

A THORNE HILL WORLD NOVEL



DARKSIDE

4

THE GRIM GATE SERIES

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
EMILY GOODWIN

Darkside

BOOK FOUR IN THE GRIM GATE SERIES

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Book Four in the Grim Gate Series

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To my mojitos girls. Thanks for always having my back.

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Chapter

One

“**T**here’s been a mistake,” I rush out, stepping onto the porch and putting myself between Ethan and the police officer. Because there *has* been a mistake. Ethan didn’t kill Patrick. A demon did.

But I can’t exactly explain that to the police.

“Anora,” Ethan says, voice steady. “It’s okay.” I feel him step close behind me and I turn my head, seeing him hold out his arms. “This isn’t the first time I’ve been arrested,” he reminds me quietly, but his words bring little comfort.

Instead, my heart skips a beat and I edge toward the first porch step, hardly aware I’m moving at all. My brain goes a million miles an hour, trying to think of how to handle this situation. Granted, all I have to go off of are the police interactions I’ve seen on TV.

Which is how I know that if the police have a warrant for Ethan’s arrest, then they already have evidence pointing toward him as being the murderer. I’m not going to be able to talk our way out of this. But I’m a witch, so why talk when I can cast spells?

Though again, standing here without my Book of Shadows or any magical items, there’s nothing I can do unless I want to summon fire and...and...probably end up getting shot.

“He didn’t kill anyone,” I say, trying to be careful in what I give away. There’s no reason we should know the details about Patrick’s death. After all, Ethan and I are just regular citizens as far as the police are concerned. They have no idea that I was the one who created a portal to take me to the prison dimension where the real murderer has been hiding for years.

Which is yet another thing I can’t say.

“That’s not for you to decide,” one of the officers says and reaches for his handcuffs. His eyes shift from me to Ethan, and then he stiffens when my German Shepherd, Hunter, calmly walks onto the porch. The officer next to him has his gun drawn and looks at Hunter as if he’s worried he’s going to get attacked. While a bullet won’t hurt my familiar, I’ll still be fucking pissed if a cop shoots my dog for just standing on the porch.

“I’m going to suggest we do this the easy way,” the officer holding the cuffs says and I want to roll my eyes at how cliché he sounds, but I don’t because I’m fucking terrified. Because this is bad. Really fucking bad.

Patrick died in a horrible way, found burned to death inside his apartment. The doors were locked, which I know can lead the police to believe he was killed by someone he knew who would have access to a key. And while Ethan and Patrick weren’t close, we had spoken to him recently...and I’d gotten into a heated argument with him.

Heated enough for Stephanie to accuse *me* of being the one who killed him with magic. As far as I know, no official report was made. Though if the police know Patrick and I had an unpleasant exchange, well, they could argue that’s the motive for Ethan to kill him. But Ethan going over there, confronting Patrick, and then burning him to death? It’s a stretch, though

it's one they might be willing to make. The fire can't be explained any other way.

There were no ashes. No accelerants used. They won't be able to pinpoint the source of the fire because it was demonic and came out of a freaking crack in a prison dimension. And—fuck—this happened in Chicago. Ethan and I are here in Indiana. The Thorne Hill Police Department is here to carry out the arrest, but will Ethan be transferred to Illinois? Does this make the charges against him Federal or something? I have no idea how it works but crossing state lines can't be a good thing.

Fire sparks around my fingers and I ball my hands into fists, trying to keep flames from springing up around my fingers. Knowing I need to redirect the energy somewhere, I squeeze my eyes shut and quickly open my hands, letting go of the energy I was gathering.

“Ahh!” the officer holding the gun says and jerks back as if someone shoved him. He pulls one hand off his gun, looking at his hand. His palm is red and raw, and my eyes widen, realizing I accidentally sent the red-hot energy to him. Shit! This isn't going to help our case when the victim of said murder was *burned to fucking death*.

The other officer, who is close enough for me to read the name *Maxwell* on his vest, reaches for his gun, eyes slitting suspiciously.

“Don't even think about moving,” he tells us, and I look at Ethan out of the corner of my eye. Ethan still has his hands out slightly in front of him, showing that he's not going to try anything. He's wearing athletic shorts and a t-shirt, ready to go into work. I know for a fact he doesn't have a gun on him today, thank goodness. He has his concealed carry permit for

Indiana, so having his usual pistol isn't illegal. It wouldn't paint him in the best light in this current situation.

"No one is moving," Ethan says calmly. "This is a misunderstanding but, as you can see, I'm going to comply." He holds up his hands a little higher. "I'll come down the porch steps now, if that's alright with you."

Officer Maxwell looks at his fellow officer and gives him a curt nod. The officer grips his gun again, grunting from the pain of his burned skin. How he's going to explain that...I have no idea. Then Maxwell motions for Ethan to come down the steps.

My heart is in my throat, beating so fast that nervous sweat starts to drip down my back. How the hell is Ethan so calm? Nothing about this is okay, and the little voice in the back of my mind is screaming at me to keep my shit together. The voice is trying to remind me that guilty people often act out because they know they've been caught.

The police don't have anything on Ethan because he didn't do it. There just cannot be any evidence pointing toward him. There can't be.

"Ethan," I rush out, eyes wide in shock as Officer Maxwell roughly grabs his arms, pulling them behind his back so he can cuff him.

"It's okay, babe," Ethan tells me as tears start to fill my eyes. This can't be happening. But it is. My breath leaves in a ragged huff and I move toward Ethan.

"Easy now," the officer with the gun tells me. "Don't make this any harder than it needs to be."

"But this is wrong." I look at him, shaking my head. "He didn't kill anyone. You've got the wrong person."

“Anora,” Ethan says again, hazel eyes locking with mine. “It’s going to be okay,” he repeats. “Just call my dad and he’ll get in contact with someone from—” The words die in his throat, but I know what he’s about to say.

He’ll get in contact with someone from the Order.

Someone who can pull strings and get Ethan’s record scrubbed clean again. But he’s not part of the Order anymore. They won’t help anymore...especially when I’m starting to think they were the ones to accuse Ethan of murder in the first place.

If they can’t have him, no one can.

Chapter

Two

“Nik!” My hands shake as I hurry back into the house. Hunter bumps his nose against me, trying to give me some comfort. “Nik!” I shout again, trying to wake him up. “Nik!” With trembling fingers, I grip the railing and put my foot on the first wooden step. It creaks beneath my weight and my knees feel like they might buckle.

Ethan just got arrested. *For murder.*

This is bad. Really fucking bad. I want to believe we’ll figure this out and I’ll go down to the station with evidence proving his innocence, but how?

“Yes, milady?” Nik asks, stepping into the hall. His brown hair is messy and he’s wearing blue plaid PJ pants and a black t-shirt. “If a demon is attacking, tell it to come back when it’s not so early.”

“It’s the afternoon,” I say, voice thin. “And...it’s...it’s not a demon. Ethan just got arrested.” I make it the rest of the way up the stairs, stopping at the landing. Nik blinks several times, looking at me as if he didn’t hear me correctly. “For Patrick’s murder. The hunter who was found burned to death.”

“By Kornath.”

I bob my head up and down. “But they arrested Ethan and I bet the Order is behind this. They’re pissed at him for leaving and they’re pissed at him for dating me: a witch.”

“Okay,” Nik starts and inhales deeply. “Do you know a lawyer?”

“Um, just the one who handled Aunt Estelle’s affairs after she died, but I don’t think he does criminal cases? Fuck, Ethan isn’t a criminal. Well, I guess he is on some accounts of breaking and entering, but he’s not a murderer!”

“I know,” Nik says calmly, eyes wide. “We’ll start by finding a lawyer.”

“And tell them what?” I ask as the reality of the situation comes crashing down on me. “That Ethan is innocent because a demon is the real murderer, but don’t worry about that because I used a flaming sword to kill her!”

“I wouldn’t tell a lawyer you killed anyone.” Nik makes a face. “Even a demon. They might think you’re speaking metaphorically.”

“Right.” I bring my hand to my forehead, feeling like the world is spinning around me. “He said to call his dad.”

“Then that’s what you should do. I know I’ve heard Ethan talk about other times he’s been arrested, and yes—” Nik holds up a hand to keep me from protesting. “I know the Order was able to step in and pull strings and he’s not part of the Order now. But his family still is. They could help.”

“Unless they really are behind this.”

“Well, yes, I supposed they would not be helpful then.” Nik comes down the hall and puts both hands on my shoulders. “It’s going to be okay, Anora.”

“How? I have no idea how to prove Ethan is innocent?”

“You are a witch,” he says slowly. “Surely, we can come up with some way to get Ethan out of jail.”

I nod again, letting his words sink in. I am a witch. I can cast spells and sway opinions and probably do a lot of things I *shouldn't* do. Though in this case, it's justified.

Because Ethan didn't kill anyone.

“I'll call his dad.”

“Good.” Nik gives my shoulders a squeeze. “He was on his way to work, right?”

“Shit, yes.”

“Did he take his phone, by chance?”

“I don't know,” I reply. “The police didn't check his pockets or anything.”

Nik holds up a finger and rushes back into his room, coming back a few seconds later with his own phone. He calls Ethan's and we hear it ringing downstairs. “Call Ethan's dad. I'll come up with a reason for him not to show up to work.”

“Food poisoning,” I offer, not knowing what kind of weird excuse Nik might use. “Send a text. His phone password is zero-eight-two-seven.”

“The day you two met?” Nik's lips curve into a smile.

“Yeah. The day we met. I thought he was a vampire.” I smile as well, mind flitting back to that night. I was drunk and upset and walked out of the bar with no destination in mind and just happened to cross paths with Ethan. “Thanks, Nik.”

“Of course. You're like my family now.” He gives me a sympathetic smile and we start downstairs. I get my phone

from the kitchen to call David, hands still trembling. The call goes right to voicemail. Letting out a long exhale, I call Julia next. She answers on the third ring.

“Thank god,” I sigh, letting my eyes fall shut.

“What’s wrong?”

“Ethan was just arrested for Patrick’s murder.”

“Fuck,” Julia replies. “Are you guys at home?”

“Yeah. It was the Thorne Hill police and they had a warrant.”

“Fuck,” she repeats. “This just happened?”

“Yeah. Ethan said to call his dad, but he didn’t answer.”

“He’s on a hunt.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “What do we do?”

“Where were you the day of the murder?” Julia asks, tone tense but overall calm.

“Um...we...we...” I close my eyes, thinking back. Sam came to the house to tell us in person that I was about to be accused myself. And she came because Ethan wasn’t answering his phone. “We were here dealing with an incubus.”

“Oh. Okay. I didn’t know that.”

I’m surprised Sam didn’t mention anything, but I’m not about to bring it up now. “We didn’t leave the house until, um, maybe that night? Or did we order food?”

“The night doesn’t matter. Patrick’s time of death was early that morning. You have cameras, right?”

“Yeah, we do,” I say, getting excited for a split second. “And the camera footage will show Ethan here, but also us killing the incubus. Did you know they, uh, explode babies?”

“Eww. I’d heard but I’ve never fought one myself before. What time did that start?”

I shake my head. “I don’t remember. I can check—the barn footage!” I pull the phone away from my ear, putting it on speaker. “Ethan fed the horses that morning. Hang on.” I madly scroll back through all the footage, heart racing faster and faster the farther I go back. I haven’t deleted anything, but I don’t know how long the video footage is stored before it’s automatically deleted. The barn camera is set up to record a minute when someone—or something—comes in or out of the main door. We set it up that way so we’d know if someone tried to steal one of my horses or donkeys, someone escaped from their stall, or if a demon broke in. Other than that, nothing is prerecorded and I can just check on everyone anytime I need reassurance.

If Ethan went in one of the side doors, he wouldn’t have triggered the motion sensor until he led the horses out. Swallowing hard, I continue swiping through the footage, heart hammering faster and faster.

“Found it,” I say, letting out a sigh of relief. “Thank god.”

“What time does he go into the barn?”

“A little after seven-fifteen.”

Julia lets out an audible sigh of relief. “Patrick’s T.O.D. was six-fifty-five AM. There’s no way Ethan could have killed him and driven back to Thorne Hill in that time. How clear is the footage?”

“It’s pretty good. You know I’m cheap about pretty much everything except my horses.”

“Can you send me the video? I’ll get it over to David and we’ll get this sorted out. Did they say if they were going to transfer him to the Chicago police or not?”

“No, they didn’t say.”

“Okay.” She inhales and I can see her face, tense with worry, in my head. “I’m going to guess he’ll be held in Thorne Hill for a while. It will be at least six hours before we can get there, assuming we can get on a flight right away.”

“Right. You’re in New York. What...what do I do?” I’m all jittery again.

“Hang tight, and I know that sucks. But we’ll get this sorted out. Ethan is innocent and we have proof of an alibi. Send me everything you have from that day that doesn’t show the incubus. And I need to hear that story another day.”

“Yeah. It was kinda crazy.”

“I’ll update you as soon as I can.”

“Thanks, Julia.”

We end the call and I download and send her the videos of Ethan from the morning. He opens the big barn door and goes in, leaving the door open behind him. It lights up the barn and you can clearly see his face. He talks to Mystery, Sundance, Ross, and Rachel as he gives them hay and then the recording stops. Motion is detected again when he leads the donkeys out of the barn, taking them to the pasture. He comes back for Sundance and Mystery, and the two geldings nip at each other as Ethan leads them both at the same time outside.

He comes in once more and starts cleaning stalls, and the camera picks up him walking in and out of the barn two more times as he empties a wheelbarrow full of manure. The last little clip of him shows him with his flannel shirt tied around his waist and I pause the recording and zoom in. You can clearly see his tattoos. There's no denying this is Ethan, and he was here—all the way on the outskirts of Thorne Hill—at seven-fifteen the same morning Patrick died.

This should bring me more comfort than it does, but I can't stop thinking about why the cops would show up now, two months later, to arrest Ethan.

“There's only one reason,” I tell Hunter, setting my phone down after I sent the videos to Julia. “Someone is trying to frame him.”

Chapter
Three

“**W**hat about a glamour spell?” I nervously flip the pages in my Book of Shadows, glancing up every few seconds to look at the police station.

“For you or for Ethan?” Nik asks, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel.

“Um, both?” I shake my head, knowing that won’t help. If anything, Ethan randomly appearing as someone else would make things worse. Letting out a sigh, I lean back and look at the police station again, heart skipping a beat when the door opens. It’s not like the charges are going to get suddenly dropped and he’ll be free to go.

Closing my book, I tap the screen of my phone. Julia hasn’t updated me in nearly half an hour and I got nowhere when I tried going into the police station.

“They can lie.” I swallow hard and open the book again. “The police.” I turn my head toward Nik. “They can say they found evidence or have DNA or something.”

“Ethan is smart,” Nik assures me. “He won’t say anything to make matters worse.”

“Yeah. You’re right.”

“It’ll be okay. Somehow.”

“Somehow,” I echo and start to feel frustrated as I look through the book. “I’m a witch who can literally hold fire in my hand yet I’m totally clueless how to fix this right now.” I lean my head back again, grinding my teeth. “Someone set Ethan up, I know it. And I’m pretty sure it’s the fucking Order.”

“Let’s say it is,” Nik starts, twisting in the driver’s seat to face me. “What could they have on Ethan that could frame him?”

“I have no idea. I mean, it could literally be anything. They have the resources to get him out of jail, it would probably be pretty easy to get him into jail, right?”

“Yeah,” he agrees. “But being convicted of murder requires evidence. You two didn’t go to Patrick’s apartment, did you?”

“No. We saw him at the Order HQ and that was it.”

“What about a motive?”

“Patrick didn’t like me. He said a few mean things and kind of threatened me, but it wasn’t anything major.”

“But it could be enough.”

“Yeah.” We’ve been through this already, and I’m thankful Nik is going over things again to appease me. “Really, Patrick has more motive to murder us, but, uh, he’s a little too dead to do that.”

“That tends to make things difficult.” Nik lets his hands slide off the steering wheel. I was too shaken up to drive and I need to get it together. Ethan is innocent and he *will* get out of here. If we can’t do things legally, then I will figure out how to magically erase his record.

“Maybe I can cast some sort of spell that will help us fake his death or something?” I muse out loud when I open the Book and flip past the glamour spell again. “I can make him look dead and then we can break into the morgue and get him out.”

“If it comes down to it,” Nik says, making a face. “But, uh, I’m sure we can come up with something else.”

I put my head in my hands, letting out a breath. “I can fight demons but I cannot figure this out.”

“You’re rattled right now.” Nik pats my shoulder. “Your boyfriend is in jail for murder and the Order of the Mystic Realm has it out for you. It’s a lot to process.”

“Yeah.” My breath leaves my lungs and I turn, looking out the window. “And that’s what scares me. We get Ethan out and then what will the Order do? They won’t let this go. Will they go after Ethan’s family?”

“They’re members. They probably won’t go after them,” Nik tries. “They follow the rules and everything. Ethan didn’t. So, they’re safe.”

“I hope so, but if David finds out they’re responsible for this...” I shake my head. “Sam is already on the fence about leaving. This would definitely push her to do it.”

“Silver lining?” Nik shrugs and I just bite the inside of my cheek. “A secret organization with enough power to clear or create criminal records is, uh, terrifying.”

“A secret organization with enough power to clear or create criminal records and has a warehouse full of dark objects at their disposal,” I correct and we both shudder. “I wish there was a way to take them down.”

“The coven. Could they help?”

“I don’t know,” I say, realizing I didn’t even think about it. “I’m sure if it were me, but Ethan isn’t a member of the coven. But if the Order is blackmailing people, the High Priestess probably will want to know.”

Silence falls over us and I let my eyes close for a moment. Something is really off about this whole thing, not just the obvious *Ethan got arrested* issue. Whatever it is nags at me like negative energy. My eyes fly open when I realize that’s exactly what I’m sensing: negative energy. But right when I open my mouth to tell Nik, I see someone get out of a black SUV.

“The fuck is he doing here?” I ask, reaching for the door.

“Who?” Nik sits up straighter.

“That guy.” My eyes widen. “Carl. He works for the Order.”

“Oh, shit. Anora, don’t—”

I don’t hear the rest of what Nik says. I get out of the car, rage building inside of me, and rush across the parking lot.

“What the hell?” I demand and Carl spins around, half smile on his face.

“Oh, hello, Miss Benson.”

“I knew it! I fucking knew you were behind this.” I ball my fingers into fists, too angry to realize little flames are flickering around my hands.

“Easy, Scarlet Witch,” Carl quips, looking at my hands. “Or else they’re going to think they arrested the wrong person.”

“This isn’t funny,” I say through gritted teeth, and the light in the lamppost behind us starts to hum with energy. The doors

to the police station open and close and two officers come out. One of them eyes us, no doubt able to read the tension in my body language. I blow out a breath, releasing the energy.

Nik comes over right as they walk past, stopping at my side, eyes narrowed as he stares down Carl, who stiffens at the sight of him. Right. Order members don't like supernatural creatures, which means Stephanie must have told him the Order that not only is Ethan living with a witch, but a faery as well.

"It isn't funny at all. Murder charges are serious." Carl pushes his shoulders back and adjusts his briefcase hanging on his shoulder. "Which is why you need to get out of my way and let me go to my client. We both want the same thing here."

"What?" I blink once. Twice. Carl isn't laughing or even grinning. Is he being serious? "You are the reason Ethan got arrested."

"I assure you, I am not."

"Maybe not you, but the shady as fuck organization you work for you is."

Carl's brows go up. "I can also assure you the Order is not responsible for this." He puts his hand to his chest. "I offered my services as soon as I heard." He tries to take a step forward, but I block his way.

"You are not going in there until I know what's going on."

Carl looks at the police station doors and then back at me. "Don't cause a scene."

"I'll do what's necessary," I shoot back, though he's right. "Ethan left the Order and now you're getting back at him."

“Quite the opposite,” Carl insists. “The Baileys are valued members of the Order, and we hope in time Ethan will reconsider and join again. Pinning a murder on him would not only guarantee that wouldn’t happen, but it would also cause his father and sisters to drop out as well.” Carl looks around and nervously shifts a little closer. “And reopening this case is nothing but a headache for us. We’d already had this handled. I assure you,” he presses. “The Order had nothing to do with this. I’m here to clear Ethan of the charges.”

“You’re a lawyer?” Nik asks, wrinkling his nose. “Are you any good?”

Carl narrows his eyes. “You better hope so.”

“Fine,” I relent. “Say I believe you and you’re here to help and win back a hunter. Then who framed him?”

“That is a question we want answered as well.” A tiny bit of fear flickers across Carl’s face. “Only a handful of people know about Patrick’s death and the real cause, with a majority of them being hunters. We were able to keep the case as closed as possible. The death was ruled accidentally after Patrick fell asleep with a bottle of Jack in his hand and a cigarette in his mouth. Things were dealt with accordingly...until a few days ago.”

“What happened a few days ago?”

“Someone new moved into Patrick’s apartment and conveniently found a lighter stashed inside a vent in the wall.”

“Okay, that’s a little suspicious,” I admit. “But how does that make an accidental death a murder?”

“The lighter was covered in sulfur dust, which is highly flammable. And there was one very clear fingerprint on the lighter.”

“Ethan’s.”

“Yes,” Carl says, eyes meeting mine. He doesn’t have to say it: I know what he’s thinking, and it’s bad. Really fucking bad. Because whoever framed Ethan not only knew that Patrick’s death wasn’t an accident, but they knew enough to use sulfur.

Which means they know about the demon.

Chapter
Four

“**A**re you sure we can trust him?” I nervously twirl my hair around my finger. Nik and are back in my car, talking to David on the phone.

“Not in general,” David responds. “But in this case, yes. The Order didn’t set Ethan up. Carl was telling the truth in saying they want Ethan back in their ranks. You know he’s a good hunter and losing him is bad for business, you could say.”

I look at Nik, making a face and shaking my head. I hate the fucking Order, but if they can pull this off, then I’ll owe them one. Which is another problem on its own, but I can’t think about that right now.

“Yeah. I guess. They, um, weren’t happy he left. Retaliation didn’t seem too far off.”

“I agree,” David says, surprising me a bit. “But not in this case. They really do want him back, and...” He lets out a sigh, hesitating before saying what he was about to say. “And Ethan doesn’t know this, but the Order has used him as what you’d call their poster boy for the last few years.”

Now it’s Nik’s turn to give me a *what the fuck* look. “Poster boy?” he repeats. “What do they do? Send out pamphlets with pictures of him killing demons?”

David hesitates again. “More like video clips.”

“And Ethan doesn’t know?” I echo, surprised but not at the same time. Ethan and I have only been together for nearly ten months now, but I know him. I trust him. I love him.

And he feels the same about me.

But I’m starting to realize there’s a lot I don’t quite know about his family...and now I’m wondering if I’m not the only one. It’s not the first time his dad kept him in the dark about something, either. From downplaying the severity of an Order member entangling with a witch to this?

David was born into the Order, raised as a hunter, and never questioned it. Then he had a son and expected the same. Except, Ethan did question things. He wanted to go to college. Get a regular job and have a life as well as hunt and kill demons.

And I thought we had that, but the Order wanted to keep Ethan on a leash.

“You know he wouldn’t be happy if he found out,” David goes on. “Telling him won’t change anything.”

“Right,” I say, hearing the unspoken request to not mention this to Ethan. David is right in saying that the Order won’t stop using Ethan as promo, and it *will* piss Ethan off to know the Order has been using video clips of him.

“If the Order didn’t frame Ethan, then who did?” Nik asks.

“I have no idea,” David says with a sigh.

“What about another hunter?” I suggest. “Someone who’s mad Ethan left the Order and is dating a witch?”

“It’s a possibility, though no one loyal to the Order would reopen a case like that. They’d find another way to get back at

him, or they'd go after you, Anora.”

I raise my brows and nod as I talk. “Yeah. That makes more sense. Unless...” The words die in my throat, not wanting to say them out loud.

“Unless they knew they couldn't take on a witch,” Nik finishes for me. “And they knew going after the one person she loves more than anyone would hurt the most.”

“We will look into it. Julia is getting information on the new couple in the apartment as we speak.”

“Good,” I say and a few seconds of silence tick by.

“Ethan will be released,” David assures me. “Carl is good at what he does, and the security camera footage proves there is no way Ethan was in the barn in Thorne Hill and in Chicago murdering Patrick at the same time.”

“I know,” I tell him, trying to fully believe it myself. Ethan has an alibi, yet I can't shake the bad feeling that's settling down in the pit of my stomach.

“Try not to worry. I know that's easier said than done. I'll keep in touch, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks, David,” I say and then end the call, letting out a slow breath. Nik turns the music back on and I open my window. A cool breeze blows in, making me shiver, but it feels good right now. It's a typical spring day here in the Midwest. The sun is warm, but the breeze still has the chill of winter on it, reminding me that we're not completely out of the woods when it comes to being cold just yet.

“It's only a matter of time before he walks through those doors,” Nik says.

“Yeah.”

“But I think we really should consider what I said.” Nik’s brows push together with concern.

“You said a lot of things.”

He gives me a lopsided smile. “I typically do, but I’m talking about someone going after Ethan to get to you. I mean, look at you: you’re rattled, tense, upset—obviously, of course. But you’re distracted with your guard down. If I was going to attack you or curse you, this would be an ideal time.”

“Seems like a lot of work to go through just to go after me.”

