clothes situation later.

"And who's *this* guy?" Magnus asked.

Ethan turned over his shoulder and stuck out his hand in a way that suggested he was operating on muscle memory. Stella could still smell the henbane coming off him.

"Ethan Mather," he said.

"Whoa," Magnus said. "What happened to your face?"

"Disagreement among friends." Ethan flicked his hand in a dismissive fashion.

"Hey," Magnus said, pointing at him. "I know *you*. I saw you on the news. You're running for mayor."

"Governor," Ethan said.

"Whoa." Magnus leaned back in his seat. "This is so weird."

"Which way to the cabin?" Stella asked, wholeheartedly agreeing with his assessment.

"Route 1A. Straight north. I'll tell you where to turn once we get close."

For the next twenty minutes, Stella told Magnus everything he needed to know to keep the store up and running, but little else about why she was on the run. The less he knew, the safer he'd be.

He took it all in stride. Stella knew there was a reason she liked the kid.

After they passed through the town of Ipswich, Magnus instructed her where to pull off the main route, and they followed a twisting gravel road that

led into the woods. The scene was reminiscent of the barn where she and Ethan had just come from and, as the trees closed in around them, shutting out the sky, Stella tried not to panic.

Nothing good ever happened in the woods.



THEY PULLED up to a weathered A-frame with a small front deck. “You can hide here,” Magnus said. “The nearest neighbor’s gotta be a quarter mile away.”

“This is great,” Stella said while trying to stay optimistic about the future. “We really appreciate it.”

They got out. Magnus handed Stella her satchel, then showed them where the key was hidden, inside a fake rock at the edge of the deck.

Stella handed off the van keys. “Thanks again, Magnus. You really are magnificent.”

He blushed, ducked his head, and gave her and Ethan an embarrassed wave.

Stella and Ethan watched as Magnus drove off, then looked at each other. Neither of them spoke. Somewhere in the trees, a cardinal made its rhythmic whistle, and a squirrel rustled through the carpet of pine needles.

Ethan was beaten, bruised, and still half-drugged. They were both coated in mud that was now dried and cracked. If Ethan was anything like her, he was probably wondering how in the hell they’d gotten to this point.

Stella inserted the key in the lock and opened the front door to the cabin. She took a step forward, but before she could enter, Ethan gently grabbed her wrist.

She turned to face him. “What’s wrong? We should really get inside.”

He pressed his lips together and stared deep into her eyes. His navy-blue ones—or at least the eye that wasn’t nearly swollen shut—held so much intensity, a tingle spread through her chest, heading south. She simultaneously loved it and hated it when he looked at her like that.

“Stella...” He released her wrist and gripped her shoulders, gently squeezing. Clearly, his haze was clearing. “If I haven’t said it already... *Thank you.*”

“You’re welcome.” It came out croaky as the air caught in her throat.

“I trust you’re going to explain everything that happened, but I already know...you didn’t have to come find me. You didn’t have to get me out of there.”

Stella swallowed down the lump in her throat. Ethan didn’t realize this fiasco was all her fault. “I’ll explain after I fix up your face.”

He touched his cheekbone and winced. “How bad?”

His question shouldn’t have made her smile, but it did. “You’ve been prettier.”

His good eye twinkled. “*How* pretty?”

She sighed with feigned frustration, because he knew the answer to that. “Very pretty.”

“So, you *are* attracted to me.”

“Obviously, Ethan.” How could she not be? He wasn’t merely beautiful to look at, he was a good person. Too good for her, especially the danger she’d put him in.

“And you *like* me too.”

He was still joking, so maybe the effects of the henbane hadn’t completely worn off. Marietta had once told her the drug could distort a person’s memory, but Stella needed Ethan to remember how dire the last several hours had been.

“Of course, I like you. I saved your ass, didn’t I?”

He leaned in and kissed her forehead. “That you did.”

Stella sighed and reinforced the wall around her heart. Their magic may want to be fused, but she couldn’t allow them to become paired witches. It was too dangerous for both of them, and not only because of the current situation.

They stepped inside the cabin, and Ethan let out a low whistle. She had to agree. The place was much nicer than she’d expected for a hunting cabin. She thought it would be bare bones, decorated with used lawn furniture, canvas cots, and probably a makeshift bar. Maybe some decapitated animal heads on the wall.

Instead, it was paneled in knotty pine and furnished with a comfy-looking couch, a recliner, a cast iron wood-burning stove, and a small kitchen. A narrow stairway led up to a loft where there appeared to be a bedroom and, presumably, a bathroom. She hadn’t noticed an outhouse outside.

At the back of the living room, a large picture window looked out into the

forest, and she shivered.

“Are you cold?” Ethan asked. “There’s a good stack of wood and some kindling. I could get a fire going.”

“No. It’s just...the trees...” She moved quickly around the cabin, closing all the curtains.

Ethan obviously didn’t get her meaning, and she definitely didn’t feel like explaining Marietta’s bedtime stories about the Collector. There was no point in dwelling on childhood fears when they had massively grown-up problems.

Stella cleared her throat. “Let’s see if there’s a first-aid kit upstairs.”

He followed her up, and they entered the bedroom. It was small, just a double bed and a closet.

“You sit.” She tossed her satchel into the corner of the room. “No, wait! You’re too dirty. Stay standing.”

In the bathroom, which was only big enough for a toilet, a small sink, and a shower the size of a telephone booth, she found some old, scratchy towels and a mangled tube of toothpaste, as well as a white plastic box filled with bandages and antiseptic spray.

She soaked a washcloth with warm water, returned to the bedroom, then stopped in her tracks. Good god.

Ethan held his dirty shirt balled up in his hand, and his broad chest and powerful shoulders were deliciously on display.

She had to tip her head back to look all the way up at him—so tall, strong, *powerful*...

Not to mention the sight of Ethan standing so close to a bed made her stomach clench. He was sex incarnate, even looking like a prize fighter had done him dirty.

It was all so confusing.

The only thing she knew for sure was that the Boston coven couldn’t do any harm without the athame, and that she’d done the right thing by rescuing Ethan.

She still needed to know the nature of his magic, why he had possession of the athame that opened the grimoire’s dark spells, and how on earth she could reverse Bishop’s three-hundred-year-old curse.

If there were answers to be had, she was going to find them. Though this time, she and Ethan would be doing it together.

He reached over and squeezed her hand.

“Are you feeling a little better?” she asked as her magic surged at his

touch. “Should we talk? There’s a lot I need to confess.”

Ethan grimaced, his expression tight with indecision.

Worry twisted through her, and she tossed the washcloth onto the foot of the bed. “Ethan, what is it?”

He leaned down, kissed her firmly on the lips, then walked to the window.

“Today wasn’t my first encounter with witches, Red.”

Stella closed the gap between them and grabbed onto his arm, squeezing tight.

He laid his hand over hers, but kept his gaze on the woods outside. “And you’re not the only one who needs to confess.”

The end...for now, and not for long!

The story continues with [Villainous Magic](#), Book 2 in the Cursed Descendants series, coming **October 3, 2023**. [Order now!](#)

CURSED DESCENDANTS



VILLAINOUS MAGIC

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She writes complex characters, action-packed plots, and snarky in-your-face banter. And, of course, loads of steamy love scenes.

When she's not writing romance, she's probably watching *Outlander* or pleading (unsuccessfully) with her husband to don the kilt she bought him last summer.

You can find her on most social platforms at @asgreenbooks. For the latest news and to get your hands on exclusive content, subscribe to A. S. Green's [newsletter](#) today!



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