“Well, you’ve been surprisingly resilient when it comes to facing the darkness. You’re a witch, who, until recently, had no memory of being one and in just a few months, you’ve fought and killed several demons, became a leader of reapers, and went into a demonic prison and came out unscathed. Whoever framed Ethan has been watching to know that there was a connection between Ethan and Patrick in the first place. They probably know you’re not so easy to mess with.”

“That is true, though you’re making me sound way more badass than I am.” I wrinkle my nose. “I didn’t really know what I was doing while fighting any of the things you mentioned.”

“I’ll argue that makes you even more badass.” Nik playfully elbows me. “You’re a talented witch, Anora.” He rests his head back against the seat. “Why your aunt bound your powers is beyond me. You’re catching up fast, but think of where you’d be if she hadn’t.”

“Yeah,” I say again. “I think I need to come to terms with the fact that I’m never going to know why she did it.” I push my hair back when another gust of wind blows in the car.

“You know it’s basically haunted me since I found out about it. At least I remember pretty much everything now.” I shake my head. “Which is weird as fuck on its own. The memories are there, but it’s more like memories of watching a TV show and not of something happening to me.”

“Hey, at least you didn’t go crazy when your past got altered in your mind like that.”

“That is one heck of a silver lining.”

Silence falls over us again and we both stare at the doors to the police station. My heart starts to beat faster as each minute passes. What the hell is going on in there? Is the alibi not good enough to stand up against the evidence? Do they have more evidence they didn’t tell Carl about?

“The new barn should be ready soon,” Nik notes, and I know he’s bringing it up for my sake. If there’s one thing that can distract me no matter how bad things get, it’s talking about horses.

“Yeah,” I say, unable to help the small smile that comes to my face. “Though I’m almost more excited about the arena. It’s been so muddy it’s hard to work the horses without proper footing.”

“There are more than four stalls in the new barn,” he starts and raises his eyebrows.

“Trust me, I’m already thinking about filling them. There’s a place that does livestock auctions like twice a month only a few hours south of us, and they get a lot of Amish horses. I want to get a few before a kill buyer snatches them up.”

Nik shudders. “I still don’t understand how horses can be sold for meat.”

“Neither do I. Or any animal for that matter.” I look back at the police station, heart aching. “Ethan still has no idea I used Beyond Meat the last time I made him tacos.”

Nik chuckles. “I almost didn’t eat them, thinking it was ground beef.” He’s only half faery but abides by the fae rule of not eating any other living creature.

“Yeah, if you didn’t know you’d—” I cut off when the doors open. Carl exits first, followed by Ethan. Gasping, I throw open the car door and get out, running through the parking lot.

“Ethan!” I call, but he’s already rushing over to me. I fling myself into his arms and he holds me tight against his chest.

“It’s okay,” he tells me, strong arms wrapped around me. “Everything is good.”

“Is it?” I pull back just enough to look into his pretty eyes.

“Yes,” he presses and flicks his eyes to Carl. “The charges were dropped. We should get out of here before we talk.”

“Right, of course. We could get something to eat,” I say and then remember Ethan called off sick. The gym he works at is in Paradise Valley, but there’s a chance he could run into someone here in Thorne Hill. “Going home is a better idea.” We start walking toward my car. “Things are really okay?” I can’t help but ask.

“They are,” Carl answers this time. He comes to a stop, flicking his eyes to the police station. We’re alone in the parking lot at the moment. “Ethan has a solid alibi with proof he was at home at the time of the murder. And as soon as I pointed out that the evidence seemed rather convenient, it was as if the officers suddenly thought so too.”

I look from him to Ethan, not following. “Well, duh, it was planted, right?”

“Yes, and anyone with half a brain would have been able to realize that,” Carl goes on. “Once questioned, it was as if a spell had been broken and things were seen as they really were, which was that they didn’t have enough plausible cause for an arrest. No one even knows who found the lighter.” Carl tips his head, staring at me.

I inhale, eyes narrowing. “You really think that I’d try to get my own boyfriend arrested for murder?”

“All I know is, something altered those cops’ minds.”

Ethan holds his hand up. “Anora didn’t do this. Don’t you even fucking think about accusing her.”

Carl’s thin lips curve into a smile. “You know what they say about the company you keep.” He shifts his gaze from me to Ethan. “I’d be careful if I were you. You know who your family is,” he tells him. “And you know we have your back. When you’re ready to return, the Order will welcome you home.” He gives Ethan a curt nod and then turns and walks away, leaving me gaping at him.

“The fuck?” I mutter and look at Ethan. “I didn’t—”

“Babe,” Ethan interrupts. “Don’t defend yourself. I never for a second thought you were behind this. You’re not.” He puts his large hands on my shoulders and a rush goes through me just from feeling the heat of his skin against me. “The charges were dropped, I’m free to go, and Carl was able to pull some strings and the lighter with my prints on it will be *misplaced* by the end of the week. Everything is okay.”

“It’s not, though.” I shake my head and bite my bottom lip. “Someone tried to frame you for murder, and I think Nik is

right.”

“Right about what?”

“Another demon is after me.”

Chapter
Five

“**A**ll right,” I say and smooth out the paper in front of me before sitting at the island counter in the kitchen. “It could be any one of these.”

“Or something else entirely,” Ethan chides, coming up behind me.

“Right.” I pull the cap off my pen and look down at the handwritten letter. Aunt Estelle wrote it years ago, and I don’t know who it was intended for. The letter has a list of all the demons she bound to human bodies, rendering them powerless. The spell she used to bind the demons was similar to the one she used to bind my powers. If the spell on me broke after her death...it makes sense that the demons won’t be bound for much longer either.

“We can go through the demon dictionary too. There’s not much to go on, but better safe than sorry, right?” I open a notebook, looking at my messy handwriting. I cross referenced as many demons as I could from the list with what I could find in the demon dictionary and my Book of Shadows. I look carefully over my notes about the demons.

“We have nothing to go off of,” Ethan says gently and sits next to me. “I’m not downplaying anything, but framing

someone for murder isn't typically how demons go about things."

"I know," I agree. "But someone did frame you."

"The odds point to a human."

"But who?"

His hand lands on my thigh. "My dad is going to send over all the info the Chicago PD has as soon as Julia can hack into their system. And Carl is still working on getting what he can from the Thorne Hill police." His brow furrows and he slowly inhales. "The officer who made the arrest, Maxwell was his name, he...he seemed to know something is going on in this town."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we now know there's a Ley line running through the center of town."

"Right," I say, thinking back to not that long ago when Ruby explained it all to me in detail. It was a strange concept to grasp, though not even scientists can deny there are certain points and locations where natural energy is stronger than others. "And all sorts of things flock to it."

"Exactly. Statistically, Thorne Hill has one of the lowest crime rates in all of Indiana. But it has an unusually high death rate...though a lot of deaths caused by demons are written off as animal attacks."

"Which the police have to know is bullshit."

"Right. When Officer Maxwell questioned me, it was like he was trying to get info out of me, and not info about Patrick." His eyes meet mine and I know what he's implying.

If one cop is already suspect to the supernatural, we need to be careful.

“You’re sure demon bones don’t share any sort of human DNA?” I ask, turning and looking at my backyard. The burn pile and surrounding disturbed earth would be a crime scene investigator’s dream. If finding charred skin and bone fragments is their kind of thing.

“Yes. If anything, it would bounce back as some sort of inbred, cross-species animal. And I am speaking from experience. The charges were dropped, but we are on the cops’ radar now.”

“Great,” I say with a wince. “We haven’t even been in town for a year and I’m already running out of room for our unmarked graveyard.”

“I still think we should get some pigs.”

“So we can feed them demons?” I raise my eyebrows.

Ethan shrugs. “They eat anything, right?”

I laugh and turn so my body is facing him. “I can’t believe you got arrested today.”

Ethan takes my hands in his and looks right into my eyes. “It was really lonely in prison.” He stands and picks me up, setting me on the counter, and moves between my thighs, hands landing on my hips. I hook my arms around his neck, heart fluttering in my chest. “I am a man with needs.”

I cock an eyebrow. “You spent maybe two hours in a holding room. They even gave you coffee.”

“Like I said, thinking of you got me through my time away.” He pushes my hair over my shoulder, deft fingers

sweeping across my collarbone. Just one little touch is enough to turn me on.

“It’s almost a shame you weren’t convicted. You make a rather sexy felon.”

“In that case, let me remind you that I have been arrested before. I’ve spent a few nights in jail too.”

“I am a sucker for bad boys.”

“Want me to show you my unofficial record then?” He wiggles his eyebrows and grins.

“I’m thinking I’d rather see something else right now,” I say with a laugh. “And after that long prison sentence, I’m sure there’s only one thing on your mind right now.” I run my hands down his chest, feeling his muscles beneath his t-shirt. I let out a shaky breath as I lean forward, resting my forehead against Ethan’s. “I was scared I wouldn’t get you back.”

“I’m not leaving you, Anora. You know I would do anything to come back to you.”

I nod, not wanting to move my face away from his. I dreamed of finding a love like ours and had relented to the fact that it was something I’d only read about in romance novels. My whole heart longed for someone like Ethan, and I still have moments where I can’t believe how lucky we are to have found each other.

Ethan sees me—all of me—and accepts the good and the bad. He’s patient and kind but can be ruthless and violent when he needs to be. He’s my demon-hunting hero, but I know he’d burn the world for me and me alone. That should scare me, and some might even call it a red flag, but knowing he would do anything for me makes my heart swell in my chest

and stirs desire deep within me, making me want him like my life depends on it.

“I love you,” I breathe and Ethan puts his lips to mine, kissing me softly at first. Then he slides me to the very edge of the counter so my core presses against his cock. I can feel it harden as he pushes his tongue into my mouth, kissing me with fervor. Warmth spreads through me, and I slide my hands down his shoulders, balling the material of his shirt in my fists.

He lifts his arms, breaking the kiss for just a moment so I can pull his shirt up and over his head. I drop it on the floor and go back to him, running my hands over his tattooed arms and back over his chest. His skin is warm and soft under the palms of my hands, sending another jolt of desire through me.

Ethan slides his hands under my thighs, and I wrap my legs around him as he picks me up. He stumbles his way through the kitchen, kissing me as he walks up the backstairs and into our room. My heart flutters as desire swirls inside of me, wanting him and him alone.

We make it as far as the sitting area in our bedroom when we tangle together again. I rake my fingers through Ethan’s brown hair, pressing my forehead against his.

“I love you,” I breathe, stepping in close so my hips are against his.

“And I love you.” He pulls my shirt up and I raise my hands, allowing him to strip me bare. The shirt falls to the ground, and I flick my wrist, using magic to close the bedroom door. His hands land on my sides, slowly tracing his fingers along the curves of my hips until he gets to the waist of my pants. Goosebumps break out along my flesh and my heart hammers in my chest as the desperation builds. My lips part as

I watch Ethan look at me like I'm the only thing that matters to him.

I'd never been with someone as intense as Ethan before, both in the bedroom and in life in general. Growing up as a romance book junkie, I always wanted the kind of epic love people write about. I was scared I would never find it. It was like there was a piece missing, a puzzle piece with an ever-changing shape. Finding someone to fill that hole seemed next to impossible, but here we are, and I can't imagine my life any other way.

And I've learned that the missing piece still changes shape. Sometimes it's big enough to let the cold wind blow through and other times it's scabbed over and small. But that's the thing about good love: it changes and grows with you, and Ethan has been there with me every step of the way. He knows some days I need more from him than others. He's patient and kind with me but fiercely protective too. Yet he knows I can handle my shit—most of the time—and his level of respect for me is almost unreal.

“God, I want you,” I pant, bringing my own hands down to his, impatiently undoing the button of my jeans. I shimmy out of them and Ethan brings two fingers to his mouth, wetting them with his tongue before moving his hand between my legs.

My eyes flutter shut and I shiver, widening my stance as I hook my arms around his neck. He works his fingers in expert movements, knowing exactly what I like and always delivering.

“Be patient.” He circles my core, teasing me. “I'll fuck you when I'm good and ready,” he growls in my ear, and I let my head fall to the side. Ethan keeps moving his fingers until I'm

about ready to come. My knees are already weak, and if I wasn't holding onto him, I would have fallen on the floor.

“Oh god, don't stop,” I beg, ready to reach down and grab his wrist, holding it there as he keeps rubbing my clit, not stopping until I come so hard his hand is dripping.

“Fuck, you're wet,” he moans, putting his lips to my neck, kissing and sucking my skin as he continues to work his fingers against me. My mouth falls open and I press my fingers into his flesh as the orgasm hits. My entire body shudders but he doesn't stop there.

Wrapping his free hand around my waist to help support me, he slips a finger inside, going right to my g-spot. He presses against it, not needing to do much to make me come again since my core is still pulsing with pleasure. It's almost too much, and I try to push him away, but Ethan doesn't relent. He presses and releases again and then strokes my inner walls with his fingers while gently rubbing my clit with his thumb.

I moan again as I come for the second time, harder and faster this time. I have to lean on Ethan to keep from falling. He slowly moves his hand from between my legs to my waist, holding me against him as the pleasure continues to flood through me. I'm panting, heart racing, and couldn't form a coherent sentence if my life depended on it.

Then he advances, picking me up and carrying me to the bed. He throws me down on the mattress, spreading my legs and moving in between. I slit my eyes open, watching him hastily undress before he dives back down on me, the hard, wet tip of his cock rubbing against me. It sends a ripple through me and even though I just had a double orgasm, my body begs for more and I want that big cock to push inside me, fucking me into oblivion.

I push up just enough to watch him enter me and then collapse back down, still trying to catch my breath. Ethan lowers himself enough that my nipples rub against his bare chest as he thrusts in and out, and I bend one leg up and around him. He hits me at a different angle, and I cry out as a new sensation of pleasure goes through me. This one builds up slowly, and I buck my hips along with Ethan's thrusts, knowing he's doing everything he can not to come until I do again.

My breath quickens and I wrap my other leg around him, enabling him to push in deeper. But then in a swift movement, he sits up, grabbing my thighs and holding me against him as he moves onto his knees, fucking me with fervor. I grab a tangle of the blankets in my hand, balling them tight as I come one more time, pussy tightening around his cock. Ethan lets out a groan as he pushes in deep, holding himself there as he comes.

Slowly, he lowers me back to the mattress and pulls out, laying down next to me. We're both panting and little beads of sweat gather around Ethan's forehead.

"You can never go to prison for real," I say, voice all breathy as I reach for him. "I'd miss that too much."

"I would too," he pants. "Though I hear conjugal visits are an actual thing."

"I think you have to earn them with good behavior."

"I'm a fucking saint."

I laugh. "As long as you don't get a prison boyfriend you end up leaving me for."

"Way to ruin the moment, Anora." He rolls over and kisses me, hand going to my side. "I fucking love you, you know."

“I do, but I really like hearing you say it.” I put my hand on his, feeling completely at peace. My eyes start to shut and I know I need to get up and do the quick closed-legged run to the bathroom to pee and clean up. Telling myself it’s like ripping the Band-Aid off, I force myself up and scurry to the toilet and hurry back, getting into bed and under the covers.

“I have the rest of the day off,” Ethan says, running his fingers up and down my back. “What do you want to do?”

“I need to feed the horses and clean out the chicken area,” I say, tracing one of his tattoos with my finger. “The feed is still in the truck, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he says and my eyes flutter shut, being lulled to sleep from him gently scratching my back. “This afternoon seems like a long time ago.”

“It really does.” I get a flash of the pretty pregnant lady and the blue-eyed guy she was eating lunch with at the restaurant. She was so familiar and I don’t know why. I can’t remember if I saw her at the coven or not, but I’m sure that’s where I’ve seen her before. I’ll keep my eyes open the next time I go. “I want a nice quiet evening.”

“That sounds nice. I’ll make dinner.”

“And I’ll open a bottle of wine and get started on that as I watch you cook.”

Ethan chuckles. “We’ve had a lot of nights like this lately. I like it.”

“Ethan Joseph!” I sit up just so I can glare at him. “Don’t you jinx us.”

He gives me a look. “I don’t believe in jinxes, and we already had one shit show happen today.”

“That’s still ongoing,” I mumble and lay back down next to him. As much as I want to say it’s over and done with and just be happy the charges were dropped and Ethan is home with me, this is far from over.

“We can’t do anything about it at the moment,” Ethan says, being the voice of reason. “So, let’s drink and eat and fuck again later.”

The corners of my lips pull up into a smile. “I can get behind that plan.”

We stay in bed together a bit longer and then I force myself up, getting dressed in sweatpants and an old Minnie Mouse sweatshirt that I’ve had for way longer than I’m willing to admit. Nik and Hunter are in the living room watching TV, and Hunter comes with me out to the barn, acting like a working German Shepherd and rounding up my little herd.

I get everyone fed and brushed, take care of my chickens, and then go back into the house. Nik and Ethan are in the kitchen, and I stop when I get through the back door, smiling as I watch them both. Nik is sitting at the counter with a bowl full of ice cream in front of him. The sugar bowl is at his side, and my teeth hurt just thinking about the spoonfuls of sugar he no doubt dumped on top of the ice cream.

My phone rings as I walk to the pantry. I quickly grab a bottle of red wine and dash back into the kitchen to answer it. It’s Keith, and I think for a second if we had plans I forgot about or not. He always texts me instead of calling.

“Hello?” I say.

“Oh, thank god,” he huffs into the phone. “Are you home?”

“Yeah, what’s wrong?”

“My aunt bought a house to turn into a bed and breakfast. It has Hill House vibes so my cousin well...she...had had a seance to see if there were any spirits in the house who would talk.”

Well, there goes my quiet night. “There’s no chance you’re calling to say nothing happened and the place isn’t haunted, is there?”

“Not tonight. Something answered, Anora. And it talked about you.”

Chapter

Six

“**W**hat do you mean, it talked about me?” My brows push together, and I shake my head, looking at Hunter. He’s able to read my thoughts, more or less, and gets to his feet, coming over and pressing his nose against me.

“I was telling my aunt about my friend who’s really in tune with the paranormal and I’d probably be able to get you to come out and just get a read on the place,” Keith starts. “I didn’t know my cousin was trying to record ghost voices at the time. When we went back and listened to it, you hear me talking about you in the background and then you hear someone whisper *she’s a witch* on the recording.”

“Where is this house?” I push my hair back and turn around, seeing Ethan looking at me, brows slightly pushed together. He’s holding a wooden spoon in his hand, and the vegetables he’s sautéing splatter oil on his arm. He doesn’t wince but turns the burner down and gives me a look, silently asking what’s going on.

“In town. My town,” Keith adds, meaning Paradise Valley. “I don’t know much about the house, but it was built in the 1940s and is in serious need of an upgrade since the last one happened in the early 90s and I really don’t understand why geese in hats were ever a trend.”

“Reminds me of my grandma’s house.” I let out a slow breath, debating on how much to share with Keith. Both he and Rene now know that I’m far from the only witch in Thorne Hill, but I’m not about to share all the coven’s secrets. “We don’t go to Paradise Valley that often, and when we do, it’s to the feed store or we stick to the downtown area and go out to eat. Send me the address and the EVP recording if you can. I’ll listen and let you know what I think.”

“Thanks. We were supposed to start emptying the place but I don’t know if I want to go back in.”

“Did anything happen? I mean, other than capturing the EVP?”

“Not to me, but I get a really bad stomach-hurting vibe from the place.”

“That can usually be pretty telling,” I admit. “Did anyone live there before?”

“A long time ago. We’re still working on digging up the real history of the place. My aunt got it dirt cheap from the bank who suggested she tear it down and build something new,” he says ruefully. “The place has good bones...and probably a decent amount of mold. But I know it was built by a rich family who didn’t live there all that long and then it was subdivided into apartments. Then it was sold and bought with the intention of turning it into a wedding venue. We’re guessing the owners ran out of money and abandoned the project. Luckily, they sealed up the house pretty well which kept it from getting vandalized or exposed to the elements.”

“Interesting. I’ll look into it.”

“Do you want to stop by?” Keith asks. “I mean, this kinda seems like something right up your alley.”

“Oh, it is,” I say and try not to get too excited. Having been a medium all my life, I love checking out places nons consider haunted. Most of the time, the places are actually haunted, but not in the way most people think. The spirits are more like echoes of memories left behind, walking a familiar hall, or calling out the name of a loved one. Seeing and hearing something like that can be spooky, but there usually is no danger around those kinds of spirits. They make me sad, really, to know that they’re stuck in a loop with little energy left. Not all of them are even able to cross over or move on once they’ve reached that point.

It’s terrifying, really, to know someone’s spirit can get stuck like that, faded and forgotten until they’re just a tourist attraction. Don’t get me wrong, I’ve loved how mainstream ghost hunting has gotten over the last few years, but there’s something sad about people using these tormented spirits for views.

“You wanna go tonight?” he asks hopefully. “I can order takeout and meet you there.”

I make a face, glad he can’t see me. “Um, it’s been a really crazy day. You don’t think anyone is in danger, do you?”

“Not if I can get my cousin to leave. Everything okay?” He gasps. “Did a demon attack again?”

“Thankfully no, and I’ll fill you guys in soon.” I let out another sigh and shake my head as I think about the crazy turn today took. “Over wine. Lots and lots of wine.”

“I might have signed up for another monthly wine subscription so let me know when and I’ll bring a bottle or two.”

“Hah. I’ll definitely take you up on that offer. And I’ll text you tomorrow. The vet is coming out to do the horses’ teeth tomorrow morning, but I should be able to swing by in the afternoon, if that works.”

“It does. I work seven to three tomorrow, so we can meet out there in the evening.”

“Perfect.”

“I’m texting you the location and a few photos from today. Want me to dig into the history of the house?”

“Sure, but don’t tell me anything. If your cousin is expecting a world-class medium, then I want to deliver.”

Keith laughs. “I know you’ll blow her away. And don’t worry. I didn’t tell her you were a witch. She probably wouldn’t have believed me even if I did, but your secret is safe with me.”

“Thanks. Be careful, okay?”

“I will. I’m going to tempt my aunt and cousin to leave with the promise of buying them dinner. It’ll work.”

“Sounds good. Have a good night.”

“Bye, hun.”

I end the call and set my phone down, looking at Ethan. He’s waiting for an explanation, I know. “So, Keith’s aunt bought a haunted house and they caught an EVP that said something about a witch, and he thinks it was talking about me because *he* was talking about me.”

Ethan cocks an eyebrow. “What?”

I wave my hand in the air. “I’m sure it’s nothing. There are soooo many witches in the area...”

“Where is the house?” Nik asks.

“Somewhere in Paradise Valley,” I say right as a text from Keith with the address and pictures. “Oh, this is the place. It is wonderfully creepy.”

“Estelle would have said the same thing,” Nik notes with a lopsided grin. “I used to tell her if she dyed her hair black, she’d be the perfect Morticia.”

“I’ve always liked her. And Wednesday.”

“What exactly did this ghost say?” Ethan asks, face pulling down with concern.

“Supposedly, it said *she’s a witch* and Keith was just talking to his aunt about his friend who’s really good at ghost stuff.”

“Did he mention your name?” Ethan sets the wooden spoon down.

“I don’t think so. There are so many witches in the area I’d really find it hard to believe this spirit was talking about me. And people tend to hear what they want to hear when it comes to interpreting EVP.”

“That’s true,” Ethan agrees. “He was already thinking about you when he listened to it.”

“Exactly. And how would a random ghost know who I am? I don’t think I’ve been here or even driven past it.” I exit out of the photo and plug the address into a map. It’s on the complete other side of Paradise Valley than where we go. “It’s by the university,” I tell Ethan. “I don’t even think we’ve driven on this street.”

“Then I wouldn’t put much stock into it,” Ethan says and goes back to the food he’s cooking.

“I said I’d meet Keith there tomorrow. I am interested.”

“Your brother is coming for dinner tomorrow.”

“Shit. That’s tomorrow?” I wrinkle my nose. “Right, it is. Today feels like it’s been a million years long.”

“Call him and tell him this weekend isn’t good,” Ethan suggests.

“No,” I quickly reply, shaking my head. “I pushed him to take the job in Chicago so I could see him more often. What time is he supposed to come over?” I ask, knowing “Harrison time” is usually half an hour or longer than planned.

“Seven, and he’s bringing his girlfriend.”

“He has a girlfriend?” My jaw drops and I stare at Ethan. “And you knew?”

“Ohhhh,” Nik whispers, looking from me to Ethan. “I didn’t know that Harry is dating a nice girl from India whose parents don’t approve of him, but she really likes horses so she’s excited to come over and wants you to take her on a ride.”

“The fuck?” I lower my gaze to Hunter, the only one in the house who didn’t keep this from me. “Why am I just now finding out? Who is this girl? What socials are she on? How do we know she’s not a demon? Fuck, I don’t have any collated silver to mix into her food. But I do have holy water to spike her drink with.”

Ethan looks at Nik and then at me. “I’m guessing that’s why your brother didn’t tell you he’s bringing someone over.”

“How long have you known?” I narrow my eyes. “You kept this from me?”

“Technically you didn’t ask,” Ethan tries. “And just this morning. He texted me before I got arrested and then I kinda forgot to mention it. Ya know. Because I was busy being arrested.” He turns to Nik. “I didn’t know any of that, though.”

“And I didn’t even know you talked to Harry,” I go on. “Or called him Harry. I call him Harry. Because he’s my twin.”

“We talk occasionally,” Nik says, trying to be casual. “And he might have mentioned that you’re a tad overprotective at times and have a tendency to overreact.”

“Because he makes really dumb choices.” I roll my eyes. “Whatever. I’ll figure it out, but I’m pissed he offered up my horses. Not that I don’t want to take someone riding, because I do, but because neither horse is really suited for a beginner.” I make a face. “Maybe I should adopt a nice beginner-friendly horse.” I grab a bottle of white wine from the fridge and unscrew the cap. “Okay. It’ll be fine. The vet will be here around nine tomorrow, dentals will take a few hours, which then gives me time to clean the house, grocery shop, and deferret the guest room before meeting Keith to check out the haunted house and then be back here for dinner. Can you cook?” I ask Ethan.

“You know I could, but I have a client tomorrow at five,” he says almost apologetically.

“I can cook,” Nik offers. “As well as assist with housework.”

“Perfect,” I say with a smile. “We got this.” Going over to the cabinet, I grab two glasses and fill two with wine, handing one to Nik. “And then once Harry and his mysterious girlfriend are gone, we’ll get back to re-con.”

“Re-con?” Nik asks, taking a small sip of his wine.

“Yeah. We’re going to find out who framed Ethan and then get them back. Tenfold.”

Chapter
Seven

“I love a good revenge story.” Nik piles rice onto his plate. “What are you going to do?”

Shrugging, I look at Ethan. “Honestly, I haven’t gotten that far. I’ve yet to curse anyone and that sounds kinda fun.” I can sense Ethan’s eyes on me. “Fun in a really fucked up *wrong* way.”

“What if it’s a demon?” Nik goes on.

“Then we’ll kill it,” Ethan and I say at the same time, making Ethan smile.

“A girl after my own heart,” he says, and I smile. “You know I find it so fucking hot to hear you talk murder.”

“As long as it’s about demons, right?” I smirk and raise my eyebrows. We’ve had this conversation before, and Ethan’s gray moral compass should be a red flag, but it isn’t to me.

“I still say we need to get a few pigs,” he only half jokes. “It would make getting away with murder that much easier.”

“Wouldn’t their poop have human DNA in it?” Nik asks, adding a ton of teriyaki sauce to his rice.

“I don’t know,” I reply, looking at Ethan in question. “I mean, I suppose?”

“I’m not sure how much they’d find in feces, but you’d have to be careful bites weren’t left behind. Hair and teeth aren’t digestible, so you’d just have to shave the head and pull out the teeth,” Ethan answers seriously. “And you’d probably have to break down some of the larger bones to make it more appealing for the pigs to eat them.” Ethan scoops up a spoonful of rice and shoves it in his mouth. I look at my demon-hunter, not sure if I should be turned on or concerned.

“Then what do you do with the hair and teeth?” Nik goes on.

“Burn it?” I suggest. “Though bones won’t burn. Scatter them across state lines?”

“No,” Ethan says with his mouthful and holds up a hand to let me know he’ll finish chewing before he goes on. “If they match DNA from different remains in different states, the FBI will get involved and you don’t want that.”

“Good point.”

“Just open a portal and toss the body inside,” Nik says and shrugs. “No one is going to find it in there.”

“Ohh, now that is a good idea.” I stab my fork through a green bell pepper and look up across the table. “We’re going to have to make sure to have a normal conversation at dinner tomorrow.”

“What do normal people talk about?” Ethan chuckles.

“I can always talk about horses.”

“Being the adult horse-girl isn’t normal,” he teases, playfully kicking me under the table before turning to Nik. “Neither is introducing yourself as their great-aunt’s former lover.”

“I see your point after doing the math,” Nik points out. “Though I still don’t see the stigma you humans have against age gaps. Love is love, right? I can promise you that Estelle had quite the sexual prowess until her hip gave out.”

“Eww,” I say, though I agree with him. “It’s been like twenty years since you last saw her. I don’t think you’d say the same if you went to the nursing home hoping for a wild night.”

The humor fades off Nik’s face. He went to the faery realm and didn’t realize just how much time passed here until he came back hoping to find Estelle alive and well. I know he still feels guilty about it.

“Can you imagine the look on the nurses’ faces?” He laughs. “I wonder if she still had her teeth at the end.”

“Okay, there was a line and you just crossed it.” I shake my head and laugh.

“Hey, I’d say don’t knock it ‘till you tried it but you don’t have a—” He cuts off with a jump when Hunter springs to his feet and barks, running through the house. Ethan springs to his feet and I get up, dropping my fork onto my plate with a clatter.

We make it to the front porch just in time to see something crash against the warding I cast around the house. It causes the magic to ripple, lighting up for just a split second.

“Wait!” I say and throw out my hand, catching Ethan before he can jump off the porch. Hunter shadows forward but doesn’t go far. “This feels like a set up.”

“It probably is,” Ethan growls, eyes narrowed as he looks out at the country road. There’s an overgrown pasture across the street that housed cows once upon a time. It’s overgrown and full of tall weeds that have wound their way around the

old, rusted barbed-wire fence. It's a decent hiding spot but is hard to move through since it's so thick with growth.

And right now I feel like something is there, watching us.

“And I'm going to find who set it up and kill them,” Ethan finishes and takes another step forward.

“You're not even wearing shoes,” I rush out as nerves creep down my back. The instant fight-or-flight feeling is something I'm used to from dealing with spirits. But this is different in a weird way. The air is buzzing with neutral electricity, ready to be directed in one way or another. Everything inside me is telling me to get back into the house, close the curtains, and light a protection candle. Why? I don't know, yet something about this is familiar.

“Let's go back in,” Nik says, voice a little shaky. He opens the front door and steps inside, holding the door open for us.

“Yeah,” I agree and shift my gaze to Hunter, telling him to go check the barn and make sure the animals are okay. He bounds forward, shadowing around the porch so fast he's just a dark blur in the night.

Ethan looks around once more, then relents and comes inside with us. Nik sweeps one hand out, whispering an incantation. Sparkly gray fog covers the stained-glass window on the front door.

“You felt that, right?” he asks me, and I nod.

“Yeah. It was like...like...something bad was about to happen.”

“Exactly.” He takes a few steps away from the front door. “Is it a demon?”

“No,” I say, though I’m not certain. “It was more like a shift in energy. I’ve felt it before.” I close my eyes in a long blink, trying to think back. “The Ley line,” I start. “It has a similar feeling. The energy is there but it’s not good or bad until you direct it one way or another.”

“I’m going back out there,” Ethan says, walking quickly through the house to get his shoes and his gun.

“No,” I say firmly, and Ethan turns around, shooting an annoyed look at me.

“Anora, something is out there.”

“I know.” I bite my lip and look behind me. “And I can’t explain it, but I have a really strong feeling it wants us to react. If it was going to hurt us, it would have tried.” I can sense Hunter and he lets me know there’s nothing in our yard that poses a threat. “Because if it did, it wouldn’t have gotten through,” I mumble out loud.

“What?” Ethan asks, retrieving a gun he has hidden in the library.

“I just recast that warding,” I start and sweep my hand out in front of me, pulling down the blinds in the dining room. I lack the finesse to gracefully draw the blinds telekinetically and they flop down, but it gets the job done. “If something was trying to hurt me, it would have gotten burned when it crossed over. But that was like poking the line of protection with a stick. It was enough to get our attention.”

“Fuck,” Ethan huffs and clicks the safety off his gun.

“It’s trying to draw you out.” Nik crosses his arms over his chest. “First the fake evidence and now this?” He raises his eyebrows. “I don’t see how they can be connected, but it’s too much of a coincidence for them not to be.”

“I agree,” Ethan admits and puts the safety back on the gun before tucking it into the back of his pants. “If something is trying to lure you outside of your own warding then it wants to attack.”

“Makes sense, right? I have an advantage here.” I wait a beat, listening for Hunter again. He’s doing one more round just to be sure nothing is out there.

“I’m going to check the cameras,” Ethan tells us and goes back into the kitchen. “Hunter didn’t hear a car drive by or anything?”

“No,” I say as I follow him. The food is getting cold, and we have no reason not to eat right now. I take my seat and mix my rice in with my veggies. “He felt the same thing I did.”

“Which was a shift in energy?” Ethan perches on the edge of a bar stool as he pulls up the security system app on his phone.

“Yeah. That’s really it,” I offer with a shrug. “I can’t describe it better. Energy itself isn’t good or bad. It’s what you do with it.”

“Could it be that ghost?” Nik gets the honey from the panty and goes back to his plate. I realized right away that adding honey or sugar—sometimes both—to everything is a faery thing. Fae immortality must come with some sort of cavity protection because my teeth hurt just looking at his food half the time.

“I really doubt it,” I answer. “I’ve been a medium my whole life and can count the times ghosts sought me out specifically on one hand. But I’ll find out tomorrow when I go check it out.”

“I’ll go instead,” Ethan says without looking up from his phone. “If something is trying to draw you out, then you should stay here.”

“I’m not hiding out at the house,” I immediately counter.

“Something is going on, Anora. Laying low for a day or two makes sense.”

“You were the one arrested for murder,” I remind him.

“Falsely arrested.”

I press my lips together in a smile and roll my eyes. “Of course, falsely.” Hunter shadows onto the back porch, shifting into dog-form. I get up and unlock the door, letting him in. His tail wags when I bend down, scratching under his chin. He pretended to be a real dog for so long I think he got used to it. “The Ley line’s main artery runs through the center of town. But it has little veins that runoff, if you will, and some of them are closer to the surface than others. There’s a hot spot nearby,” I remind Ethan. I’ve spent the last couple months studying the Ley line as much as I can, trying to comprehend the vast amount of power the thing carries.

“And it ebbs and flows,” I go on. My great-grandmother, JoAnna Lancaster, bought this house after moving away from her judgey family in New England. While I have no proof she was a witch, I don’t have any that proves otherwise either. Though since Estelle was raised as a witch in the area, it makes sense to assume her mother was the one to teach her about witchcraft. “I think that’s why this house was built in the first place, and why JoAnna bought it. She could use that hot spot.”

“And if it was a random fluctuation, then we have nothing to worry about,” Ethan states, though the look on his face tells

me he doesn't think this was random.

“And if it's not?” Nik asks before eating a spoonful of honey.

“Then I should tell the High Priestess,” I answer. “As far as I know, tapping into the Ley line without the coven's permission is against the rules. That's why the Grim Gate Coven is here in Thorne Hill. And why Thorne Hill got its name. You know...all the magically grown thorn bushes were supposed to keep people from wanting to settle in this area.”

“But the Ley line was too alluring,” Nik goes on. “Both beautiful and dangerous. Like a woman.” He looks at me and winks. “You know the Fae have a healthy respect for Ley lines. Over the centuries, we've seen them corrupt both warlock and man.”

“Nons have tapped into the Ley line?”

Nik bobs his head up and down. “Many times, and it never ends well for them. It's rather dangerous, really, when nons acquire a basic knowledge of magic but lack the ability to use it.”

His words hit me, and I look at Ethan, and his expression lets me know he's thinking the same thing I am. If there's anyone who knows all about magic but lacks the actual ability to use it, it's the Order of the Mystic Realm.

Chapter
Eight

I hold my hand up to shield the sun from my eyes, debating on going inside for my sunglasses. It's nearing nine o'clock and Ethan is installing more security cameras around the house. "You don't think that's a little overkill, do you?"

Ethan steps up another rung on the ladder and gives me a dubious look. "Adding a camera to see down the driveway is overkill but the three cameras and two motion detectors you added to the barn isn't? And that's not to mention the four cameras you ordered to place around the pasture."

Taking a sip of my coffee, I shake my head. "Demons or no demons, I like to keep an eye on my animals. You never know what could happen."

"With horses, that's true. I never realized how dangerous a walnut on the ground could be."

"Hah. Spoken like a true equestrian," I say ruefully, remembering how Mystery slipped on a walnut last month and pulled a muscle. Thankfully, he's better now and we're getting into a good routine.

"Can you hand me that?" Ethan asks, pointing to part of the camera. I set my coffee down and help Ethan put up the camera until the vet comes.

“Morning,” I call with a wave, walking down to the barn. Dr. Fisher has been here a handful of times in the half a year we’ve lived here, but she hasn’t yet seen the new barn. Having lived paycheck to paycheck for pretty much all of my adult life, I’ve learned to live frugally. Inheriting a ton of money and not having to worry about paying bills is still weird at times. I’m proud of how reasonable I’ve been with it.

Except for my barn. I definitely splurged and went a little overboard, but I’ve been sketching out my dream barn since I was a kid.

“Morning, Anora,” Dr. Fisher says as she gets out of her truck. “Wow, the new barn looks great!”

“Thanks,” I rush out, all too eager to gush about the barn to anyone who’ll listen. “The barn is pretty much done but some of the material for the indoor arena was backordered.”

“Looks like your outdoor arena is ready just in time for the nice weather,” Karly, the vet tech, says.

“Yeah. It’s so nice not to ride in a muddy pasture anymore.” I steal one more glance at Ethan, silently telling Hunter to keep an eye on him as he climbs up the ladder to put up more cameras.

“Did you get everyone moved over from the old barn?” Dr. Fisher asks as we make our way into the barn. I left the horses and donkeys in today since the vet was coming, and they all whinny to me, annoyed and wanting hay since they’re stuck standing in their stalls.

“Yeah. Just like a week ago,” I answer, a smile coming to my face when I step into the barn. I’ve had a horse long enough to know that simple is best when it comes to a barn set up, but I didn’t skimp on anything. Every once in a while, I get

hit all over again with just how fucking grateful I am to have this life. I'll do anything to protect it...and those in it. "And I'm loving the automatic waterers."

"Those are game changers, that's for sure."

I get Mystery out first, bringing him into the aisle so he can get a dose of tranquilizer before Dr. Fisher starts on his teeth. Nik joins us halfway through, fascinated to learn that horses need to have their teeth filed down once a year to get rid of sharp edges and hooks that can cause pain.

We're out in the barn for a few hours, and my mind is at ease the entire time. There's just something about horses that has always calmed me, offering a distraction from all my problems. Ethan has already left for work by the time Dr. Fisher leaves. I spend some time cleaning up the yard and then walk around to the front, trying to remember what Aunt Estelle had in the now-empty flower beds.

Most of my memories are back, but I don't remember everything. It's normal, I know, to not recall things from that long ago.

"Whatcha doing?" Nik asks, coming onto the front porch holding a steaming cup of tea.

"Do you remember what kind of flowers Estelle had here?" I point to the stone flower bed beside the porch. I already planted a few flowers around the steps, and they're not doing too well. I've never had a green thumb, and I don't have to cast spells to know I'll never excel at green witchcraft. "I know it was pretty and I called it *the fairy garden*. She even bought me little gnomes to put around it."

"You know, I've always found it amusing the way humans stereotyped us fae. We don't live in mushroom houses or

collect dew drops to drink. But we do like flowers and are quite good at making them grow.”

“So, you’re saying you’ll help me with my garden this spring?”

“I can’t stand to look at the dying flowers much longer,” Nik says and we go inside. I head upstairs to clean Romeo’s cage, bracing myself for whatever mess he inevitably made. Then I shower, straighten up my room, and make a list of everything I need at the grocery store. It’s a rush to get there and back in time to meet Keith at the house, and I’m tired by the time I pull down the street.

“This really is isolated,” I say to Hunter, who’s lying on the backseat. Like Thorne Hill, Paradise Valley has a lot of farmland. There are cornfields on either side of the street, freshly plowed and ready to be planted as soon as the ground is dry enough. It’s a landscape I’m used to since my house is on the outskirts of town with few houses on my street.

The neatly plowed fields give way to an overgrown weed-filled yard lined with maple trees. At one point this was a grand estate, and it’s sad to think how it was left to rot. I slow, GPS telling me I’ve arrived at my destination, and turn onto a once-gravel driveway that’s mostly just mud and weeds now. I drive between two dilapidated brick pillars that used to hold a gate.

The gate itself is rusted on the ground, bent like a car had smashed into it years ago. There are several apple trees along the length of the driveway. A few still have rotten apples hanging from the branches. I’m already getting an eerie feeling from this place.

The long driveway continues down to the house, circling around a circle of crumbling stone that might have been a

fountain.

“This place would have been impressive back in the day,” I say out loud, slowing to a stop and parking behind Keith’s car. I kill the engine, unbuckle, grab my phone, and get out of the car, leaving the door open for Hunter.

“Hey, girl!” he calls, getting out once he sees me. “On thank god you brought him.” Keith crouches down, waiting to greet Hunter as if he’s a normal dog. Acting the part even though Keith knows the truth, Hunter runs over, tail wagging, and demands to be petted.

“Figured we could use the help,” I reply and look at the house again. “This place is huge!”

“Yeah, it’s a beast, that’s for sure. I did a little digging into the history if you wanna—”

I hold up my hand. “Don’t tell me yet. Let me see what I’m picking up.”

Keith smiles. “I’m excited and slightly terrified to find out what’s actually going on inside the house.” He shudders. “It creeps me the fuck out.”

“It has a...a...presence.” I turn back to the house, running my eyes over it. It’s a colonial-revival style house, which was popular at the time, two stories tall with a large attic that looks like it must have been finished and converted into livable space since there are curtains on the windows. The white siding is covered in moss and mold, and all the first story windows are boarded up.

“Are you getting anything?” Keith stands up and Hunter comes back to me, standing loyally by my side.

“Yeah,” I say. “There are definitely spirits here.” I close my eyes and feel like I’m being watched. “Two girls,” I go on,

hearing their voices but not able to discern anything they're saying. "And something...darker." As soon as I say it out loud, that negative energy withdraws, slinking into the shadows. "And it's intelligent." Closing my eyes, make sure my mental shields are all the way down. I used to work hard on a daily basis to hold them up, not wanting to accidentally talk to a ghost thinking it's a real person, as I've done before. In public.

But now I don't need to hide that side of me from Ethan, and whatever protection spells Aunt Estelle cast on the house keeps spirits at bay.

"Whoa," I whisper, getting hit with another wave of emotion. "Did you find out who built the house?" I ask Keith, opening my eyes and taking a few steps toward the porch.

"Yeah. I did."

"This is what I'm picking up...kind of." I go onto the porch, recalling memories that aren't my own. "So, the people in the area were still struggling with the aftermath of the Great Depression in the 40s. And there was some sort of issue with that."

"You're good." Keith's brows go up. "Want me to tell you?"

I nod. "Minimal details, though."

"A rich guy from the east coast bought a bunch of farmland for cheap with the promise he'd let the farmers keep living on it and using it, but then charged them rent that was like double what was reasonable. And according to one article I read, it seemed like a handful of people in PV back then sold their land for the cash but had some sort of verbal agreement they'd be able to buy it back once they could. The whole thing is shady if you ask me."

“That is, and I can see how the resentment built from there.”

“Oh, totally.”

“I’m not sensing anything dangerous,” I tell him, assuming he stayed in the car because he was too creeped out to go in alone. “Want to head in?”

Keith winces, sucking in a breath through his teeth. “I forgot to get the key from my aunt. She’s going to swing by and drop it off.” He checks the time on his phone. “Should be soon.”

“Or I could do this,” I say and twirl my hand in front of me. “And unlock it with magic.”

Keith’s eyes light up. “Yes, please.”

Smiling, we go up the porch and I take a second to look at the lock. It’s a standard, modern deadbolt and I put my hand on it, imagining someone inside turning it back and letting us in. Just a second later, it unlocks, and I open the door, stepping inside. Light from behind us spills in, and I reach into my pocket for my phone. With all the windows boarded up, it’s dark in here.

“The power is on,” Keith says and comes in behind me, reaching for a light switch. “Not all rooms have ceiling lights, though. We think someone stole them.”

“Nice,” I say sarcastically and step in a little more so we can close the door. Suddenly, the energy shifts and I can tell immediately that something doesn’t want me here. It’s not because I’m a medium and will be able to easily find them. It’s because I’m a witch.

Chapter
Nine

The door slowly creaks shut behind us, and I blink, adjusting my eyes to the dark. Keith turns on another light and shuffles close to me.

“It’s rough, but we did have an inspector come to make sure it’s safe to be in here,” Keith tells me. “And it is, as long as we stay out of the basement.”

“What’s in the basement?” I ask, already imagining skeletons in the closets. Literally.

“Radon. It’s common in this area, if you didn’t know, and it’s a pretty easy fix. Someone is coming out next week to put in a mitigation system so it’ll be safe to go down there.”

“Oh, well, that’s good you guys got it checked out.”

He nods. “The previous owners got all the asbestos and black mold taken care of. But this is pretty much where they left off.” He sweeps his hand out in front of me and I turn, taking in the full grandeur of what this place once was. We entered into a foyer that still has a lot of the original woodwork, but a wall has been put up, blocking the view of the rest of the house. I’m guessing it was to divide this place up into apartments.

Another wall to our left has been knocked down, leaving dark marks on the hardwood floor. This room will have a gorgeous view of the apple trees along the driveway once all is said and done. Carpet has been rolled back, revealing what I'm going to assume are the original hardwood floors. I shine my phone light around the room and step in, trying not to think about anything in particular so I can pick up on whatever is lingering here.

"You're going to die when you see the library," Keith tells me.

"Ohhh, where is it?" I turn around, pointing my light on the ground.

"Back of the house. And I don't mean like *die of excitement*. I mean part of your soul will die when you see what they've done to it."

"Now I'm scared."

"You should be. Whatever happened in this house, destroying that place is one of the biggest crimes that happened here."

As soon as he's done talking, something knocks against a wall. Keith jumps, grabbing my arm.

"Oh shit. What was that?"

"It came from upstairs?" I question, looking at Hunter. He heard it too, and he's picking up on the same things I am. He wants to go investigate and will take the lead, checking for vengeful spirits as well as weak floorboards. "Yeah, good idea."

"What's a good idea?" Keith tightens his hold on me.

“Finding the source of that noise.” Hunter tips his head, picking up on something else. “Well, in a minute. Hunter said someone just pulled down the driveway. Probably your aunt?”

Keith lets out a breath and drops his hand from my arm. “I’ll check.”

Together, we go back onto the porch and wait for Keith’s aunt to park her truck and get out.

“Hey, Aunt Lauren!” Keith calls with a wave.

“Hey!” she calls back. Like Keith, she’s tall with dark hair and brown eyes.

“Your aunt is gorgeous,” I can’t help but note, watching her walk across the path and up to the porch. She’s wearing a teal athletic set, looking like she stepped out of a fitness Instagram post, only she has no reason to filter or edit her photos.

“She is,” Keith says with a smile. “She really turned her life around. Three years ago, she was living with an abusive prick who was draining her bank accounts. She drank a lot and put on a ton of weight. Once she finally kicked him to the curb, she got back into yoga and now teaches classes a few times a week at the gym in PV in between her shifts at the hospital in Thorne Hill. We’re really proud of her, but don’t tell her I said that.”

“I love that,” I say quietly so Lauren won’t hear me. “And it makes me want to get this place usable for her even more.”

“You must be Anora,” Lauren says as she comes up the steps. “I’m Lauren.”

“Anora,” I blurt and then shake my head. “Which you just said. This is Hunter.” I run my hand over his head. “He, uh, really in tune with paranormal things.”

“I’ve heard animals can sense things we can’t.” She pulls a key from the small purse she’s carrying. “You know, I was a skeptic until somewhat recently.”

“So were you,” I remind Keith. “We met at a ghost hunt.”

“Ghost hunt?” Lauren echoes and sticks the key in the lock. She turns it, locking it instead of unlocking it. She makes a face, confused, and Keith shoots me a look, quickly shaking his head. “Oh, come on,” she grumbles and gets the door unlocked. “So, I’m told you’re quite the sensitive.” We all go into the house again but this time it’s harder to pick up on anything.

“Yeah. I’ve always had a knack for it.” Hunter pads in ahead of us, going through the open door that leads out of the foyer. “Do you guys feel threatened or anything when you’re in here?”

“As skeptical as I am,” she goes on, leaving the door wide open behind us to let light and fresh air in. “It scares me.”

“I can’t say I feel in danger, considering,” Keith adds under his breath, and I know he’s talking about the demons I’ve dealt with lately. “But definitely unwanted.”

“Yeah. I’m picking up on that.” We go through the house, following Hunter. Another wall has been knocked down, opening one room up to another. The dark energy I felt before is still here, lingering in the shadows. Whatever it is doesn’t want to be found, which isn’t uncommon when it comes to intelligent spirits. It takes energy to manifest, and energy isn’t something they have an unlimited supply of. If I’m just in and out of this house in just a few hours, then it’s not worth it to use the energy it would take to try and scare me away.

“Are you going to gut the whole house?” I ask, curious to what the plans are as well as hoping that if the spirits hear us talking about a big renovation, they’ll come out of hiding.

“We have to pretty much clear out the kitchen on the first floor and replace pipes in the bathrooms. The layout upstairs will work, but there are two bigger apartments we can divide, as well as take the full kitchen out of the little ones. People will appreciate a sink and mini fridge in their rooms, but you don’t go to a bed and breakfast so you can cook yourself breakfast. Kinda beside the point,” Lauren explains.

“It’ll be really pretty once it’s all done.”

“I hope so.” Lauren’s eyes widen and she shakes her head. “I’m a little worried I bit off more than I can chew.”

“Hey, you got this,” Keith tells her. “And you have me as your free interior designer.”

“And I’m very thankful for that.” Lauren looks at Keith and smiles. “He’s got a good eye for decor, though I think—”

“No,” Keith cuts off. “No farmhouse-chic allowed. My plan is to stick as close to the original 1940 style as possible but modern and practical. In a world full of Airbnb, you need to stand out.”

“Definitely,” she agrees and we step over a pile of dusty flooring material that’s still in the original boxes. “Which is why I’m thinking we need to offer something more than just a place to stay for the night.”

“Advertise this place as haunted and you’ll get more bookings,” Keith jokes. “Though if Anora can do her thing, this place won’t stay haunted for long.”

We come to a stop in a long corridor. The feeling of being watched is back and I hold my hands out slightly to my sides,

trying to figure out if I'm actually behind watched or picking up on a memory of someone being watched. This is the part of being a medium that's the most confusing. The emotions are real and deciphering them is tricky.

I blink and get hit with the vision of two girls excitedly holding up a set of keys and walking down this hall.

"When did this place become apartments?" I ask, reaching out and touching the wooden wainscoting on the wall next to us.

"I think the late 70s," Lauren answers.

"Do you have any way of finding out who lived here? Female renters in particular?"

"Yes and no," she replies, turning on a light in the hall. It flickers a few times before shining pale yellow light around us. "The records weren't the best kept."

"Right, and it wasn't until 1974 that the Equal Credit Opportunity Act was passed for women to get their own credit cards," Keith elaborates.

"So if someone paid in cash, there could be no record," I fill in.

"Yep."

We go down another hall, using our flashlights to light our way. Having the windows tightly boarded up did keep vandals and animals out, but the lack of fresh air is almost suffocating.

"Brace yourself," Lauren warns before opening a door. "This room doesn't have to be haunted for me to know it's sad."

"Oh gosh," I exclaim, knowing right away what Keith was talking about. "That poor library."

Going with the *geese in bonnets* theme, someone wallpapered the built-in wooden shelves, so each shelf is blue with a matching goose background.

“I know,” Lauren groans. “Whatever glue they used damaged the wood. I really wanted to salvage this and make it a wonderful reading area with a shelf full of board games right over there.” She smiles as she talks, envisioning it all. “And maybe a little bar cart in the corner. Oh! And the fireplace will totally be up and running and it would be a perfect way to spend an evening.”

“Yeah,” Keith says sarcastically. “Because young couples just love staying in and playing board games.”

“Hey,” I interject. “I like playing board games. And cocktails. I think that would be fun.”

“See?” Lauren raises her eyebrows. “I’m telling you, this could be a big draw for people looking to get away from the city. I just need some farm animals.”

“Anora can help with that, too,” Keith says. “But let’s stick to the ghosts for now.”

“Good idea. There’s so much to do.” Lauren sighs. “What do you think?” she asks and it takes me a few seconds to realize she’s talking to me.

“Oh, um, this place is definitely haunted. I’m picking up on several different spirits. There’s one that’s almost... oppressive, if you will. It’s hiding something.” I tip my head slightly to the side, trying to judge how much I can say to Lauren before she thinks I’m crazy. “But I don’t think you’re in danger.”

“Good,” she laughs. “I can’t have ghosts murdering my guests.”

“Right,” I laugh back. “I’m in a bit of a rush today, but I can come back. Typically, it takes more than a walk-through to get a full read on a place. The ghosts will hide.”

“That makes sense,” she says. “And you’re welcome anytime. If horror movies are anything to go off of, I’m going to stir up some trouble when we start renovating.”

“I’m sure you will,” I tell her seriously. “I’ll help however I can.” Hunter, who’s been by my side this whole time, picks up on a thrumming of energy coming from outside. “What’s the yard like?”

“A mess,” Keith and Lauren say at the same time.

“I’ll show you,” Keith offers, and we head outside. Lauren stays in to take some measurements. “So? What do you really think?”

“What I said,” I tell him. “That dark energy.” I turn around, waiting until the door closes behind us to keep talking. We step onto a stone patio that’s full of cracks and covered in soggy leaves. “It’s definitely hiding something and trying to keep the other spirits silent. I need to come back and probably spend a night or two at least. Make it seem like I’m settling in for the long haul. Whatever it is, it’s worth digging into.”

“What if we find a body?”

I shrug. “We might.”

“You excited to meet your brother’s girlfriend?” Keith asks as we come to a stop at the edge of the patio. Hunter jumps down and starts sniffing around the yard. There are several outbuildings, and something is pulling me to one of the little sheds with its roof caved in. I glance at the time on my phone. It’s going to have to wait.

“The girl friend that he didn’t tell me about.” My eyes narrow. “I can’t believe he kept it from me!”

“Well, didn’t you say it was because he thought you’d overreact?” Keith asks with a slight wince.

“Yeah, but only because the last girl he supposedly fell head over heels with turned out to be a demon with alluring demon-powers that she stole from a witch or warlock she murdered, which made him become all infatuated with her because she thought he was me and she wanted his powers but instead kidnapped him, my best friend, my boyfriend, and my fucking dog! So yeah, I might overreact in a sense.”

“Oh, wow. You’re going to have to better explain that whole drama at another time.”

“I can do that. But really, he should have run it by me beforehand. What if I didn’t want another person in the house? Maybe I only set the table for four and then she shows up? Awkward, right? And showing up unannounced?”

“Would that really be that big of a deal?” Keith asks, thinking logically.

I shrug. “I’ll just say it wouldn’t be the first time we kidnapped and tied someone up in my living room.” Letting out a breath, I look around the yard. “I might be a little overprotective, but Harrison doesn’t always make the best choices. Not telling me about this girlfriend just raises my suspicions. At the very least, I could have internet stalked her and her family so I can find out they’re all real and not demons...unless they’re real people possessed by demons—and I knew I should have gotten that fucking silver.”

“Silver?”

My head bobs up and down as I quickly nod. “To put in her food. Not all demons react negatively to silver, but a good handful do.”

“What if she’s just allergic to silver in general, as a regular human?”

“I’ll slyly slip a silver bracelet around her wrist when she’s not looking.”

Keith gives me a dubious look. “Since you’re such a great pickpocket I’m sure that’ll go unnoticed.”

“Right. The easiest thing would be to put a few drops of truth potion in her drink and ask some questions. Starting with asking if she’s here to hurt my brother or myself.”

“And if she says no, how long will the truth potion last?”

“Depends on how much I slip in her drink, but a few hours at minimum.”

“Please tell me you’re joking?” Keith says.

“I’m not, and I still have some truth potion I made when I had to see if Nik was who he said he was. I wonder how long it stays good for?” I muse out loud. “I can make a new batch. And polish the real silver teaspoons I found in the attic. I’ll serve tea, of course, so she’ll have to pick up the spoon and then drink the truth potioned tea!” I smile triumphantly. “Or maybe I’ll start by asking if she’s using my brother for the money.”

“Does he have a lot of money?”

“Eh, he makes a really good salary but like I said, he hasn’t made the best choices and lives a rather lavish lifestyle. Which is yet another reason he needs me to look out for him.”

“Anora,” Keith starts, pursing his lips slightly. “You’re starting to sound a little crazy.”

“Crazy not to let another demon into my house?”

“The chances of your brother dating two demons in a row has to be statistically low, right?”

“I suppose.”

“Then you’ve just giving truth potion to a woman your brother has newly fallen for. All sorts of things could be said that should stay unsaid.”

He’s right, dammit. “Those things have a way of coming out eventually and if they’re serious, it should be brought up.”

“I see some of your point, but what if this girl says she’s dying to get married and start popping out babies and it freaks your brother out so he breaks up with her but really they were meant to be all along? And if she hadn’t taken the truth potion, she wouldn’t have brought it up for, say—I don’t know—another six months and by that time your brother is emotionally ready to think longer term and might have even gone and looked at rings?”

“If they were meant to be then it shouldn’t have mattered.”

Keith hikes an eyebrow. “Okay, well then imagine Ethan telling you on your second date that he’s in love with you and wants to move into to the big-ass house you just inherited, benefiting from the money you *also* just inherited because you both live a very comfortable life, and you have plenty of money to basically do what you want.” He holds up his hand to keep me from talking. “Which isn’t true, we all know that Ethan didn’t get with you for your inheritance. But before you got to know him, it would be hard to trust he was genuine.”

“Fine,” I relent. “It’s not so much that I’m worried the girl is a demon than I am pissed that he didn’t tell me about her.”

“Pissed?” Keith prods, elbowing me. I sigh, wishing Keith wasn’t so right.

“No. Hurt. He’s my twin. We don’t really keep secrets from each other. And I know,” I rush out. “You’re going to ask if I told him about the witch and demon stuff right away and I didn’t. I needed to sort things out myself and didn’t know how to present all that stuff without sounding completely insane.”

“I wasn’t going to ask, but I can’t imagine that was an easy conversation.”

“It really wasn’t that bad,” I recall with a shrug. “I did a simple spell and then promptly got attacked by a demon. I killed it but not before I almost burned down my garage. And that was how my brother and best friend saw me use my pyrokinesis for the first time.” A breeze rustles my hair. “Thanks. You’re a good friend for talking me off a ledge.”

“Brutal honesty is my forte. And I spent years lying to myself and others around me. I won’t do that anymore.”

“I’m sorry you had to.”

He shrugs. “The past is in the past, right?”

“Yeah, but the past can still hurt.” Our eyes meet for a moment and we both sigh. “I should get going before I’m late. I told Nik I’d pick something up for dessert and honestly, I think we could use some more wine to get through tonight.”

“Get a bottle per person. Play it safe.”

We laugh and I turn to call Hunter, who’s still out exploring. But as soon as I open my mouth to say his name, he

comes bounding forward, letting me know that there's something buried under the little shed.

Chapter

Ten

Swallowing hard, I grip the steering wheel and fake a smile, waving to Keith and Lauren as I back up enough to drive around Lauren's car.

"I'm a horrible friend, aren't I?" I flick my eyes to the rearview mirror, looking at Hunter. I didn't tell Keith there was something buried under the shed. Hunter picked up the scent of something long dead but didn't have a chance to sniff around long enough to be able to tell if it's human or animal remains. For all we know, it could be an old family cat buried in a forgotten pet cemetery. "Something tragic happened there. I will go back," I say out loud to make myself feel better.

My heart starts to beat rapidly and my stomach clenches. I hate lying and while this is more withholding information, I still feel icky about it.

"You're right," I tell Hunter and feel a little better. "It's not like it's going anywhere, and it's been there long enough already." I pull out of the driveway and bump along the country road. "And leaving it be until I can figure out what's going on at the house is probably safest. I can go back and cleanse it after trying to figure out who's trapped there and why."

A slew of text messages come in when I'm about a mile away from the house. Crap. I didn't realize I didn't have service inside. I glance down, seeing that most are from Ethan and two are from my brother. I don't attempt to read them until I'm stopped at a stop sign. Most of the texts are from Ethan, asking how the investigation at the house went and letting me know his last client was running late so he'll be late. The next is from Harrison, asking me to call him when I have a chance.

"Odd," I mutter but call him right away.

"Hey, sis," he answers on the second ring.

"Blink twice if you're being held captive by a demon," I shoot back.

"I'm on the phone. How will you know?"

"Just checking. Are you good?"

"I'm fine. What about you?"

"Good as well, considering I'm having to scramble to add another place setting to the table."

"You're so dramatic, Annie."

"Fine. I just can't believe you didn't tell me."

He hesitates for a second. "I wasn't sure if she'd actually come."

"Oh," I reply, not expecting that response. "From what Nik said, you two seemed pretty, uh, committed."

"Things are good," he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice. "We went from friends to something more pretty fast."

"Hey, I understand the whole *hard and fast* part of romance. Kinda living it."

"Gross."

“You brought it up,” I laugh and press down on the gas, going faster now that I’m on a busier road. “But I’m happy for you. Though I do need some basic deets. Like how did you meet her and what is her name?”

“Saanvi. And we met when I came here for the interview a few months ago. We hit it off and emailed back and forth until I officially moved to Chicago. Then we went from emailing to talking to...well, you know.”

“Boning,” I say, relinquishing my title of the mature sibling for just a second there.

“Not quite. She, uh, is a wait until marriage type of girl.”

“If you were face to face with me, you’d see my jaw dropping. You’re a whore, Harry. Not that I’m judging, because I’m not. I’m just surprised.” I look at Hunter in the mirror. *And now we need to be extra sure this girl isn’t a demon.*

“Hah. I think you’ll like her, really. She loves horses and has been in lessons for the last decade or so.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. She said she competed in first level dressage but scored in the sixty percentile or something, whatever that means.”

I can’t help but smile. “I like her already. When will you guys be here?”

“That’s why I’m calling. I got out of a client meeting early, so I can be at your place in about an hour. Is that okay?”

I glance at the clock and wince. I still need to change, make up the guest room, and help Nik get dinner and dessert

ready...as well as feed the horses. But I'll be damned to let that get in my way. "Yeah, that's perfect."



"So I totally didn't possibly find a body buried under a shed at that haunted B&B today." I glance over my shoulder, looking at Ethan walking through the back door. He stops a few feet into the kitchen and takes his shoes off. Wearing dark athletic pants and a matching t-shirt, he looks so fucking good. I'm elbow deep in dishwater but he's making me want to shake the soap bubbles from my hands and climb him like a tree.

"That's an interesting way to start a conversation," he quips and comes up behind me, strong arms going around my middle. I close my eyes and lean back, taking solace in just how damn good he feels against me.

"Okay. Let's try again." I tip my head up and wait for him to kiss me. "You know how we thought the most shocking thing today was the vet bill? Well, I got something to top it."

"Now I'm kinda scared to ask."

"Hah, right? Well, that house Keith's aunt bought is totally haunted. I picked up a few spirits there but the one that stood out the most was a dark spirit that was keeping the others from reaching out. But anyway, that's not my news. We went outside and were about to leave when I felt something telling me to go to this little old shed. I didn't have time to investigate more, but Hunter was able to smell something rotten and decaying under the floorboards." I turn the water off and twist in Ethan's arms.

"Hmm. We'll have to check it out soon. Were the remains human?"

I raise and lower my shoulders. “Hunter couldn’t tell.”

The floorboards creak as Nik comes down the rear stairs, emerging into the kitchen. “Best let sleeping dogs lie. And by that, I mean skeletons.”

“That’s what I said,” I tell both Ethan and Nik. “Mostly to make myself feel better for not telling Keith. But digging up a corpse will not only delay the renovation project but could anger spirits and we kinda have enough going on.” Just saying it out loud makes me feel guilty all over again. But I already feel scatterbrained and stressed, and I know whoever tried to frame Ethan for Patrick’s murder isn’t done messing with us yet.

“One thing at a time.” Ethan kisses my neck and steps back, grabbing his gym bag and going upstairs to shower.

“Everything looks good,” I tell Nik with a smile and pull a glass bowl for the salad out of a cabinet. “And smells amazing.” I take the bottles of wine I was chilling in the fridge out and open them so I won’t have to mess with the cork later. Stepping back so I’m leaning against the counter, I end up pouring myself a glass of wine, looking around the kitchen as I take a small sip.

I’ve never been overly concerned with getting my house spotlessly clean before someone comes over, telling myself my guests are here to see me and not my house. My previous house was so small I didn’t have many places to hide all my clutter, and I thought moving here would somehow make me a wonderful housekeeper.

It didn’t.

But Nik enjoys keeping things clean and tidy and even though we’ve told him over and over we don’t expect anything

in return for him staying with us, I think it makes him feel better to do his part, so to speak. And right now, the kitchen looks perfect, with most of the dishes already washed and put away. The dining room table is set, and the guest rooms upstairs are clean with fresh sheets on the beds.

I scrubbed Romeo's cage before heading out to meet Keith, and it was finally warm enough today to open the windows to get some fresh air in the house. The guest bathroom is sparkling clean as well, with brand new towels rolled up in the little linen closet. Why I'm so worried about making a good impression on Harrison's girlfriend is beyond me.

It's important to him, though, so in turn, it's important to me. And I assumed at some point, he'd grow up and stop being such a manwhore. If I'm being honest, I didn't think it would happen anytime soon.

Hunter lets us know when Harrison pulls onto the road, able to detect him much sooner than a regular dog. I take the salad into the dining room and Nik holds his hands over the candles on the center of the table, using magic to light them.

Ethan comes down the stairs right as Harrison and Saanvi get out of his car. I watch out the dining room window, trying my best not to make any assumptions about her until I actually get to know her. Keith is right: statically, Harrison isn't going to date two demons in a row.

My brother is dressed casually in jeans and a long sleeve t-shirt. We're twins and share a slight family resemblance, but I definitely take after the Lancasters more than anyone else. Finding out there was another redhead in the family was almost as pleasing as finding out I'm a witch. Saanvi is gorgeous, with her dark hair swept up off her face, gently

blowing in the spring breeze. She's wearing a knee-length blue dress with a coordinating sweater and is clutching her purse tightly in one hand and holding onto Harrison's arm with the other.

I go to open the door, welcoming them in, but then Saanvi abruptly stops. I wouldn't think too much about it except she stopped directly in front of a circle of protection.

Chapter
Eleven

My eyes widen and I feel fire flicker around my fingers. She can't cross the warding. She is a demon! I knew it and I—

“We forgot the wine,” she says, voice drifting up through the open windows. “It's in the car.”

“Shit, you're right.” Harrison pulls his hand out of hers, kisses her cheek, and jogs back to his car. Saanvi inches forward, walking over the invisible line of protection. Hunter bumps me with his nose in a very *I told you so* move.

“I know,” I whisper to him, rolling my eyes at myself. I'm on edge, and I need to chill. Closing my eyes, I take a few deep breaths, waiting for Harry to make it to the door before I open it. Hunter, playing the part of regular dog, wags his tail and jumps up excitedly when Harrison comes into the house. “Hi,” I say, standing to the side to welcome them in. Hunter settles down and Harrison gives me the bottle of wine.

“You must be Anora,” Saanvi starts, holding out her hand to shake.

“And you're the famous Saanvi,” I reply with a smile. “This is Hunter. He's really friendly.”

“Aww, I love dogs.” Saanvi crouches down, earning bonus points from me as she scratches under Hunter's chin. I catch

Harrison's eye and give him a tiny nod of approval.

"Is dinner ready?" Harrison asks, taking off his shoes. "I'm starving."

"Yeah, come in." I wave them into the dining room and introduce Saanvi to Ethan and Nik. I tend to overthink and, therefore, over explain. It's not unusual to have a roommate or just let a friend crash with you for a while and I highly doubt Saanvi is going to press Nik for details. Though knowing him, he'll tell her the truth which is less believable than anything I can come up with.

"Your house is beautiful," Saanvi tells me as I bring the last dish out of the kitchen and set it on the table. "Harrison told me it's been in your family for a while?"

"Yeah, it has." I take my seat next to Ethan. "Our great-great grandma bought it when she moved here from the east coast. Then her daughter—my great aunt—inherited it and now it's mine."

"Why did you get the short end of the stick?" Saanvi jokes, playfully poking Harrison.

"Estelle was quite gifted with the power of foresight," Nik starts. "I'm sure she saw this place becoming a bachelor pad if Harry got it."

Saanvi laughs, thinking he's joking. "I can see that. You'd have this place be all white and gray with stark, modern furniture." She looks around again. "You've done a really nice job updating but keeping the house original."

"Thanks, but I can't take too much credit," I admit. "It went through a renovation before we moved in. I'll give you a tour after dinner."

Saanvi smiles. “I’d love that.” She looks at Harrison, who gives her an encouraging nod. “And the barn if it’s not too much trouble. I’d love to meet your horses.”

“Asking Anora to show you the horses is like opening Pandora’s Box,” Ethan teases, turning so he can look at me. My stomach flutters when his eyes meet mine. “I do admire her passion. It crosses over into other areas.” He raises his eyebrows and flashes a coy smirk. God, I love this man so much.

I spoon a helping of the vegetarian lasagna Nik made onto my plate alongside an even bigger serving of sautéed vegetables. We eat as we talk, getting to know Saanvi a little better. She transferred to Chicago for work as a software developer a year and a half ago and had been living with her aunt and cousin in California before that. Harry met her through work and went out a few times with mutual work friends a few times before he took her on their first date. She hasn’t raised any demonic red flags—yet—and Hunter hasn’t been able to sense anything off about her either.

“The blood doesn’t bother you?” she asks, reaching for her wine glass, after confessing she’d wanted to be a veterinarian but passed out the first time she saw a dog come into the clinic with a large open wound.

“No,” I reply with a shake of my head. “I loved assisting during surgeries. Honestly, I think I can speak for everyone in the vet-field to say we’re bothered more by the owners than anything else. I lost count of how many times I’d been screamed at because someone didn’t bring their animal in soon enough for treatment or if they couldn’t afford to pay for medication.”

“Ugh, that sounds awful. Makes me glad I work alone in an office on a computer that only talks back when I tell it to.”

I laugh and open my mouth to reply when I suddenly pick up the smell of cigarette smoke. “Did we leave something in the oven?” I turn my head and inhale. Whatever that is, it’s not burned food but the very distinct smell of cigarettes. With the temps dropping as soon as the sun goes down, we already closed all the windows in the house and, even if someone were out on the road, Hunter would be able to sense them.

“Everything is accounted for,” Nik says.

“I can go check and see if the oven was left on,” Ethan offers but I shake my head.

“It’s okay, Hunter can—” I cut off, remembering that I can’t send a normal dog into the kitchen to tell me if the oven is on or off.

“The pie is in the warming drawer,” Nik recalls.

“Right, that’s probably it.” I smile and go back to my food, taking a few more bites before switching to wine. An uneasy feeling starts to creep over me so slowly I don’t realize it until I’ve finished all my wine and set the empty glass back down. Leaning back, I half pay attention to a story Harrison is telling us about something that happened at work. My mind wanders and for some strange reason, it feels like I’m waiting for someone to come join us at the table.

“You okay?” Ethan asks softly, hand landing on my thigh.

“Yeah,” I reply right away. It’s an automatic response from me, even though Ethan always wants a genuine response. “Just, uh, lost in thought.”

“What are you thinking about?” Saanvi asks.

“Horses.” I force a smile. “I’m pretty much always thinking about horses. It’s kinda funny, actually. I think about them all day but when I’m out in the barn with them, my mind is quiet.”

“That was one thing I loved about riding. As soon as I got in the saddle, my problems faded. Then I worried about not falling off, which oddly I’d rather worry about than real life troubles.”

“Hah, I know what you mean. It’s such a good way too—”

Hide.

I cut off with a gasp at the sound of the hoarse whisper, dropping my fork onto my plate and spinning around so fast I bump into the table and almost cause everyone’s drinks to spill. My hand goes to the back of my neck, where I swear I felt cold breath against my skin as something whispered to me.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to shock you,” Ethan tries to cover up, bringing his hand to my shoulder. “Guess I should keep my hands to myself at the dinner table, right.”

“I hate when that happens,” Nik goes on, blotting up a bit of wine that spilled out of Ethan’s still-full glass. Knowing he’s not going to drink it, I reach forward and grab it, sucking down a big mouthful.

Smelling smoke, feeling cold breath on the back of my neck, and hearing voices...I’m either going crazy again or somehow, despite all the warding, a spirit has followed me home.

Chapter
Twelve

“**A**nything?” I whisper to Hunter. I snuck away saying I needed to use the bathroom and am standing in the hall right before the powder room with my hands outstretched. “I don’t feel anything either.” Biting my lip, I let my hands fall to my sides. A chill came over me, but it’s probably because this old house doesn’t retain heat all that well and it is getting colder outside now that it’s dark.

“This house isn’t haunted.” I take a few steps down the hall, unable to shake the feeling that someone is in the living room waiting for me. “It can’t be because I would have known the first time I stepped foot in here.” I’m starting to feel more and more on edge, which is something I’m familiar with from picking up a ghost’s emotions. Shaking my head, I move to the middle of the living room.

“Look,” I start in a harsh whisper. “If you’re trying to get my attention, I’m listening.” I wait a beat and sigh. “I won’t cleanse the house yet, but just, uh, lay low for the next few hours, okay?” Standing perfectly still, I listen for the smallest of signs before going back into the dining room.

Everyone is done eating, and we all agree that we’re too full for dessert just yet. I start clearing the table, hoping to get a few minutes in the kitchen alone with Ethan so I can tell him

what happened. It's not like he'll be able to detect anything I can't but being on the same page keeps us both sane.

"What's going on?" he asks as soon as we get to the sink. I put the plates I was holding in and turn on the water. Ethan's hands land on my hips and he steps close, body just inches from mine. Heat comes off of him in waves, and I close my eyes, tipping my head up. The fact that I almost lost him to a life sentence for a murder he didn't commit hits me and I close the small distance between us and kiss him.

Ethan slides one hand down my back and brings the other to my head, taking a fistful of my hair. He pushes his tongue into my mouth, kissing me harder. I softly moan as I wrap my arms around him, forgetting about everything else in the world for a moment.

"Don't tell me the incubus is back," Nik deadpans, coming to a stop in the kitchen. Ethan and I slowly break apart.

"Hah, not this time." Ethan runs his hands down my body and takes a step back. "But I think something else is, isn't it?"

I look from him to Nik and nod. "You didn't feel anything?" I ask Nik.

"I felt a lot of things. You need to specify."

"Anything ghostly."

"No." He cocks an eyebrow. "I thought you said this house wasn't able to be haunted."

"I did say that and I still believe it but—" I stop talking when Saanvi comes into the kitchen, carrying another stack of dishes.

"You don't have to do that," I tell her.

“Oh, it’s no problem at all. I like helping. I feel awkward sitting when someone else cleans up after me.”

“I know what you mean,” I tell her. “And I have an idea. How about we go to the barn while Harry helps wash dishes.”

She turns, looking at Harrison out of the corner of her eye. He’s doing a good job pretending he didn’t hear. “I like that idea, don’t you, babe?”

“I’m a guest,” Harrison protests.

“Exactly. You should show your appreciation,” Saanvi says and Harrison smiles, getting up and going over to her. The way she looks at him makes my heart happy. I really hope she doesn’t end up being evil.

We grab coats and put on our shoes and head outside.

“The barn is new?” she asks.

“Yeah. Like brand new. The inside arena isn’t quite done yet. Materials are back ordered, but the frame is up at least, and the weather has been decent so it’s not a big deal. It’ll be done before winter, that’s for sure, and I definitely took the heated arena at my previous barn for granted.”

“I bet. I lived in California when I rode. My definition of cold is probably laughable for you.”

“Hey, I’d happily get used to better temps. Of all the places my aunt could have lived, she picked the Midwest.”

Sundance and Mystery whinny to me when I step into the barn, and the donkeys start braying.

“I already fed you guys,” I remind them, but toss everyone more hay anyway. I give Saanvi a tour of the barn and then I take Sundance out of his stall, moving him into the grooming

area. We talk as we take our time brushing each horse, not realizing just how long we'd been outside.

The wind picks up and the air feels charged from the storm that's rolling in. We're due for a good thunderstorm, and while I'm not scared of storms anymore like I was when I was a kid, I'm a little annoyed since the pastures were finally drying up.

"I have a bunch of baby chicks," I tell Saanvi as I lock up the barn for the night. "I need to give them another handful of feed. They're in the garage if you want to see them."

"You're living my dream life," she says with a slight chuckle. "A creepy old house with horses—oh, sorry, not that your house is creepy. That came out wrong."

"It's fine, and I know what you mean. Victorian houses have a bit of a creepy factor and I personally love it. I always said my dream house was the Addams's Family house." I look lovingly at my house, walking closer to it. "This is perfect. Especially when I remember I don't have a mortgage."

She laughs. "That would make me love pretty much any house." An old truck slowly drives down the road, letting off the gas right when it gets in front of our house. "That must be one of your neighbors?"

"Uh, probably. I don't recognize the truck but that doesn't mean much."

"We saw it on the way here. It was going really slow, and I only remember because it has the dog kennel in the back and it wasn't tied down. I didn't see a dog in it, thankfully."

"Oh, I hate seeing that. It's so dangerous." The truck speeds up as if whoever is driving sees that we're watching, and I get a flashback to Ethan's colleague Stephanie driving by the house hoping to catch me using magic.

She likes Ethan and thinks he'd be better off dating her than me. It wouldn't make sense for her to go after him...yet it wouldn't surprise me either. Maybe she's pissed enough to want to punish him. She's already on probation with the Order, which was probably like a death sentence to her. She definitely drank the Kool-Aid and believes the Order to be everything they say it is.

My stomach starts to twist into a knot and Hunter bumps his cold nose against my hand, reminding me to take a deep breath and calm down before I accidentally summon fire in my hand. That would be fun to try explaining to my brother's new girlfriend.

We make it inside after feeding the chicks right as the rain hits. Harrison and Ethan are in the living room, watching a baseball game, and Nik is looking at his matches on the new dating site he signed up for.

Saanvi sits with Harry on the couch, and I go into the kitchen to get the dessert ready. My phone chimes with a text and I set the pie down to go check it. Sam texted me, and I see that I have a few texts from Rene as well.

Sam: Hey...just checking on you guys. (David said everything is still good legally)

Me: Ethan doesn't seem phased by the whole thing. I'm still a little freaked out

Sam: It's not the first time he's been arrested, though he's never been accused of murder before.

Me: Hah. He reminded me. I'm going crazy trying to think of who set him up.

Sam: We are too. Julia reached a dead end. The “tip” was called in anonymously and the couple who live in that apartment now weren’t the ones who found the lighter. We talked to them and it’s almost like they’ve been held spellbound by a vampire.

Me: OMG really?!

Sam: Yeah. They can’t remember if they found it or if they didn’t. It’s like there’s a hole in that part of their memory. Classic symptom of being held spellbound.

“What would a vampire want with Ethan?” I mumble out loud. We personally don’t know any vampires, and it’s been four or five years since Ethan was sent on a vampire hunt by the Order. Though human years probably aren’t much time in vampire-years.

Still, if a vampire wanted to get revenge on Ethan for killing one of their friends, I don’t think framing him for murder would be the way to go.

Me: Thanks for looking into it. I’m not going to let this go until we figure it out. Nik thinks whoever did it was trying to unnerve me so they could attack.

Sam: That would make sense, actually. But you weren’t attacked by a demon, right?

Me: Right. Unless they expected Ethan to actually get arrested.

I let out a sigh, feeling annoyingly helpless. I’m a fucking witch and I also feel like I’ve hit a dead-end and have no idea what to do to get the answers I want.

Sam: Just be careful.

Me: I will. You too. <3

Putting the phone on the counter, I take the pie and new plates to the dining room. Stealing a glance behind me, I hold my hands over the pie to warm it up with magic since it's been sitting on the counter. I grab another bottle of wine and pour myself another glass, taking a few slow sips.

The wind picks up, making the siding out the outside of the house creak. Sinking down in my chair, I take another drink of wine and open the texts from Rene.

"Hey," Harrison says, coming into the dining room.

"Hey." I look up from my phone. "Everything okay?"

"I came in to ask you that." He eyes the glass of wine in my hand. I rarely drank before because it made it hard to keep my mental shields up. "What happened during dinner?" Harrison looks through the living room, making sure Saanvi isn't nearby to overhear us.

"Nothing," I dismiss, waving my hand in the air. "Just my guilt manifesting in real life."

"Guilt?"

"Yeah. Just a few hours before you got here, I went with my friend to check out a haunted house and left without telling him there are remains under one of the outbuildings."

Harrison blinks once. Twice. "You're not joking, are you?"

"Nope. I wasn't able to confirm whose remains are buried, but I can feel it in *my* bones that I'm going to find human *bones*. See what I did there? But I need to dig into the research on the place first before I dig into the ground so I can try and figure out who is buried before I report it."

"How would you do that?"

"You didn't forget I can talk to ghosts, did you?"

Harrison continues to stare at me for several seconds. “We live very different lives.”

“You could always come ghost hunting with me.”

“I think I’ll pass.”

Thunder rumbles in the distance, and the wind blows even harder. This is the first strong storm my new barn is going to withstand, and unlike the old rickety barn, I’m not worried this time. Everyone else joins Harrison and me in the dining room for dessert. The storm is still raging when we finish, and a tornado watch is issued right before Harrison and Saanvi leave.

“You guys should stay,” Ethan tells them. “We have room and it would be safer than driving into a storm.”

“My overnight bag is in your car,” Saanvi says a little shyly. “You’re sure you wouldn’t mind if we crashed?”

“Not at all,” Ethan assures her.

“Both guest rooms are clean,” I say, not sure what kind of sleeping arrangement she’s comfortable with. “One has my ferret in it, but he’s pretty quiet once he’s asleep for the night. We can make Harry stay there with him.”

Harrison looks at Saanvi, taking her hand in his. She smiles, eyes glimmering when she looks at him. This girl might not be a demon, but if she hurts my brother, I’ll come for her. Though if I’m being realistic, there’s a bigger chance my dipshit brother will be the one to mess things up.

Nik and Ethan start clearing the table, and Saanvi insists she help this time. I walk with Harrison onto the porch so we can run outside and get the overnight bag from his car. The rain is coming down hard, blowing sideways.

“Watch this,” I start and hold up my hand. Telekinesis doesn’t come easily for me so it takes a bit of concentration to make a magical bubble to stand under, keeping myself dry as I go to the car. Headlights on the road catch my attention as I dash off the porch. It’s dark and hard to see through the rain, but I swear the same red truck is slowly driving by the house again.

Chapter
Thirteen

Ethan drapes his arm around me and pulls the blankets up to our shoulders. We're in bed and I'm snuggled up close to him with my head on his chest.

“What do you think?” I ask, splaying my fingers over his muscular pec.

“About what?”

“Saanvi.”

“She's nice. What do you think?”

“I agree, she's nice.” I hook my leg over Ethan's and let my eyes fall shut, listening to his heart beating. “She's smart, has a good job, and is easy to get along with. And she's really pretty.”

“You sound like you want to date her.”

“Hah. I'm just happy Harry found someone I approve of,” I only half joke. “Now to make sure he doesn't fuck things up.”

“How about you stay out of it?”

“What, like I'd meddle in my brother's love life?”

Ethan chuckles. “Good thing he hasn't had much of one in the last year or so.”

“Right?” I wave my hand, magically turning off the light and nestling closer to Ethan. He slides his hand under my shirt and pulls me on top of him. Straddling him, I push up just enough to rub myself against him. He brings his hands up my back and lifts his head off the pillow so he can kiss me. My eyes flutter shut and my whole body relaxes as he deepens the kiss. I love him so much that it’s easy to get lost in each other.

He slips his fingers under the bottom hem of the oversized t-shirt I’m wearing. I sit back just so he can pull it off, dropping onto the bed next to us. I lean back, rocking my hips against him and feel his cock start to harden beneath me. Ethan moves his hands to the back of my thighs and urges me up toward the headboard. My pussy quivers with anticipation and I fumble a bit, leaning to one side and then the other so he can remove my underwear.

And then I’m back, core hovering over his face. I grip the headboard as he puts his soft mouth to the flesh on my inner thigh, lips parting as desire swells inside me. My eyes are shut, and in the back of my mind, I know we have guests over and I should be quiet.

But as soon as Ethan’s deft tongue flicks my clit, I let out a moan, melting against him. He holds me against him, kissing and sucking, not stopping until I’m writhing against him, unable to stay silent as the orgasm rolls through me. My body is shaking and I shudder, pussy contracting with aftershock waves of pleasure.

Not wasting any time, Ethan moves me down, spinning me around so I’m facing away from him. I’m still reeling, still panting with a racing heart as I feebly push up onto all fours, spreading my legs enough for Ethan to enter me from behind. He hastily takes off his boxers and grabs my hips, lining his

cock up and slowly pushing inside. He thrusts in slowly at first, and then speeds up his movements only to slow down again as he reaches around, gently stroking my swollen clit. I'm still so wound up it doesn't take long to come again, and as soon as the second orgasm hits, Ethan pushes his cock in balls deep, holding it there for a second before pulling back and thrusting in again and again and again, coming right after me.

Panting, he pulls out, and I do an ungraceful scuffle to the bathroom to pee and clean myself up. I hurry back into bed, not bothering with my clothes.

"I love you," he whispers, enveloping me in his arms.

"I love you, too," I whisper back and let my eyes fall shut. Satisfied and happy, I fall asleep quickly despite everything that's weighing on my mind. I don't stay asleep long though, and wake after a dream that I can't quite classify as a nightmare yet was unsettling.

Blinking, I sit up and think about what I just saw. In my dream, I was walking through the bed and breakfast again. The first floor was in the same state of disrepair as I saw it, but it was as if I was walking back in time as I ascended the stairs. I was seeing everything from someone else's eyes and was walking behind a young woman with shoulder length dirty-blond hair.

And her name was Allison.

She was a friend, and we were going to spend the summer together in our first apartment. Everything seemed so exciting and promising until hands closed around my throat, squeezing until I couldn't breathe.

Rubbing my neck, I get up and pad into the bathroom to check for marks. Seeing none, I try to tell myself this was just a dream and not a spirit trying to reach out to me. But I can't turn my mind off and go back to sleep, so I move into the sitting area of our room and open a notebook. I doodle as I think, getting annoyed because I just *know* I'm missing something when it comes to who framed Ethan.

I jot down a few different motives and try to go from there. Like most hunters, Ethan has a long list of enemies, but I run into the same problem I did with Sam suggesting a vampire is behind this. Monsters don't tend to make patient, calculated decisions like this. Most of the monsters Ethan has hunted have been simple minded and lack the cognitive ability to pull something off like that.

Sighing, I close the notebook and put it on the little table next to me. The floor outside my door creaks like it always does when someone is walking down the hall. I don't think much of it at first, assuming it's Harry or Saanvi going to use the bathroom. But whoever is in the hall stops right by the doors leading into my bedroom.

The air suddenly feels cold, and I jump up, holding my right hand out in front of me. Embers spark around my fingers, ready to attack if need be. Moving slowly so I don't make a sound, I twist the doorknob and then throw open the door. No one is in the hall, but out of the corner of my eye, I see a dark shadow move down the stairs.

"Hey," I whisper-yell and rush into the hall. I'm hit with a wave of dark energy but fight through it. It's not the first time I've walked right through negative spiritual residue like this, if you will. Part of my dream flashes through my mind and my blood runs cold when the vision of a young woman plays out

before my eyes. It's hard to see in the dark, but her face looked bloodied and bruised. I blink and the vision is gone, yet her fear is palpable.

"Wait," I say, in case the spirit is trying to manifest. I close my eyes and think back to the dream, certain now that it was the spirit reaching out. It's easier for them to communicate through dreams, and I think I accidentally astral project to the spirit world in my sleep. Another part of my dream comes back to me, and I was able to listen to the woman's thoughts. They are scrambled and I get little flashes of the library from the bed and breakfast. The shelves haven't been wallpapered yet, and the smell of cigarettes burns my nose.

A shadow crosses the landing by the front staircase, and I hurry after it, fingers curling in toward my palm, ready to summon fire if need be, though I can't burn a ghost. Knowing which stairs creak the loudest, I walk down them in a zigzag, avoiding the squeak of century-old wood under my feet.

Chaotic whispers echo around me, coming from the spirit realm. Whoever this spirit is seems to have sought me out, and I can't dismiss it. I did that once before, missing the warning said spirit was trying to give me.

But I don't have time for games, and if something is going down, I need to know and I need to know now so I can handle it.

I get to the bottom of the stairs and wait a beat, trying to feel if the spirit is still here. I can't sense a presence, but something shuffles in the library. The energy shifts and a darkness threatens to take over.

Maybe Keith was right and the spirits in the house were talking about me all along. The timing can't be a coincidence: his cousin captured that EVP talking about a witch around the

same time something tried to get through my warding. And now I'm thinking it could somehow be connected to whoever tried to frame Ethan. Breaking through my warding would be a million times easier when I'm distressed and distracted.

I mentally call Hunter, who's sleeping on the bed in Romeo's room, and slip through the living room, rushing toward the dark silhouette that's standing in front of a bookshelf in the library.

"Hey!" I demand, eyes narrowing on the dark figure. "I know where your bones are and don't think for a second I won't burn them and send you to hell."

The dark figure jumps, bumping into the bookshelf. Her dark hair swishes behind her back and she turns just enough for me to see that I'm not talking to a ghost, but Saanvi.

Chapter

Fourteen

S *hit.*

I lower my hand, squeezing my fingers against my palm to extinguish the flames I was holding. Dim light illuminates Saanvi's face and she's staring at me like she doesn't know whether to scream, cry, or run away.

"Sorry," I blurt. "I, uh...I...I thought you were someone else and you scared me. I didn't expect to see anyone down here."

She blinks a few times, trying to back away but bumps into the bookshelf instead. Hunter runs down the back staircase and I take a quick step toward the couch and turn on a light on the side table.

"W-who did you think I was?" She wraps her arms around herself and flicks her eyes from Hunter to me and back again. Swallowing hard, I'm sure she's debating on yelling for Harrison to come protect her from his crazy sister.

"Um," I start, mind blanking. I've never been a good liar and I'm even worse when I'm on the spot like this. "A ghost." Honesty is the best policy, right? And considering that I threatened to burn her bones, I can't think of anything better to say.

“A ghost?” she echoes and I mentally cringe at my own words.

“Yeah. I, uh, had a nightmare and heard someone downstairs.” Thank fucking god it’s dim in the room, masking the flush that’s taking over my face. My cheeks probably match my hair right now. “I have a very active imagination and watch a lot of horror movies as well as those ghost hunting shows where they say to provoke and threaten the spirits.”

She continues to stare at me dubiously for a few seconds and then lets out a breath, body visibly relaxing, having bought my story. “Huh. So, you think you see a ghost and you go after it?”

“Yeah. I don’t want it in my house.”

“I would be hiding under my covers.”

I let out a snort of laughter. “I’ve always had a fascination with anything paranormal.”

“You’re braver than me.” She looks around nervously.

“There’s no ghost,” I quickly add. “I’m almost disappointed.” I’m not lying about that. “Is everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah. I couldn’t sleep so I thought I could watch a movie on my phone without waking up Harrison, but I forgot my charger in the car. I was being a little nosey and looking at your books,” she confesses.

“They’re mostly romance novels and books about horses. You can read whatever or turn the TV on in the living room.”

“Thanks. I might take a book back upstairs.”

“I have an extra phone charger. It’s in the kitchen.” Hunter follows me, thankfully not pointing out how fucking awkward

I am. I grab the charger from the junk drawer and give it to Saanvi.

“Thanks,” she says again, looking tense again. “I think I’m going to try to get some sleep.”

“Me too.” I motion with my head toward the rear staircase. “Help yourself to whatever. The kitchen is pretty well stocked. You don’t have to ask if you want something.”

“Noted, thanks again.”

Hunter races up the stairs first, going to steal my spot in bed before I can get there. Saanvi nervously smiles and goes back into the guest room she’s sharing with Harrison, closing the door behind her. I roll my eyes at myself, knowing I’m going to get an earful from Harrison in the morning.

“Move over,” I tell Hunter, who acts like a stubborn dog and stretches his paws out. “Fine.” I get back into bed, wedging myself between him and Ethan. It’s comforting, really, to have my demon-hunting boyfriend and my badass spirit familiar on either side of me. In his sleep, Ethan rolls over and puts his arm around me. I put my hand on top of his, closing my eyes and trying to go back to sleep, but I can’t, and I don’t know what bothers me more: the fact that I’m being haunted or the fact that I’m being haunted in *my house*.

“If you’re trying to tell me something, I’m listening,” I say quietly as not to disturb Ethan. I lay in bed waiting for some sort of message until I fall asleep a good hour later. It’s my turn to get up and feed the horses, and I groan as I hit snooze for the third time.

“Want me to feed?” Ethan asks sleepily.

“Yes,” I say honestly. “But I’ll do it. You have two Saturday morning clients, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” He runs his hand over my hip and under my shirt.
“But not until nine.”

“Funny, I used to think nine AM wasn’t early.”

“You’re spoiled not having to get up for work anymore.”

“Right?” I roll over, pulling the blankets up over my shoulders and remember yelling at Saanvi last night.
“Actually, I think I’m going to hide out in the barn until Harry leaves.”

“Huh?” Ethan cups my breast with his hand and moves closer so his lips brush against my neck.

“I kinda, sorta thought Saanvi was a ghost and told her I was going to burn her bones and send her back to hell.”

Ethan sits up slightly, looking at me with an expression of amusement on his face. “When did this happen?”

“When you were blissfully sleeping.” I take a deep breath and stretch my legs out. “I had a weird dream about the ghosts at that bed and breakfast and then I heard someone in the hall. I hadn’t separated myself from the dream yet and I was sure a ghost was moving through the house.”

“But it was just your brother’s innocent girlfriend.”

“Hah. We don’t know she’s innocent yet.”

Ethan raises his eyebrows. “She’s saving herself until marriage. That screams innocence to me.”

“I bet some serial killers were virgins,” I shoot back and Ethan laughs. “But you’re right. She hasn’t waved any red flags and Harry seems really happy with her.”

“If you look for something bad, you’ll find it. Trust your gut. It hasn’t steered you wrong yet.”

“Easier said than done.” We stay in bed together for a little while longer and then we both force ourselves up. Ethan wants to get his own workout in before he has to train anyone, and the horses are going to angry-whinny at me when I finally step foot in the barn.

The guest room door is still closed when I go into the hall, then into Romeo’s room to feed him and let him out of his cage. I head outside to take care of the chickens before going into the barn. I might grumble about getting up early to feed everyone, but I wouldn’t trade this for anything.

Harrison, Saanvi, and Nik are all in the kitchen with Ethan when I come back inside. I smile and flick my eyes to Ethan, silently asking if anyone said anything about my little freakout last night. It was completely justified, given my lifestyle, but I can only imagine what Saanvi thinks of me.

“You guys heading out after breakfast?” I ask, going straight to the coffee pot.

“Yeah,” Harrison answers. “Saanvi has a cat.”

“I have automatic feeders and one of those water-fountain type bowls,” Saanvi quickly adds. “She’s fine on her own for a day or two.”

“Oh, nice. That’s a good thing about cats,” I say. “They’re independent.”

We eat breakfast together and Harrison pulls me aside when Saanvi goes upstairs to shower and get dressed for the day. I’m already wincing, ready for him to reprimand me for being weird around his girlfriend.

“So I can explain,” I start and then regret my words immediately since it’s apparent by Harrison’s confused look he

wasn't going to ask me why I came downstairs threatening to burn someone's bones. "Never mind. What's up, bro?"

"I'm gonna ignore the first part of that due to not wanting to get involved."

"That's probably the best choice when it comes to me. Between demons and ghosts and drama within the coven, it's a lot to keep up with."

"I'll take your word for it." He runs his hand through his light-brown hair. "She's great, isn't she?"

"Yeah," I say, unable to keep the smile off my face. "She really is. So, don't fuck things up, okay? I mean, assuming she's not a demon—"

"That happened once. You'll never let it go, will you?"

"Not until I die. And then I can promise you I will come back and haunt the shit out of you about it."

He shrugs. "I'd expect nothing less, honestly."

"Exactly. But what I was going to say, assuming she's not an undercover demon, she's way out of your league."

Instead of joking back, Harrison grins. "Right? I was nervous to ask her out. I'm never nervous."

And now I'm smiling again. "Well, it looks like you've finally met your match. Who knows, maybe this time next year we'll be letting her in on the family secret."

"About magic? Why would she need to know?"

I tip my head to the side, looking at my brother for a few seconds as I try to figure out how to put things without freaking him out. Deciding to just spit it out, push my hair back and say, "magic runs in our family. It's skipped

generations or siblings maybe since Grandma didn't have powers but her sister did. Kinda like how I have powers and you don't. But it's still in your blood. It's not impossible that either of our kids have powers too."

The color drains from Harrison's face and I don't know what's more of a shock to him: thinking about having a kid or having a kid with magic. I'm already worried that I'll be disappointed if my children don't have magic. I'll love them the same either way, I know, but I hope to carry on the Lancaster family legacy.

And magic is cool as fuck.

"You don't have to worry about it anytime soon," I add, regretting saying anything. "And if you come visit me again, there's a good chance she'll see something that lets the cat out of the bag on its own."

"We'll do Thanksgiving and Christmas in New York this year."

I cock an eyebrow. "Like that'll make much of a difference."

"True."

"But anyway, I didn't mean to make it about me. I really like her, and I think she would like to come back sometime during the day so we can ride."

He smiles again. "She would like that."

"Get her a pair of riding boots if she doesn't have any," I suggest. "I don't think anything I have will fit her. She's smaller than me."

"I can do that. I'm glad you approve," he says with a wink. "It'll make telling Mom and Dad that much easier."

I laugh. “Good luck with that. You know Mom is going to start planning your wedding as soon as you say the word *girlfriend*.” I roll my eyes.

“She’s still bugging you about living with Ethan?”

“Yep. She loves to drop subtle hints.” I shake my head. My parents don’t disapprove of me living with my boyfriend, but our mom seems to think I’ll give her grandkids nine months after I say *I do*. I would say yes in a heartbeat if Ethan proposed today, but I’m also not in a rush. What we have is real and I don’t need a legal piece of paper defining just what we mean to each other.

And as for having kids...I don’t know if I’ll ever feel adult enough to be responsible for a living-breathing human being.

“Maybe next weekend you guys can meet us in the city for dinner?” Harrison suggests.

“Yeah. I’d like that. What about one of those dinner cruises along Lake Michigan? It’s been too cold for me to want to be along the shore, but it’s warming up.”

“My company just ran an ad campaign for one of the cruises. I can probably hook us up.”

My smile broadens. “It’s a double-date then.”



“YOU ARE the laziest thoroughbred I’ve ever met,” I tell Sundance, reaching down to pet his neck. “All-day turnout has mellowed you out. Leslie—” Emotion hits me like a punch to the gut and I cut off, feeling the sting of tears threatening to fall. “She would be happy to know you’re happy.” I loosen the reins and pat his neck. “Though she might get on me a bit for

letting you skip so many training days.” I swallow the lump forming in my throat and take my feet out of the stirrups, guiding Sundance to the arena gate.

I lean over to unlatch it when something spooks Mystery, Ross, and Rachel in the pasture. Sundance reacts and I catch my balance right before I tumble off.

“Easy, big guy,” I tell him, sitting deep in the saddle. He sidesteps and bumps into the gate, scaring himself even more. Working to calm him down, I look out at the others to see if they’re just being typically spooky today or if something more sinister is lurking in the woods surrounding the pasture.

The woods surrounding the property are pretty overgrown. Clearing it out is going to be our summer project. If we’re ambitious enough, we’ll make some trails through the trees to take the horses on. If anything was lumbering through the woods now, I’d hear it.

Sundance holds his head up, nostrils flaring, and I hear something moving through the underbrush.

“Seriously?” I ask, shaking my head when I see a rabbit come out of the tree line. “I mean, let’s all run and panic before the killer bunny morphs into a demon. Shit. That could actually happen.” I pat Sundance’s neck, reassuring him that he’s fine. He watches the rabbit move across the yard and decides it’s not a threat. I get the gate open, and he lazily walks toward the barn.

I take my time brushing him, trying to decide if it’s worth it to give him a bath when the pasture is a sloppy mess. He’ll just go out and roll in the mud as soon as he’s turned out.

“As long as you don’t lose a shoe again, I don’t care how muddy you get,” I tell him, reaching into my pocket to pull out

a peppermint. Sundance noses me, eagerly taking the treat. I turn him out and go up to the house, finding Nik in the front yard working on salvaging the flowers I planted too soon... despite his warning.

“Oh, wow,” I say, seeing my marigolds and pansies look even better than they did the day I brought them home from the nursery. Nik rubs his hands together and sprinkles green and blue faery dust on another wilted flower. “And go ahead and say it.”

“Say what, milady?” Nik looks up, eyes slightly narrowing. “I told you so? Because I would never do that. And I’d never remind you that the stores put out flowers too early just to profit off people like you who get over-excited, plant things before the frost is gone, and then have to go out and buy more, wasting your money and making the plants suffer. Nope. I wouldn’t say that at all.”

“Hah. And you were right. Thank you for helping.”

“I’m glad I can. At some point things can be beyond my scope of magic.” He moves onto the next section of flowers, and I turn, looking at a truck going down the street. It slows in front of my house and turns down the driveway, but I’m annoyed, not concerned.

“Fucking Donna,” I huff and can’t help but roll my eyes. Donna lives down the street and is judgmental, nosey, and has a *can I speak to the manager* haircut with the entitled attitude to match.

“I wonder what she wants this time?” Nik wipes his hands on his pants and we both go down the sidewalk.

“Hey, neighbor!” Donna calls as she gets out of her car.

“Hi,” I reply. “What, uh, brings you over?” *This time*, I grumble in my head.

“You have a dog, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” I say slowly, shifting my gaze to Hunter, who’s laying on the porch. “Hunter.”

“And he’s never leashed, is he?”

I clench my jaw, taking a breath before answering. This isn’t the first time she’s given me shit about it. “Not when he’s on my property.”

“Hmm.” She pulls her phone from her purse and steps around me, putting one hand on my hip as she looks at Hunter. “Nope, it can’t be him. He’s too dark.”

“Can’t be him?” Nik echoes.

“Look at this.” She thrusts her phone forward, showing us a still image captured from her doorbell camera. “This is the fourth time we’ve seen it. Scared our livestock and my kids half to death!”

The sun is shining on the screen, making it hard to see the picture. I hold my hand up, shielding my eyes and move closer.

“It seems about the same size as your dog,” Donna goes on, holding the phone right up to my face. “Maybe even bigger. We don’t have wolves around here so someone must have gotten one as a pet and wasn’t able to handle it. They’ll be fined for this, you know.”

“Do you have more footage of it?” I ask, surprised to see that she’s not exaggerating for once. The image is a little blurry, but there’s no mistaking the wolf-like creature in her yard.

“Yes and take a look at this. That thing is probably rabid. I’m going to start keeping my pistol in my purse.” She pulls up another video. This one was taken at night, and the wolf is sniffing around the yard and then sits right in the middle of the path leading to their porch. It’s staring at the camera, and I swear it’s doing it on purpose. It stays like that, unmoving, for several seconds and then turns and trots off, eyes flashing red for just a millisecond.

Anyone else would have chalked the red flash up to some sort of reflection from the porch lights, but I know better. That wolf is someone’s familiar.

Chapter
Fifteen

“**W**hen did you first see it?” I ask, watching the video loop play again.

“We got footage on Thursday night, but the kids say they’ve seen it for well over a week now. We found tracks around the barn, and I told Animal Control someone’s large dog was off leash and wandering my property, but they didn’t believe me. But they will know that we have video evidence,” Donna explains, looking rather satisfied with herself for having this information.

And she either didn’t realize or doesn’t care that she just admitted she called Animal Control thinking it was Hunter. Given what I know about Donna, she just doesn’t care.

“Have any of your animals been attacked?” Nik asks.

Donna shakes her head. “No. And I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Donna. I live down the street.” She holds her hand out for Nik to shake.

I grit my teeth again. She has met Nik before, and we ran into each other about a month ago when Ethan, Nik, and I went to dinner. Donna picked and pried for information about Nik, making it known how “modern” we were for “having a male houseguest” and how “surprised” she was that Ethan didn’t feel threatened.

“I’m Boris,” he says shortly, annoyed with Donna just like I am. “And I’m new in town,” he goes on, talking with an accent with a straight face. “Visiting from Russia for first time.”

I have to look away to keep from laughing, and Donna’s face is priceless. She wanted to go through the same song and dance about how weird it is to have a roommate—though it’s not—because I think she’s convinced we’re a throuple and wants me to admit it.

“Oh, well, it’s, uh...nice to meet you.” Her small eyes narrow and she looks at me, waiting to see if I’m going to laugh and say this is a joke.

“That wolf,” I begin again. “You said it just frightened your animals, but it didn’t attack?”

“Right.” Donna shudders. “It was like it was stalking us, waiting for a bigger target?”

“Like you?” Nik asks seriously and if I had water in my mouth, I would have spit it out.

“Me or my children. That thing has a taste for blood, I’m telling you.” She shakes her hair back. “Which is why I just had to tell you. You have those little rescue horses, and I would just be heartbroken to know something happened when I could have warned you and prevented it.”

And I’m back to grinding my molars in an attempt to bite my tongue. It has to be exhausting to be her, dropping insults, and trying to constantly stir up shit.

“Well, we appreciate it, deeply,” Nik says in an exaggerated Russian accent. “I will keep my gun at my side at all times.

“Good idea,” Donna replies, still not sure what’s going on but not wanting to appear confused. “Let’s hope Animal Control can get it together and catch this thing. We all have to be on guard now.”

“Better safe than sorry,” I offer and force a smile. Donna looks Nik over once more and then takes a step back.

“You take care now,” she says and gets in her car. I keep my fake smile on my face until her truck bumps along the street.

“What a fucking bitch,” I huff, shaking my head. “And I say that fully knowing she’s never done something outrightly bitchy.”

“That’s what makes her such a fucking bitch,” Nik agrees. “So that wolf isn’t a wolf.”

“It’s someone’s familiar.”

“You saw that, too?”

“Yep. The eyes were a giveaway. And it didn’t attack.” I shift my weight and push my hair over my shoulder. “Why would someone have their familiar lurk around like that?”

“I have no idea,” Nik tells me. “I’m not familiar with familiars.” He laughs at his own words. “But I do recall Estelle mentioning that it’s typically frowned upon to have your familiar take the form of a wolf.”

“Why?” I ask right as it dawns on me. “Oh, werewolves.”

“Yeah. Though, there’s no bad blood between you guys, right?”

I shake my head. “No. Ruby told me that weres tend to say *within the pack* which sounds like it could be an inbreeding issue to me, but hey, who am I to judge?” I hold up my hands.

“She said that witches and weres are free to be friends or marry but their children tend to only inherit half of one set of genes, so they’re either a witch with weak powers or a wolf who’s unable to shift. It sounds like a genetic risk.”

“I’ve heard,” Nik says, nodding his head toward me. “Maybe Donna really is a demon.”

“Is it horrible that part of me really wishes she was? I’d love to stab her with my fire-sword.”

Nik lets out a snort of laughter. “I’m betting half the town feels the same way about her. We didn’t call them *Karens* back in the day, but people like her have existed throughout history.”

“I think I’d definitely lose it if I came across a version of Donna every fifty or so years.” The wind picks up and I look out at the street. “If someone nearby was a member of the coven, you’d think they would have reached out, right?”

“Right. I also recall Estelle mentioning how few members of the coven settled in Paradise Valley. You’re right on the cusp of Paradise Valley and Thorne Hill, I know, but given the fact that your aunt was rather well known within your own coven someone would have most definitely reached out.”

Glancing at Hunter, he’s already thinking he should go out tonight and try to find this other familiar. It’s kept its distance, and he thinks it was for a reason. If it had come any closer, he’d be able to sense it.

“I’m going to text Ruby,” I tell Nik, reaching down to pull my phone from my breeches pocket. “And ask if she knows of anyone in our coven who has a familiar that takes the form of a wolf.” I walk up the porch steps as I type out a message.

Me: Hey! Random question, but do you happen to know if anyone in the coven has a familiar that takes the form of a large gray wolf with blue eyes?

I'm pocketing my phone, not expecting a reply until later. There's no cell service in the Covenstead, where Ruby resides since she's a professor at Grim Gate Academy. But it's summer and she's only doing part time summer school and texts me back right away.

Ruby: No. It's a bit of an unwritten rule in our coven not to have your familiar take the form of a wolf. We're a tad protective of the Ley line and won't allow any packs to settle here so it would be a little distasteful to have a wolf familiar.

Me: Oh, interesting, and that makes total sense. And thanks!

Ruby: I'm guessing there's a reason you want to know? I don't mean to pry, I'm just curious

I bite my lip, debating on what to tell her. Ruby has been nothing but exceptionally kind and helpful to the point where I consider her a friend. But she's seemed distracted lately and I get the feeling that something is going on in her personal life. I don't want to burden her any more than necessary.

Me: Just trying to work through another memory.

I feel bad for lying so I promise myself I'll come clean if I need to. Though something nags at me, telling me this isn't a total lie. Because there *is* something familiar about the wolf. The memory spell is pretty much totally lifted, but the mental confusion the High Priestess warned about is strong. I have dual memories of the same event: one memory of what

actually happened and another of an alternate reality that Estelle carefully crafted to protect me. Most times, the real memories are obvious, but other times I have to really think back and can't decide what was real or not real.

It's not like I expect to remember everything that happened in perfect clarity throughout my childhood. Normal memories fade, and our perception shifts as we age, skewing how we look back on things. But I know I've seen that wolf before, and it's like her name is on the tip of my tongue.

Familiars themselves are neither good nor bad, yet they pledge themselves to a witch or warlock and will follow them down whatever path they choose. If I wanted to embrace my villain era and watch the world burn, Hunter would supply the matches.

My phone vibrates and I look down to see Ruby sent me another text.

Ruby: We do have several families who have had various dog breeds as their familiars for centuries. I want to say the Jones have huskies. They're smaller than wolves but look similar.

I can definitely see how I could mistake a husky for a wolf back when I was ten, but now that I'm in my twenties and have worked at a vet clinic for most of my adult life, I wouldn't make the same mistake.

Me: Yeah, they do. Maybe that's what I'm remembering. Thanks again. Sorry to bother you!

Ruby: It's never a bother! Once things calm down, we still need to go on that lunch date.

Me: Def! Let me know! :-)

I let my hand fall to my side and go to the front door, waving my hand in front of me to open it with magic. My feet hit the hardwood and a memory washes over me.

“Go on upstairs,” Aunt Estelle tells Harrison, reaching into her robe pocket and pulling out a piece of chocolate. “Turn on a movie and eat this once you’re settled in bed.”

“Is that another sleeping potion?” I ask, holding a squirming cat in my arms. I’m already scratched and bleeding but I’m determined to make this cat mine so I can bring it home.

“Shhh,” Aunt Estelle tells me with a whisper. “It’s our secret” She smiles and winks. “Though this time I need you to go up and keep watch over him. You do that for me, and I promise tomorrow I’ll teach you a new spell.”

Smiling, I hold the cat tighter and nod before hurrying up the stairs after my brother. The cat scratches me and I lose my grip when we get to the landing. I turn, trying to catch her, right as a man with dark hair and dark eyes steps into the house. The door closes behind him, but not before I catch a glimpse of a beautiful gray wolf.

Chapter
Sixteen

“**G**od, this is good.” Ethan closes his eyes and nods. “You sure you don’t want to try some?”

I wrinkle my nose in disgust and shake my head. “Eww. No, thank you.”

“You’re missing out.” He raises his eyebrows and takes another bite of his burger.

“It is good,” Rene agrees, stabbing her fork into her salad. “It’s usually what I get from here, but I need to lose ten pounds.”

“Girl,” Keith huffs and looks at me. “She’s crazy, isn’t she?”

“I wouldn’t say crazy, since I know where she’s coming from,” I start. “But you do not need to lose weight in order to fit into a dress you bought a size too small.”

“It wasn’t that long ago men preferred women with fuller figures,” Nik tells her. The five of us are at a restaurant in Paradise Valley and are going to the bed and breakfast after we eat. “And I’ve had over a thousand lovers both male and female in my years and the ten pounds you’re talking about has never once made a difference.”

“Over a thousand?” Keith and I echo at the same time.

“He’s going on two-centuries old,” Ethan reminds me, talking with his mouth full. “Even if he had just ten hookups a year, that’s still one thousand people every hundred years.”

“I’ve gone on five dates in the last two years,” Keith deadpans.

“Until Ethan, I was in the same ballpark.” I set my vegan vegetable wrap on my plate. “I don’t even know fifty people I’d want to sleep with since I lost my virginity.”

“You two are a little pickier than I am when it comes to love.” Nik opens another sugar packet and sprinkles it on top of his milkshake. “And I have twice the dating pool to dip into since I have no preference other than they need to be human-ish.”

“Human-ish?” Rene raises her eyebrows. “I’m gonna need you to elaborate on that.”

“They need to have basic human anatomy. Vampires don’t consider themselves human and some werewolves will get very offended if you call them human.”

“Ohhh, gotcha.”

Nik picks the cherry out of his milkshake. “Though I did spend the night in a cave in Tibet with these ogre brothers and let’s just say I tried things I’d never tried before. I had also done a crap ton of coke along with faery weed.” He pops the cherry in his mouth and smiles at the memory as we all stare at him incredulously.

“Sometimes you say things that make me second guess letting you live in my house,” I say, realizing the couple at the table next to us are listening to our conversation with a mixture of amusement and curiosity.

“Ogres are real?” Rene echoes. “Nothing is off the table, is it?”

“Fairytale and myths came from somewhere,” Ethan tells her. “Though ogres...that’s a new one, even for me.”

“Well, next time I babysit my niece, I might ask to borrow some of her fairytale books.”

“My demon dictionary probably has you covered,” I joke.

“You got the full history of the place?” Ethan asks Keith.

“Yep.” Keith takes one more bite of his sandwich, sets it down, and reaches into his bag, pulling out a folder. “Everything is in here and I am dying to fully let Anora dig into this.” He hands the folder to Ethan, who flips through the papers.

“I’ve seen it already,” Rene tells us. “It’s intense.”

“Don’t tell me anything.” I break my wrap in half, already full from the pita bread and humus I had as an appetizer before this. “Something already reached out the last time I was there. I’m pretty sure a woman was beaten to death,” I start, and Keith and Rene exchange looks. “None of that! I can’t have any precognition of what’s going on. There’s something dark there as well and if it realizes I already have a theory, it’ll play to that and can take advantage of me.”

“I really admire your determination to do this,” Keith says. “I know you don’t have to lie or play games to impress us since you’re the actual real-deal, but you also don’t have to do this.”

I shrug. “People are born with abilities for a reason. I wasn’t gifted to become an Olympic athlete or teach the next generation math or whatever. But I can talk to ghosts.”

“Your aunt would be proud,” Nik says quietly. He’s told me that a few times before, and every time it still makes me a little emotional. I have so many mixed feelings toward Great Aunt Estelle. From anger for her keeping the truth from me, to a great sadness that we never got to know each other. It’s a complicated relationship, even though she’s dead.

You’d think she’d at least have the courtesy of paying me a visit in a dream or using a spirit board to talk to me.

“I brought some equipment,” Rene tells us and shows off the new EMF meter she ordered. We finish eating, and the waitress brings us the check.

“I got this,” Ethan says, grabbing it before anyone else can. He takes the check up to the little counter to pay.

“Hey,” I start, leaning in a bit as soon as Ethan is out of earshot. “Don’t you think it’s weird he’s like not rattled at all about the whole getting arrested thing?” I had texted Rene and Keith a breakdown of everything that happened since that fateful Friday afternoon.

“He’s been arrested before, right?” Rene asks, shifting her eyes from me to Ethan. He’s behind two people, buying us a little more time.

“Yeah. And he’s always gotten off thanks to the Order. I’m still not convinced they’re behind this.”

“They’re the ones who got him off the hook,” Keith muses. “It could have been a setup to prove how much he needs them.”

“Ohh, I didn’t think of that.” I pick up my iced tea and take a big drink. “It’s a dirty move and totally something the Order would do. Especially given how shady this whole thing is.”

“What about the couple in the apartment?” Nik runs his finger around the inside of his milkshake glass, getting the last bit of whipped cream out. “Julia was able to talk to them and they have some very clear signs of memory loss.”

“Which means some sort of memory spell was cast. Either by a witch or a vampire.” I push my hair back. “And I think I can rule out a vampire. It doesn’t seem like their way of getting revenge.”

“Unless someone paid a vampire to do it,” Rene suggests. “I saw a thing on Reddit where people posted some of the shady shit they’ve done for cash.” She shrugs. “I would do it for the right amount.”

“Shit. I would too,” Keith sighs.

“It’s not unheard of,” Nik chimes in. “Newer vampires have been known to sell their blood for spells or gullible humans who think it’ll enhance their sex life or something. Though vampires need to be several centuries old in order to possess the power to hold someone spellbound. Still, like Rene said, some people would do anything for the right amount of cash.”

“Well, fuck,” I huff under my breath. “Okay, so I’ll add *vampire for hire* to my list. Still, I feel like Ethan is brushing this off.”

“Is he?” Nik leans back. “Or is he not obsessing over it because you are?”

“This is something that should be obsessed over. It’s a big freaking deal. Whoever set him up wanted him out of the picture for some reason or another. They were really good at covering their tracks and making sure nothing could be traced back to them. From the new renters not knowing who called in

the tip to not being seen on any security footage in the area... there's so many questions. The biggest is how they got Ethan's fingerprint on the lighter. And they didn't get their way so this whole waiting for the other shoe to drop is going to be the death of me."

"It scares me too," Nik admits. "Because I agree with you and I still think whoever did it saw *you* as the target, not Ethan. If they actually wanted Ethan arrested, they'd have done a better job planting evidence and would have made sure he didn't have an alibi."

"Okay, now that's a good point," Keith says. "So, let's just say they knew the evidence wouldn't stand up in court if it got that far. Ethan would be out of the house and away from you for months. You'd be upset and distracted and...and...well, I don't fucking know because I'm not evil or crazy."

"You're a little crazy," Rene quips.

"The best of us are." Keith raises his eyebrows and smirks. "The point is, you would not be in fighting condition."

"Right. But what did this person or demon or witch or vampire or ogre for all I know want with me?"

"That's the million-dollar question." Nik brushes sugar off his shirt and stands, looking at the front of the restaurant. Ethan is making his way back to us and stops behind my chair. One of his large hands lands on my shoulder, and it's all I can do not to close my eyes and succumb to the warmth of his skin.

"You guys ready to go?" he asks.

"Yeah, I'm done." I take one last drink of iced tea and get up, grabbing my jacket that's hanging on the back of my chair. I put it on, grab my purse, and we all head out. Nik, Ethan, and

I follow behind Rene and Keith, getting to the house a few minutes later.

“This looks like a place I’d be hired to clear out,” Ethan says as we get out of the car. His eyes are almost wide with excitement. While some ghosts can get violent and dangerous, most are playful, annoying, and harmless in the physical sense when you’re clearing out a space. It’s the negative energy and the dark spirits you need to watch out for.

Ethan and I have enjoyed the calmness of our lives the last two months, but I do wonder if part of him misses going on assignments for the Order. It’s not like he can never hunt demons again, and I know there are probably more “freelance” hunters than hunters with the Order at this point. And mostly, given my appeal to things dark and dangerous, we’ll be burning demon bodies in no time.

“It’s creepy, that’s for sure.” Nik closes his door and looks at the house, clearly having second thoughts. As a half-faery, he’s much more sensitive to the supernatural than the others in our party. “And it’s giving off bad vibes.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “There’s one dark energy that’s stronger than the others. It’s oppressive and intelligent.”

“Then let’s do this.” Ethan goes to the back of the Jeep and gets out two large duffle bags. I go around to help and grab an armload of pillows. Nik gets the sleeping bags as well as a bag of food.

“Welcome home,” Keith says, sticking to the rough script we came up with, going with the premise that we all are going to be moving in. There’s one large bedroom upstairs with an attached bathroom that Lauren had intended on living in during the renovation process. It was the first thing she tackled since it didn’t need a crazy amount of work to make it livable.

The room and bathroom have been cleared, cleaned, and disinfected, and while there's no way I'm getting in the shower—both because it's gross and there's no hot water— but the toilet will get the job done.

“This place has so much potential,” Rene says, shining a flashlight around as she feels for the light switch on the wall. “It'll be perfect for us.”

“It's definitely big enough,” Ethan goes on.

“With Hill House vibes,” Nik mumbles and I shoot him a look, seeing that his discomfort is visible on his face. I wonder if he's feeling the same sense of unwelcome as I did, like whoever or whatever is radiating dark energy doesn't like nonhumans.

“It's great, isn't it?” Keith pushes his shoulders back and motions for us to follow him. “We can do the grand tour once we get our stuff set up.”

The stairs creak and groan under our weight, and the hall light flickers above us. The wiring in the place needs to be completely redone and I only hope nothing blows a fuse or starts a fire tonight.

“This is it,” Keith says, swinging his arm out in front of him. We go into the room and get started right away setting up. Ethan gets the air mattresses blown up while Rene and I hang towels and put soaps in the bathroom. I put two rolls of toilet paper on the back of the toilet and go back into the room, taking a minute to take it in.

It's a rectangular room, with two windows. This would have been marketed as one of the “large studio” units, though it's not even as big as my master bedroom. There's a little kitchenette to the right, with one of the windows above the

sink. There's a stovetop with two burners and an empty space next to the counter for a fridge.

The same female energy I felt the first time I came to the house lingers nearby. It wants to reach out but it can't. Because he doesn't want the truth to get out. I blink and go about getting things set up. If the spirits suspect we're here to do an investigation, they might hide. I want to draw them out and force them to confront me.

"You think the bed will go here eventually?" I ask, watching Ethan disconnect the motorized fan from one of the mattresses and move it into a corner. "Or maybe over there, once we get that counter and stuff removed, of course."

"I kinda like the kitchen area in the bedroom." Ethan hooks up the fan to another mattress. "We could keep pizza and beer up here and never have to leave." He wiggles his eyebrows. "And after some marathon sessions we can refuel and go at it again."

"Yeah, because pizza and beer are so hot to smell on your breath."

He laughs and turns on the fan, inflating the second mattress. I put the pillows and sleeping bags on the mattresses and arrange a little nightstand area next to mine. I move one of the other bags over, carefully taking out just a few items and leaving the salt, iron fire poker, and other weapons hidden away. Ethan might have overpacked when it came to the weapons, but since the last time we went on a "ghost hunt" ended with us getting attacked by goblins, I can't blame him for being overly cautious this time around. Though Hunter already canvassed the area and Keith and his aunt had been here before without getting eaten.

About twenty minutes later we're all set up and I'm actually quite comfy in my sleeping bag, snuggled up next to Ethan.

"Oh, shit," Rene huffs.

"What's wrong?" Ethan and I ask at the same time.

"There's no microwave." She holds up three bags of microwave popcorn and then motions to Keith's laptop, which is set up on a box in front of us. "Ya know, for the movie."

"I can help with that," I say and she tosses me one of the bags. "Just don't hate me if I burn it and we have to smell that all night. I've never done a bag of popcorn before."

I move so the bag is on the floor and hold my hands over it, summoning waves of energy, starting out slowly and adding more. Smiling triumphantly when the kernels start to pop, I look up, expecting to see my friends' excited faces.

There's a woman standing behind Rene, face bloody and bruised just like how I saw her in my dream. Her mouth falls open, hanging unnaturally from a broken jaw and disappears as soon as I startle.

I hear the name Allison again along with a warning: get out before he kills you too.

Chapter
Seventeen

“**B**abe.” Ethan nudges me and I blink a few times, looking down at the bag of popcorn. “I think it’s time to slow it down.”

“Right.” I swallow hard, eyes wide, and look around the room for the woman. *Allison*. This was her room. A room she shared with a friend. It was a small place, but it was safe, and it was there. I pull my hands back, giving the bag of popcorn a few seconds to cool and suddenly I’m there, back in time in the same room.

I’m sitting in the same place, on the floor between two twin beds. There’s a small table by the kitchenette, a loveseat and coffee table set up in the middle of the room. The door opens, and Allison and her friend come in, talking and laughing.

“I’m telling you,” the friend says, shutting the door behind her. “Making a book for the recently deceased isn’t a bad idea! It was helpful to the couple in the movie!”

“Not helpful enough,” Allison chuckles. “I’d put in better guidelines.” She takes off her coat, tossing it on the small table and opens the fridge. “Ugh, we’re out of white Zinfandel.”

“No time for drinking tonight. It’s the last day of the full moon phase and we need to charge our crystals and cleanse

our auras.”

I blink again and I’m back in the present day and the smell of buttery popcorn fills the air.

“When did *Beetlejuice* come out?” I ask

“Late eights,” Ethan replies, tipping his head slightly. He knows me enough to pick up that I just saw something no one else could.

“Nineteen eighty-eight to be exact,” Nik says. “I had just returned to the good ‘ole US of A that year after a season in Europe and I went to see it with your aunt, actually.”

“And movies typically stayed in theaters for a few a month or two, right?”

“You and your streaming,” Nik scoffs. “Back then, a popular movie would play for six months or longer. We couldn’t download things off the internet because it wasn’t invented then. Well, it was just not available to the public and my gran would never have allowed me to use it anyway. She thought an evil warlock set the whole thing up to suck away our souls and now that I’m thinking about it, she wasn’t that wrong.”

“Well, fuck,” I mumble and pick up the popcorn bag, tossing it back go Rene so she can dump it in a bowl.

“What did you see?” Ethan asks quietly.

“Two girls in this room,” I start and Ethan raises his eyebrows. “Not like that.” I elbow him and roll my eyes. “They had just come home from seeing *Beetlejuice* in the theater and were talking about charging crystals in the full moon. I thought we could narrow down dates with that.”

“We might be able to.” Ethan pulls out his phone. “If we can get a list of theaters in the area, it would be a long shot to have records kept like that, but it’s possible we can see the run-time.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Nik says, waving his hand in the air. “Charging crystals? These women were witches?” His eyes meet mine and now I know for sure he’s feeling the same unwelcome feeling I am.

“I mean, we are close to Thorne Hill.” I shrug and look around the room. “I heard a name. Allison.”

Keith gasps and waves his hands excitedly. “Can I tell you now? Now that you know a name?”

“Not yet.” The air above me feels cold and I want to offer my energy to help Allison’s spirit manifest. But I don’t want to quite acknowledge them so soon. “Let’s see if she comes back.”

I heat up another bag of popcorn and then lean against Ethan, eyes feeling heavy only minutes into the movie. The plan was to stay up pretty late and then sleep in shifts, acting like Rene and Keith, who are taking the morning shift, fell asleep during the movie. But I’m not sure I’m going to make it.

Telling myself it’ll be fine if I just close my eyes for a few minutes since everyone else is awake, I mentally tell Allison to take my energy if she needs it to communicate with me. She’s come off as the victim so far, but it could all be a trick as well. I rest my head on Ethan’s chest and he puts his arm around me, absentmindedly running his fingers up and down my back, which only lulls me to sleep sooner.

I dream that I'm back at my house, where Hunter is keeping watch for the familiar who takes on the shape of a wolf. The house is silent except for the ticking of a grandfather clock. It's in the foyer, up against the grand staircase. I walk in rhythm with the ticking of the clock, going past it and up the stairs. When I get to the landing and open my bedroom door, I step into the room we're all in now.

Bright sunlight streams through, and the sweet smell of peppermint mixes with the stench of gasoline and cigarettes. My chest hurts when I inhale, and I pat the pockets of my overalls, feeling for a cigarette. I can't light it in here, though.

Because it's not my room.

Key jingle and my heavy boots thud on the floor, taking a few more steps into the room. I look around and am filled with anger when I see a pentagram made from twigs hanging on the wall. Suddenly, I'm pushed backward and am no longer seeing things from his point of view.

He turns, face too blurry to make out his features, and screaming echoes around me. My eyes fly open and I'm back in my bed. I'm unable to move. I try to open my mouth so I can scream for Ethan, but nothing will come out. Then a single scream rings out around me, bringing relief that's short-lived.

Because I'm not the one screaming.

Another scream sounds, right in my ear. And then another. They're deafening and terrifying and something bad is going to happen, I know it. Ethan sits up, quickly rolling over to shake me.

"Hey," he says and then leans back, mouth opening wider than it should. A high-pitched scream comes from his mouth and his head lulls back before his entire body starts shaking.

“Ethan!” I’m able to yell. “Ethan!” He’s seizing in front of me and the screams get louder and louder but I still can’t get my body to move. A weight is pressing down on me, suffocating me and hurting my chest. I inhale only to choke and the smell of burning flesh fills my nostrils, making me sick.

Ethan slumps to the side and I desperately try again to reach him. He’s going to fall and whack his head on the nightstand and I’ll still be here, stuck to the bed, forced to watch him bleed to death on the floor. A pained groan comes from deep inside Ethan and I scream for him again.

“Ethan! Help, someone help!”

The floor creaks and heavy boots clomp on the floor. The smell of gasoline is strong again, along with something else. It’s a familiar scent, very unpleasant, but familiar.

“No,” I say through gritted teeth and know if I can just get one part of my body to move, I’ll break this hold and will be able to get up and run out of here. Tears stream down my eyes as I watch Ethan’s body continue to tremble. His brown eyes are wide, looking right at me in horror, silently begging for help that I can’t give. He starts to go still and the light dims in his eyes.

And then I wake up, eyes flying open. I’m on the air mattress with my head against Ethan’s warm skin. I sit up fast, needing to see him.

“You okay?” He pushes my hair back from my face. His question makes everyone else look at me and I swallow down the lump of fear that’s making its way up my throat. What the fuck kind of dream was that?

“Yeah,” I say shakily. “I’m fine.” If a spirit is trying to freak me out and make me go away, they’re going to have to try a whole lot harder than that. Freaky-ass dreams are incredibly disturbing and make it hard to fall back asleep. But it’s just a dream and ghosts don’t have the Freddie Krueger ability to harm us in dreams.

But the darkness I felt...the pure unfiltered rage at the sight of a pentagram...I thought we were dealing with three human spirits with the worst of them being a deranged serial killer. After what I just saw, paired with the intense emotions, I wouldn’t be surprised to find out this house isn’t haunted, but it’s possessed.

Chapter

Eighteen

I'm really regretting not bringing Hunter. It makes sense to have someone stay at the house and keep an eye on the horses because a familiar roaming around the street while avoiding me at the same time is weird as fuck, but right now I could really use my ability to mentally communicate with him as well as someone who can move about just as freely as the spirits that haunt this place.

Yawning, I push off the mattress and reach for another bag of popcorn. I can't reach it so I telekinetically pull it to me. A loud bang sounds as soon as the bag slides into my grasp, making everyone but Ethan jump.

"You heard that, right?" Nik whispers.

"Yeah." Rene is clutching Keith's arm. "The fuck was that?"

"It's just noise," Ethan soothes, reminding me of what my mom used to tell me during thunderstorms. "Don't let it rattle you."

"Easier said than done," she says meekly.

"Hey, we'll keep you safe," I assure her, trying to shake off the feeling of the dream while at the same time trying to remember everything. "Marissa," I say as the second name

comes to me, almost like it's been whispered through the room, not spoken to me directly.

“What?” Keith pushes up and looks at Rene. “What about her?”

“She was Allison's friend. They were close and she...” I close my eyes, trying to open myself up even more to her. “She thinks she should have been more of a big sister. Am I hitting on anything there?” I ask, thoughts feeling all chaotic.

“You hit the fucking nail on the head,” Keith says, too excited to be scared right now. “Allison and Marisa were roommates and they stayed here.”

“In this room,” I go on.

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” I hold up my hand. “Don't tell me any more.”

“So we're just going to act like nothing happened?” Rene whispers.

“Yeah,” Ethan tells her. “Ignoring it will piss it off.”

“Are we sure that's the route we want to go?” She plays with her hair nervously.

“Yep. Then we'll have some fun.”

Ethan rests his hand on my thigh and I go back to the second bag of popcorn, using magic to make it pop again. The unwelcome feeling gets stronger and stronger.

“It really doesn't want me here,” I say quietly when the popcorn is done. I dump it into another bowl and pass it to Nik.

“Because you're a medium?” Keith asks.

“I don’t think it knows that yet.” Letting out a breath, I go back to the movie, acting like I’m enthralled because I know *he* is watching me. Just like he watched them.

I loop my arm through Ethan’s, working hard to keep the image of him from my dream out of my head. It was put there to disturb me and scare me. The psychological warfare raged by spirits typically starts slow, getting worse and worse over time until you’ve lost sleep, damaged relationships, and are at your breaking point.

And that’s when possession can occur.

Feeling antsy, I pick up my phone and mindlessly scroll through social media. I mostly follow horse rescues, saddle shops, and a handful of hot veterinarians, as well as some local shops and events. The Paradise Valley Parks Department shared a calendar of upcoming summer events, and one in particular catches my attention. The *Kickoff to the Summer Solstice* event is being held not long from now, but it misses the actual summer solstice by a few weeks. I’m about to scoff at it for getting the dates wrong, but I open the event page and read the actual info.

Hosted by a local spiritualist group, it’s an outdoor party in the park inviting “Wiccans, Pagans, and likeminded individuals to come celebrate nature and make new friends. We’ll discuss ways to celebrate the upcoming Solstice with a chance to join the first ever planning committee”. I wouldn’t find anyone from an actual coven at something like this, but I would have jumped at the opportunity before to go to something like this.

An impressive amount of people have already clicked *going* on the Facebook event page, and I scroll through the names, seeing if I recognize any of them as members of my

coven. I don't, but Grim Gate is a large coven and there's no way I'd know everyone.

I put my phone down and bend my knees up so my legs are resting on Ethan. He looks bored and like he might fall asleep, which would be ideal, actually. He's leaving early tomorrow for "work" but is really going home to take care of the horses and then crash for a few hours in our bed before he actually has to go to work. I thought it was a horrible idea when he suggested it, but he insists he'll be fine and is used to doing physical activities on little sleep.

The movie ends and I get up to use the bathroom. It's cold in the house and I shiver, zipping my hoodie all the way up. I pee and then go to the sink to wash my hands, turning the water on warm and giving it a good minute to see if it will actually heat up. The sink above the mirror is scratched up and dirty, and I have a rule about not looking in unfamiliar mirrors at night.

I can't help but notice something moving behind me, and as hard as I try not to, I cave and look up. A man with graying hair, dark eyes, and a cigarette burning in his mouth is behind me, and I whirl around right as he rushes at me.

"Your kind isn't welcome here," he sneers and the hate and rage he's carrying passes through me for a split second.

"No, you're the one not welcome!" I shoot back, holding up my hands as I spin back around, looking in the mirror for him. "This is my house."

Another loud bang echoes through the house, reverberating off the walls. The lights flicker and then go out. I hear Rene yelp with fear and I inch toward the door, holding up my right hand to summon a fireball. The dark shadow of a man stands right in front of the bathroom door. Sinister laughter sounds in

my head and then I sense his deep satisfaction as scissors snip and a lock of hair falls to the floor. The fucker cut hair from his victims to keep as trophies.

“What did you do?” I demand, and the fire in my hand grows brighter. The shadow shrinks down, slipping out under the bathroom door. “Ethan!” I yell, wanting to warn him that the spirit is coming into the room. Still holding fire, I twist the doorknob with my other hand.

And it doesn't budge.

“Dammit,” I grumble and try twisting the lock. Nothing works, and the door is completely jammed. “Ethan!” I call out again. “The freaking door is jammed.”

“Hang on,” Ethan calls back and I hear his footsteps as he hurries over. The doorknob rattles but doesn't turn. “Step back.”

I move to the other side of the room, out of the way as Ethan kicks the door in. The wood around the lock splinters and the door swings open. Eyes wide, he steps into the room and comes right to me, hand landing on my hip. “You okay?”

“Yeah. The angry male spirit manifested.”

“I heard you talking.”

“Did you hear him talking as well?”

Ethan shakes his head. “Are you hurt?”

“I said I'm okay,” I retort. “He's so full of rage, and I think I know why.” I bite my lip, needing to test a theory. The very first time I stepped foot in this house, I used magic to unlock the door. And I felt unwelcome and unwanted right away. But there was something else, something I don't think I allowed myself to really even think about until just now. People have

intrusive thoughts and our first instinct is usually to push them away and not give them any power. We don't *really* believe those things, after all?

Yeah, I could hurt someone, but I wouldn't because I don't want to and it's not me.

And what I felt when I walked into the house wasn't just that I wasn't welcome. It was that I wasn't worthy.

Holding up my hand to light my way, we go back into the room. "Nik, I need you to do something, like literally anything, using faery magic."

Light from the laptop illuminates his face and he thinks for a second before rubbing his thumb over his fingers, creating a tiny bit of shimmery blue faery dust. He tosses it up and snaps his fingers, causing the dust to crackle with static electricity that lights up the room, bathing everyone in blue light, for just a few seconds before sizzling out.

The bedroom door slams shut.

"I was right."

"About what?" Rene asks shakily.

"We're not just dealing with any old spirit."

"What are we dealing with?"

"The dark spirit of a witch hunter."

Chapter
Nineteen

Gaspings, I startle and almost bump into the candle in front of me.

“What did you see?” Ethan rushes out, too worried about something happening to me to just let me do my thing.

“Hang on,” I whisper and push my shoulders back. I’m sitting cross legged on the bedroom floor, reaching out to Allison. She just showed me her death and my heart is hammering as fear and adrenaline flood my body.

I’m safe. I’m not the one being drugged and beaten.

The scene rewinds in my mind, playing out again. She’s in her bed, and Marissa is on the floor, already dead.

It’s him. He killed me.

I see the same man who appeared in the bathroom mirror. His rage is palpable again and if this wasn’t premeditated, I would think this is a crime of passion. But he waited and watched until he had the chance to sneak in without being caught.

“Who?” I ask out loud. “Who is he?”

She wants to tell me but his spirit, fueled by hate, is stronger. Allison is gone and the air around me gets cold. Something scratches my arm, making me jump again.

“We’re done,” Ethan says. I open my eyes as he comes over, footsteps shaking the floorboards beneath me. “You’re bleeding.” He blows out the candle and kneels down next to me, taking my arm in his hand. “Get the lights,” he tells the others and someone flicks on the overhead light. I blink, eyes adjusting to the light. There are four scratch marks on my arm, and Ethan gently puts his fingers over them. Someone with large hands scratched me and it’s no mystery who.

Only...it is because I haven’t gotten a name yet.

“Should we get out of here?” Keith asks.

“No.” I shake my head and let Ethan pull me to my feet. “I’ll cast a circle he can’t cross.”

“Who can’t cross?” Ethan asks.

“I didn’t get his name, but he’s the one who murdered Allison and Marissa. He got away with it, didn’t he?”

“He did. Can I tell you what happened now?”

“Yeah. Tell me everything.” I sit on the air mattress and hold out my arm, letting Ethan dab it with an alcohol pad.

“Nothing eventful or historically notable happened in the house until the late eights. 1988 to be exact, as you already said. Allison Fox and Marissa Musgrave were found dead in their apartment on April twenty-first. The coroner placed their time of death to be roughly two days prior. When Allison didn’t show up to her shift as a nurse, her boss got concerned and had the landlord check on her.”

“Were there any suspects? Maybe a name will stick out to me.”

Keith gets his folder from his bag. “Allison’s ex-boyfriend was the prime suspect but there was never enough evidence to

convict him of anything. The girls had a bunch of friends over the night before they were murdered, and the police supposedly interviewed who they could. Having that many people in the house made it hard to get fingerprints. This was back in the day before TikTok CSI was a thing and no one had Ring doorbells.

“Were the official details of the murders released?”

“All I was able to find was that the girls were strangled and possibly drugged. But I did track down someone who used to rent here back then and she said it was pretty gruesome and supposedly the murderer disfigured the girls. I don’t know how.”

“He cut out their tongues so they couldn’t ask forgiveness, even in death.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.” I blink and see it play out again, watching through Allison’s eyes. She was drugged, and now I understand the feeling of sleep paralysis. “And then he marked a cross on their head with their own blood.”

“Details that specific probably weren’t released to the public,” Ethan says, wrapping a piece of gauze around my arm. “That way the police can weed out copycats or anyone who falsely confesses.”

“Makes sense,” I say. “Anything else?”

“Nothing worth noting. News spread about the unsolved murder and no one wanted to stay here. Then the house was rumored to be haunted and it’s had what appears a cursed business history since then.”

“So...now what?” Rene asks.

“Now,” I start and look at my friends. “We solve this cold case.”



“I CANNOT FUCKING BELIEVE you didn’t tell me there were remains under this shed.” Keith wraps his arms around himself, staring at me with wide eyes. It’s the next morning, and we saw no reason to stay and keep up the ruse of living in the house. The spirits already revealed themselves and I know how to trigger the murderer. I’ll definitely enjoy toying with him before I send him on, where he’ll go straight to hell.

But I can’t cleanse the area yet and risk Allison going as well. I need her to tell me the name of her murderer. And I hope that is enough for her to cross over on her own.

“I didn’t want to freak you out and I had to go home for dinner.”

“You would have been freaked out.” Rene gets down on her knees, shining a flashlight at the base of the shed. “The wood is rotting.”

“This thing is supposed to be torn down,” Keith tells us. “The outbuildings are the last things on the list to take care of.”

“That’s probably good, for the time being,” I note, watching Hunter sniff around the overgrown grass. “He just picked up the scent.” The shed appears large enough to have been lived in at some point. Some kind of shitty cottage we’d call a “She Shed” if it was new and fancied up. Now it’s just a falling down eyesore that might be covering up dead bodies.

“I still have a hard time wrapping my head around him,” Rene confesses. “I mean, I fucking love that dog, but he’s not a dog. Yet he can sniff out cadavers like a dog? It’s a little confusing.”

“I suppose. I just don’t think about it too hard.” I shrug. “Because I can’t really explain it either.”

We wait in silence for another minute and then Hunter comes back around, letting me know the rotting body is a cat that most likely went into a rabbit burrow, got stuck, and died. There are dead baby bunnies under there as well, but hey, at least it’s not a person, right?

“It’s animals,” I tell my friends but then Hunter picks up another smell. “But also human hair?” Hunter leads us to the door of the shed. There’s a single step to get up into it, and something is buried under there. He’s picking up the smell of several people.

“Hair,” I repeat. “Last night I saw him—*the murderer*—cutting off someone’s hair. He kept it as a trophy.”

“Holy shit.” Keith eyes the ground, running his hand over his face. “That’s DNA evidence.”

“We can’t touch it,” Rene says. “This is basically a crime scene, right?”

“I think the hair is kept in something,” I go on, letting my eyes fall shut as I drop my mental shields all the way down. Ethan is at the gym with a client and I promised I wouldn’t try to communicate with the spirits in the house without him since one already proved to be violent.

Still...I can handle myself.

Going over next to Hunter, I kneel on the ground and put my hand to the earth. “What did you do?” I ask and make a

mental connection to the dark spirit. He's aware of what I am now, repulsed that I'm a witch and angry that I'm a medium. He tries to get away but I keep prying, taking him on in a mental game of tug of war.

He pushes against me and it starts to hurt physically. Pressure builds in my head and I grunt, refusing to let go. Blood drips down my nose right as I get a flash of him sitting in a tiny cottage. He puts a lock of hair into a red coffee tin and then comes outside, moving the little stair. He puts the coffee can in a hole in the ground and covers it up. He knows he can't keep it there forever, but he likes to go back and look at his trophies every now and then.

"Got you, fucker," I grumble through gritted teeth, opening my eyes and wiping my nose with the back of my hand.

"W-what just happened?" Rene asks, digging through her purse for a tissue.

"There's a coffee can buried right here. Filled with his murder trophies."

"And maybe a few finger prints," Keith adds.

"Yeah." We all look at each other, debating what to do.

"I need to tell my aunt something," Keith starts. "How the hell will I keep her out of the house? She's coming after work today to rip up carpet."

"Would she believe it if we told her the radon detector went off in the rest of the house?"

"Probably. She's not very well versed in construction."

"Okay. Um, tell her that since she knows we were here last night." I look back at the ground, thinking. "Who did you talk to that lived here at the time of the murders? If I can get the

name of whoever lived in this shed, I think that's enough to go to the police, right?"

"Yeah," Rene says. "But they're going to wonder how the fuck you knew that."

"I could *discover* the coffee can while wearing gloves and preserving any DNA," Keith suggests. "I'm helping my aunt renovate this place, after all."

"That one might make more sense," I say. "Okay. You both have to get some sleep before work tonight. Can you text me the contact info for the lady who used to live here?"

"No need. She lives at Silver Meadows nursing home in town and is lonely. I think she'd appreciate the visit. Her name is Bernice Hollis."

"I'll swing by, and if Allison and Marissa were witches, I should probably fill in my coven and see if they were possible members."

I run my hand over Hunter's sleek fur, telling him he did a good job finding evidence. We all walk around the front of the main house together, getting in our cars to leave. The nursing home is about fifteen minutes away, and I send Ethan a text letting him know my plan for the rest of the afternoon.

The "guest parking" section at the nursing home is pretty empty. I get out, looking around before Hunter shadows out of the car. Pulling my purse onto my shoulder, I start toward the front doors, wondering if this was the nursing home Aunt Estelle lived out her final days. How lonely she must have been. I'm not sure which I feel more: anger or sadness.

I could have visited her, insisted she be moved to New York so the whole family could look after her. Hell, I would have considered moving in with her and helping take care of

her at home. Maybe I would have always lived with her and got a job somewhere in Thorne Hill. Life would have been so different if I'd just known the truth from the start.

“Hi,” I say to the front desk receptionist. She’s playing a game on her phone and only glances up at me. “I’m here to see Bernice Hollis.”

“Ummm.” She makes a big deal of turning around to look at the analog clock on the wall. Like...your phone is literally in your hand. “She’s probably in the rec room.”

“Would you mind telling me how to get there?”

She lets out a sigh as if I just asked her to single handedly change all the bedsheets in the place. “Yeah. I really shouldn’t leave the desk so let me buzz up a CNA.”

“Great, thanks.” I fake a smile, already feeling bad for the CNA that’s going to be taken away from a job they’re most likely already behind on. I know from Laney and Keith, who both work in the medical field, that nurses and CNA are in short supply across the nation.

It takes a good five minutes for someone to come up, and an older woman with tired eyes joins us at the desk.

“Yeah, this girl wants to see Bernice.”

I offer a kind smile and the CNA waves for me to follow.

“Sorry to take you away from work,” I say.

“Nah, it’s okay. Two visitors in one week! You another friend of Bernie’s?”

“No, but we share a mutual friend who I, uh, just realized knew her.”

“Uh-huh.” The CNA nods and I probably could have said just about anything and gotten the same response. “That’s her. Pink blanket.” She points to an old lady sitting alone in a wheelchair. She’s next to a bird cage and is facing a wall. God, this is sad.

“Hi,” I say, coming over to her. Keith didn’t warn me about her failing mental stage or anything, but I assume she’s in a nursing home for a reason. “Are you Bernice?”

“Depends on who’s asking.” She laughs and turns with a smile on her face.

“Hi. I’m Anora. You talked to my friend, Keith, not that long ago.”

“Ahh, I did. Such a handsome young man. Is he your boyfriend?”

“No, he’s just a friend.” I smile and pull a chair around. “Do you want to move over here?” I motion to the window.

“Oh, that would be lovely.” I go behind the wheelchair, take the brake off, and move her so she’s in the sun, making sure it’s not shining right in her eyes. “Do you have a boyfriend? Or a husband, perhaps?”

“I do have a boyfriend. His name is Ethan.”

“You’re smiling just talking about him. He must be a good one.”

“He really is. I can tell you more about him, if you’d like.”

“I would.” She smiles up at me as I sit down. “But I’m more curious to know why you’re here. I’ve never seen you before. I’d remember. My hair was red like yours once upon a time.” She reaches up, touching her wispy gray hair.

“I did come here with a mission,” I say honestly. “I’ve been helping Keith with the renovations of the big old house I believe you used to live in.”

“Ahh. He did ask me about it. What do you want to know, dear?”

“There’s a shed in the backyard, but we think it might have been used as a cottage or cabin years ago. Do you happen to remember who would have lived there?”

“There was a groundskeeper. Older gentleman who liked to garden. His name...Stuart, I believe. Yes, that was his name. He’d get angry if you called him Stu.”

“He worked the grounds when the two women were murdered?”

“Yes,” she says after a moment’s consideration. “He did.”

“Was he a suspect?”

“If he’d been in town I would say most definitely,” Bernice says. “He was an imposing fellow. Gave me the creeps.”

“You don’t happen to remember why he was out of town, do you?” I ask.

“Oh yeah.” She nods. “He’d won some sort of award at a horticulture club and was invited to a weekend event in Michigan, I believe. I remember the award because he used that as another excuse for yelling at the kids messing near his prize winning garden. He died of a heart attack only three years later. I can only assume all that anger finally got to him.”

“Probably had high blood pressure,” I say, thinking it’s not out of the question to murder someone here and then make it to Michigan the next day...depending on where in Michigan

the event was held. We're close to the state line and slipping away from something like that would be easy at night.

"Those poor girls." Bernice shudders. "No one deserves to go out like that."

"No, they don't. Thank you so much for answering my questions. I hope it wasn't too traumatic to bring up the past like that."

"It wasn't. I think about them from time to time. I hope they're at peace."

"Me too."

I end up staying for another half hour, visiting with Bernice, leaving when it's time for her to go to lunch. I check in with Ethan on my way to the Covenstead and then pocket my phone, walking with Hunter through the woods. I say the spell to open the door, carefully pricking a finger with a pin to use my blood as the key to get in. Hunter and I step through and the door closes behind us.

The students at Grim Gate have left for summer break and the courtyard isn't nearly as busy as usual. I look around, taking it all in. The Covenstead is a hidden dimension and only those worked into the protection spell are allowed entrance.

Now that my memories of coming here as a kid are back, this place feels all the more special to me. It offered me a sense of safety and belonging back then, and it still holds the same feeling today. I head into the library, hoping to run into Ruby or Devon, the two people from the coven I've befriended most.

"Ahh, Miss Benson," someone says as the large double doors shut behind me. I look around, unable to see anyone

behind the rows of large shelves. The academy library is absolutely wonderful. It's two stories tall with books on every magical subject I can think of available to read—as well as a large restricted section of books on dark or dangerous magic.

“Uh, hi?” I come to a stop, still unable to see anyone. Inhaling the comforting smell of old books and new paper, I take a few more steps into the library and catch movement out of the corner of my eye. A very small older woman comes out from a row of books, using magic to push a cart in front of her. She's dressed like a professor, and I'd guess her to be the same age as my grandma.

“I knew it was you as soon as I saw that red hair and green eyes.” The woman smiles. “You look just like Estelle.”

“Yeah,” I say, smiling back at her. “I've been told.”

“I'm Margret,” she introduces, holding out her hand to shake.

“Anora, but you already know that. Are you a professor here? I'm sorry if we met and I don't remember.”

“I used to be. I only teach one summer school class a year now.” She taps her temple. “Just to keep my mind sharp. I retired long ago, a year before your great aunt. We both taught different grade levels of divination.”

“Oh, so you probably knew her well?” It's odd that even with my memories back, Aunt Estelle still feels like a stranger.

“Very well! We were thick as thieves back in the day. She somehow always convinced me to partake in whatever adventure she was embarking on.” Margret laughs. “She was quite a woman, she was.”

“I wish I had known her better.” I bite my lip, debating on whether it's better to not come off as awkward just yet or take

a chance at getting some more answers. “Actually, I’ve been trying to understand this memory that came back to me. I’m assuming you heard about the memory spell.”

“I have.” She shakes her head. “Estelle...she had her own ways of doing things.”

“It seems so. But, um, I remember being at her house when I was a kid and she had a friend come over. A man with dark hair and his familiar took the form of what I thought was a wolf at the time. I now know it was probably a husky or malamute. Do you happen to know who that could be?”

Margret’s face grows serious. “Your aunt was a friend and I miss her dearly, and I never wish to speak ill of the dead.”

My stomach twists and I inhale, awaiting her to keep going.

“I do know who you speak of, but I will not speak his name. He not only brought out Estelle’s dark side, but encouraged it.”

Chapter
Twenty

Encouraged it.

What the hell does that mean? I could say Rene is a bad influence because she always convinces me to order an extra drink when we go out together. I don't make the best choices when I drink—who does?—but to say someone encouraged a dark side.

“I don't even know,” I whisper to Hunter. Two summer school students came into the library and Margret got busy helping them, which allowed me to slip away. As much as I want to talk more about Aunt Estelle, I'm here on a mission and I need to stick to it.

The tags on Hunter's collar jingle as he trots down the hall next to me. My mind is whirling with what a witch's dark side could entail. Maybe Aunt Estelle used her powers to cheat her way to winning the lottery.

Or it could be something much more sinister.

“Almost there,” I say out loud, looking at photos of graduating classes on the wall. Marissa and Allison were both twenty-three when they were murdered in 1988. Assuming they graduated when they were eighteen, that would put them around 1983, give or take a year. I stop when I get to the graduating class of 1985, looking through each and every

name. This was a big year for Grim Gate Academy, and thankfully the names are all listed in alphabetical order.

I check the portraits all the way down to 1980, and they're not listed on any of them. I keep checking, going back to when they could have first attended the academy just to be sure.

"Well, they weren't members of the coven," I tell Hunter. "I almost feel disappointed. But not being in the coven is a good thing? I think?" I shake my head. It doesn't matter, really. The groundskeeper, Stuart, killed them because he believed they were witches.

Whether they were actual spell casting witches or just tree-hugging Wiccans, they were murdered in a violent hate crime.

"Want to see if Ruby is in her office?" I ask Hunter since we're nearby. We go up a set of stairs, down a hall, and then up another curved staircase. If it wasn't for Hunter, I would have gotten lost in here when I started coming more often on my own.

Ruby isn't in her office, but Devon is in his. He also teaches a few summer school classes as well as helps manage the library since the academy librarian is partly retired. I knock on the door frame before entering.

"How can I—oh, hey, Anora." Devon leans back in his chair and smiles.

"I'm not interrupting you, am I?" Hunter sits at my side and I reach down, running my hand over his head.

"No. I've been grading papers all morning and am going cross-eyed. I'm due for a break. How have you been?"

"Good. Busy trying to solve a cold case from the 1980s."

"You know, I can never tell if you're joking or not."

I laugh and push my hair back over my shoulders. “I’m not. My friend’s aunt bought that big old house in Paradise Valley where two girls were murdered in 1988. He asked me to check it out and see if it’s haunted and boy, is it! Anyway, I picked up on some really negative energy so we did kind of a stake out last night and I was able to taunt said dark energy into coming out of the woodwork. Those girls were killed by the groundskeeper who buried his trophies in a coffee can on the property and died before he could move it. Now I have to figure out how to tell the police without coming off as crazy.”

Devon lowers the pen in his hand, eyeing me with a mixture of amusement and concern. “You’re sure you’re not joking?”

“Hah. I almost wish I was. I guess that house has been rumored of being haunted, but, uh, the right person never investigated.”

“Those murders are still brought up today. Two young women brutally killed and their killer never caught...so tragic. It caused a debate inside the coven if we should let our clairvoyants help. Ultimately, the Grand Coven wouldn’t allow it. We don’t get involved in non-business that would risk exposing us. The subject came up again when vampires came out. Some thought nons would be more open to accepting us without wanting to burn us at the stake.”

“Oh, wow.” I lean against the doorframe. “That’s really shitty.”

“Yeah. Most of the coven will agree with you. Especially since cops work with psychics and it would be easy to pose as one and not go in there summoning energy balls or talking to your familiar, ya know?”

“Yeah,” I say as an idea starts to form in my head.

“Wait, you got all that and solved a nearly forty-year old cold case from one visit?”

“Two, technically. And I had help.”

Devon motions to a chair in front of his desk. “I want to hear about this.”

“You said the Grand Coven wouldn’t let anyone get involved because the girls were nons?” I sit down, feeling like maybe my theory is wrong.

“Right. It’s petty, if you ask me.”

“Huh.” I look at Hunter, biting my lower lip as I think.

“I know that look.” Devon scoots his chair close to his desk and rests his elbows on the surface. “And the last time I saw it, we were opening a portal.”

“Hah. Not doing that today. It’s just...what I picked up was that the girls—Marissa and Allison—were killed because they were witches. Using magic is how I drew out the spirit of the murderer. I bet he haunted that place to try and keep his secret hidden.”

Devon considers my words. “The famous witches during the Salem Witch Trials weren’t real witches.”

“Right.”

“So they could have been Wiccan or even a practicing pagan but lacked actual skill.” He shakes his head. “That sounds harsh.”

“No, I get it, and it makes sense. I was able to sense that they were both into what would be considered *new age stuff* by today’s standards. Would the fact that this guy targeted witches in that way change things in the Grand Coven’s eyes?”

“Probably not at the moment. There was a, uh, shakeup inside the Grand Coven not that long ago where, uh, one of them snapped and killed members of this coven. A few students died.”

“Oh my god.”

Devon looks down. “It was a year ago but the GC has lost a lot of credibility and I personally wouldn’t trust them until the whole board has been replaced.”

“Yeah, homicidal rage isn’t a quality I look for in a leader.”

“Right? Look...solving a cold case is pretty damn cool, if you ask me. I’m a true crime junkie and it kills me when some of those unsolved murders were so obviously supernatural. Just be careful, Anora.”

“I will. If anything, I’ll stay out of it and let my friend “discover” the evidence during the renovation.”

“That’s a good idea. And thanks. Next time I see you, hopefully it doesn’t involve wannabe witch hunter spirits or portals.”

Devon laughs. “A few of us from the coven are meeting for drinks at *Maria’s* next Friday. You should come.”

My face lights up. “That would be fun!”

“Bring Nik. Something tells me he’ll enjoy the attention he’ll get. We don’t come across fae that often anymore.”

“Hah. He would eat that up.” And then try to sleep with half the witches and warlocks who paid him any attention, but I don’t say that out loud.

“But, uh, not your boyfriend,” Devon adds awkwardly. “Being an Order member and all—”

“Former,” I interject, getting automatically defensive of Ethan. “He quit and I know I told you that.”

“Right. He’s a cool guy, but the coven isn’t a fan of the Order.”

“Yeah. That whole thing.”

“Something else that’s petty.” Devon laughs nervously and I get to my feet.

“Well, uh, thanks again.” I force another smile. “Good luck with the papers. Maybe you should just give everyone As.”

“Hah. If only.”

Still feeling awkward, I leave his office and walk through the sprawling academy, saying a friendly “hello” to any other witches Hunter and I pass by. I open the door and step out, making it a few steps before my phone gets enough service to start dinging, letting me know I have a text. I stop, and the sounds of the forest surround me.

There’s something so relaxing and calming in nature. I tip my head up, looking at the green leaves that are finally coming back to all the trees.

“It’s Julia,” I tell Hunter. We had asked her to use her hacking skills to see if she could get any info on the murders from any police records that are still on file.

Julia: Just to clarify, you said the tongues were cut out and crosses were marked on the victims’ forehead with their own blood, right?

Me: Yeah. Gruesome, I know.

Julia: And you’re sure these murders happened in the 80s?

Me: 1988 to be exact.

Julia: And the murderer is dead?

Me: Yep

Julia starts typing but then the little bubble disappears and a second later, my phone rings.

“Hey, you got a minute?” she says as soon as I answer.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Okay, so records from that far back are a little difficult to access, but murders that could be based off of religious or occult reasons are tracked by the Order. The crosses were recorded as upside down.”

I get a chill and think back to poor Allison, being frozen and forced to watch Stuart stand over Marissa.

“You’re right. Allison was looking at Marissa from the top of her head down.”

“So, the first time a body was found strangled with the cross on the forehead was 1986. The tongue wasn’t removed, but killers often improve the more they kill.”

“Lovely.”

“Right? They get more cocky as well. Sometimes that’s good and causes a slip-up, sometimes it gives them time to perfect their craft. Anyway, ten years later, two more girls were killed in Arizona. Same thing. Strangled, tongues removed and crosses drawn on the foreheads. The FBI got involved and asked the public for info, but they never disclosed the details in fear of a copycat since the crimes were so spread apart.”

Bernice said Stuart died three years after he killed Marissa and Allison. The woman is in her late eighties, but her mind is perfectly sound. She told me the only reason she's in the nursing home was because she's diabetic and has wounds on her feet that just won't heal.

“Almost exactly a year after that, another girl was killed. It happened on a Native American reservation, which means it didn't get the media coverage or police work that it should have.”

“Four years later there was a string of killings in Colorado. The media named the serial killer the Denver Strangler.”

“Fuck, I've watched a documentary series on that. The tongues weren't cut out, though.”

“No, and the bodies were burned this time. This isn't on any official report since there's no credibility, but supposedly a psychic reported that a, and I quote, “large man with dark hair and beady eyes watched each girl for several weeks before breaking into their homes and killing them. He marked them with the sign of the cross before dousing them in gasoline”. Fast forward to 2007 and I was able to track down three murders that are similar in nature. A woman was found burned to death in her car and her tongue was cut out. Another was strangled and her tongue was bitten in half. There were post mortem wounds on her chin and forehead that make it look like the killer pulled her tongue out and clamped her own jaw shut on it.”

“Oh my god.”

“I know. The crime scene photos are brutal to look at for that one. And then there was another, a sixteen year old boy who was strangled and marked with an upside down cross. Not a woman this time so the connection wasn't made right away,

but Ethan told me about your witch theory and this kid, Shawn Cypress, had a blog about Satan worshipping. There's another big time gap, and in 2018 we have the classic strangulation and cross murder again in Canada. That was the only record I was able to pull since my contact in the Order only has access to US files. But there was media coverage on it that detailed the murder. It was the first time all the details were publicly aired, and it's almost as if that scared the killer. There hadn't been a murder until recently."

"How recent?"

"Two weeks ago. A forty-two year old woman who had a big following on TikTok."

"Let me guess: she posted about witchcraft."

"Yep. The investigation is still open and was ruled an accident at first. I only tagged this one based on the whole witch hunter angle, and the fact that the accelerant they found at the scene was the same as the 2007 car fire murder. It was turpentine."

"You're good. Like, damn, Julia. I'm impressed."

"Nah. Technology and keyword searches help. I'm going to keep digging. We're up to thirteen deaths I'm confident are connected."

"Yeah, it seems like it. But Stuart died in the early 90s"

"Maybe his spirit isn't bound to the building. We've seen it before, and I've already texted Ethan. When spirits can travel and kill like this, they turn into something else."

I shiver, already knowing what she's going to say next.

"Something demonic."

Chapter

Twenty-One

“**S**omething feels weird.” I close the kitchen door behind me and look at Hunter. He feels it too. It’s almost as if I’m exposed, like I’m on display yet no one is watching me. “It’s probably residual effects of realizing that we almost spend an entire night with a murdering ghost. I called Keith on my way home to let him know, and he texted me right when I pulled into the driveway to tell me that it took some convincing, but his aunt agreed to stay away—for now. I have no idea what he told her, but if I need to sneak over and use magic to scare her away, I will.

She’s not a witch, but she’s a known associate of one. And that’s a risk we’re not willing to take.

I take off my shoes and wash my hands, planning on making something for lunch. Ethan should be home soon and we need to eat and then catch up on the sleep we both missed last night.

“Because there’s a serial killer ghost on the loose,” I mumble, shaking my head. Something bangs on the ground above me and I jump. I don’t think twice as I turn and run up the stairs, right hand out in front of me as I summon fire around my fingers. Something bumps again and I’m about to telekinetically fling Nik’s door open when I hear him laugh.

And now I know the source of the thumping noise.

Shit, I'm on edge. Rightly so, I know. Letting out a breath, I sneak back down the stairs and decide to simply make macaroni and cheese. I magically heat up the water to an instant boil, turn on the burner to keep it boiling, and add the noodles, glancing at the time on the microwave. Ethan should be home by now and I'm starting to get worried.

What if Stuart went after him?

I call and his phone goes to voicemail. Instead of nervously pacing around the house, I go onto the back porch and look out at the pasture, watching Ross and Rachel boss Sundance around. My heart rate slows and some of my anxiety melts away.

"Horses are so majestic," I say out loud, talking to no one in particular. Once I'm not on the verge of a panic attack anymore, I go back inside and check on the noodles. They're just about done, needing maybe a minute more. I call Ethan and this time he answers.

"Hey babe," he says. "I just left. My last student had a breakdown we had to work through."

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah. She left much more optimistic than I've seen her since we've been working together. Her husband cheated on her and left and she's working on what she calls her *revenge body* and didn't think she was progressing."

"Oh, that's sad. Is she progressing?" I put the phone on speaker and drain the water.

"Yeah. It just took comparing progress photos. And calling her ex an asshole helped. I gotta say, you're really lucky you have me."

I laugh. “I really am.”

“I’m the lucky one. I love you, Anora. So fucking much.”

A smile breaks out across my face. “Hurry home so we can eat and then I fuck you.”

“Cast a spell so I don’t get pulled over for speeding?”

“Hah. I wish I knew one.” I put the pot back on the stove. “You, uh, haven’t talked to Julia yet, have you?”

“No. I saw she called and I think I have a few missed texts from her. I left my phone in the car and called you as soon as I got in.”

“I’ve trained you well.” I smile, but I’m having a hard time finding the humor now that I’m thinking of everything again. “I’ll save you the suspense and will tell you everything.” I recap everything Julia said along with what I learned from Bernice.

“Stuart is such a nerdy name for a serial killer.”

“What were you expecting? Wayne? Jeffery?”

“Statistically, Wayne is fitting.”

“I’m kind of freaked out,” I admit.

“We’ll get to the bottom of it. If this guy worked and resided at that address, we’ll be able to find his last name and then figure out where his grave is, dig up his bones and bring them back here to burn.”

“Whoa, why are we bringing his bones home? Why can’t we just torch the whole grave?”

“It takes a hell of a lot of heat to burn bone. A fire of that magnitude will attract a lot of unwanted attention if we just light things up in the middle of the graveyard.”

“Oh. Good thing we have a burn pile.” I open the fridge, getting out the butter and milk.

“And a super hot witch who can summon magic fire.”

“The better to burn you with my dear,” I say and then roll my eyes at myself. “That sounded better in my head.”

Ethan chuckles. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“See you soon?”

“Yeah. I’ll be home in about ten minutes now.”

“Good. Love you.”

“Love you, too.” I end the call and finish prepping lunch, cutting up a bunch of veggies to dip into hummus. The house is quiet again, and I can feel myself teeter on the edge of panic again. But then the steps on the rear staircase creak, and I look up with a mouthful of cheese and see Nik and a much older man come down the stairs.

“Hi,” I say, holding my hand over my mouth. The man looks a little startled to see me and I wonder if his first thought was he just got caught by Nik’s girlfriend.

“This is my roommate who’s a sister to me,” Nik says and now I know I was picking up an *oh shit* vibe from his lover.

“It’s nice to meet you,” the man says.

“You too. Do you want anything to eat?” I motion to the food on the table.

“No, but thank you.”

Nik gives me a wink. “I need to get Alejandro back to work. Want me to pick up something more substantial on my way home?”

“What’s wrong with this?” I ask and Nik laughs.

“I’ll be back in thirty.”

“Okay,” I say and sit back at the table. Ethan comes home only minutes after Nik leaves. His handsome face is such a welcome sight. The entire world could be on fire but when I’m with Ethan, I know we’ll find a way to put out the flames—together.

He takes off his shoes and comes right over to me, wrapping his arms around my waist. I’m sitting at a barstool at the island counter and spin around, hooking my hands on his shoulders.

“I’m not gonna lie,” I start, turning my head so my cheek rests on his chest. “I was a little worried when you didn’t answer the phone. I thought Stuart got you.”

“It’s really hard for me to take a dangerous killer seriously with the name Stuart.”

I let out a snort of laughter, so thankful for this man.

“And don’t worry.” He pushes my hair back and kisses my forehead. “I’m not his typical victim. Though I am sleeping with a witch.”

“I’ve contaminated you.”

“Yeah, you have.” His lips go to my neck and my eyes flutter shut.

“Just to be safe,” I start as he kisses me. “I should contaminate you again.”



“HERE’S WHAT WE KNOW.” I flip a second poster board around, pointing to my list. Rene and Keith are seated at the

dining room table with Ethan and Nik. They came over for pizza and to formalize a plan.

“The groundskeeper was a whackadoo witch hunter. He went after witches, but not ones with real powers. I’m guessing because we know to keep our houses warded and attacking a coven was too dangerous. But he believed anyone who practiced Wicca or had an interest in the supernatural was the real deal and needed to be killed.”

“So these girls, they weren’t real witches?” Rene asks.

“Not in the sense that I am, but they believed in spellcasting and knew the power that lies in swaying the elements in your favor. All those Instagram witches...they wouldn’t be able to step through a door to a Covenstead. But they’re onto something with pairing crystals to the zodiac and casting basic spells, like putting a lemon cut in half under their beds to absorb negative energy.”

“Right,” Nik says. “Like how a lot of the witches burned at the stake you read about in your history books weren’t magical at all.”

“Exactly. And Stuart Little-dick Energy must have felt threatened or was driven by, I don’t fucking know, voices in his head telling him that was doing God’s work by killing witches. His first victim was actually in 1986 in Ohio.” I grab a stack of papers from the table and pass them out to everyone. “And as you can see, he’s been a busy boy.”

“Wait.” Rene’s brows push together. “This says the most recent murder was this year.”

My heart skips a beat and I look at Ethan. He’s always calm and collected and is leaning back in his chair, unfazed.

“I’ve only seen it once before, but there have been other accounts. A dying person makes a deal with a demon to keep going somehow. Most probably thinking they’ll get to keep on living, but in the case of someone like our groundskeeper here who has a soul rooted in evil, their deal will be different. He gets to keep doing what he likes, which is murdering women, and the demon cashes in each time a life is taken.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Rene shakes her head. “You’re telling me that last night we taunted and teased a serial killer who can move through walls unnoticed, without a sound?”

“Yeah,” I reply and fight the urge to shudder. It could have ended so badly last night. “Which is why I want you to wear these and put this around your room tonight.” I had them each an amulet and a bag of Devil’s shoestring. “If you want to smudge your room and put a circle of salt around your bed, that wouldn’t be a terrible idea either.”

“Holy shit,” Rene whispers and puts her protective amulet around her neck. “Now what?”

“We all get some sleep,” Ethan answers. “Spirits thrive on getting into your head. Being sick or tired makes you vulnerable. Then we’ll regroup, find Stuart’s grave, and burn what’s left of him and salt the remains. It will sever his tie from the demon and he’ll be forced to move on.”

“To hell,” I add. “Where I hope he’s stuck in an endless loop of being strangled, having his tongue cut out, and then burning to death. Over and over.”

“Benadryl and wine at my place tonight?” Keith asks Rene, who eagerly nods.

“Sounds perfectly healthy,” Ethan quips. “You got your aunt to stay out of the house for a while longer?”

“I bought at least another day. She didn’t seem too concerned about the radon lie so I told her the place is really haunted and got my little cousin to wake up tonight screaming that a ghost from the bed and breakfast followed her home. Kid’s a good actress.”

“Let’s just hope it works.”

We wrap everything else and I walk Rene and Keith out to their cars. I get that weird feeling again, almost like something is wrong but not in a dangerous sense. It doesn’t make sense, even to me.

“Be careful tonight,” Rene says, pulling me in for a one-armed hug.

“I will be. You guys too. The Devil’s shoestring acts like a temporary warding, so nothing will be able to get into your house. I’ll keep my phone by me, so call or check in anytime.”

“Same. At least let me know you made it through the night.”

“Hah. I’ll be fine, don’t worry.”

I wave goodbye and go down to the barn, calling the horses in from the pasture for the night. They have a run-in shelter and the weather is decent for them to stay outside all day and all night, but current events make me a little nervous.

I’m not sure how to ward someone else’s familiar away, or if it’s even possible to do so without affecting my own familiar. One lone wolf probably wouldn’t be able to take down a healthy horse. They’d still cause considerable damage, and my donkeys are miniature donkeys and much more vulnerable to an attack. They would still be able to land a few good blows to the wolf, making them most likely to get away too.

But this wolf isn't a wolf.

After tossing everyone more hay, I tell myself I'm just going to spend a few minutes grooming. Nearly an hour later, I'm closing up the barn and heading inside. My body is exhausted and I'm relaxed after spending time in the barn. But I know as soon as I lay down to sleep, I won't be able to turn my brain off.

I feel more and more tired as I go about my nighttime routine, taking care of Romeo, showering, brushing my teeth, and then finally crawling into bed and snuggling under the blankets with Ethan.

"How did you learn to sleep with so much danger looming overhead?" I ask, walking my fingers up and down his chest.

"Survival instinct, I guess," he tells me. "Being tired makes you sloppy and at risk. It took me until I was an adult to realize that being able to stop thinking and just sleep was not something most people do."

"Lucky."

"I still get hit with nights where I can't sleep." He runs his hands up and down my arm. "It's meditation, being able to turn off your mind like that. It was taught without us knowing what it really was." He shrugs. "Think about something happy. Sounds simple, but it's where you start."

I close my eyes and envision myself in a sunny meadow, sitting on Mystery while he lazily grazes.

"And nothing bad can happen there. But don't tell yourself that, because then you're thinking about what you don't want to happen. You're comfortable and safe and not in a rush. I keep thinking about it until I fall asleep."

"What do you think of?"

“It changes. Now it’s this. Being in bed with you.”

“Yeah,” I say guilty. “That’s totally what I thought of too.”

Ethan chuckles. “You were with horses, weren’t you?” I gasp at being found out, then answer him.

“I was.”

He pulls me closer. “It’s not foolproof. It gets me to sleep but it doesn’t keep me asleep. I’m always on high alert. It’s part of being a hunter. But here...in this house with you...I do feel at peace.”

Smiling, I wrap my arm around him and close my eyes. This time I do fall asleep quickly. I’m not sure how long I’m asleep before I feel heavy weight press down on top of me. Thinking it’s Hunter, I go to move my arm, pushing him to the side. But I can’t move. My eyes fly open and a dark shape looms over me, eyes reflecting the dim light coming in from the window.

It’s Stuart, and he reaches down, grabbing my throat. My mouth opens and I gasp for breath. Arms feeling like they’ve been pumped full of lead, I can’t move. He squeezes harder, pain radiating through me.

Hunter!

My familiar runs into the room, snarling, and shifts into shadow form. He leaps through the air, knocking Stuart off of me. It wakes up Ethan, who grabs a knife from his nightstand and slashes it above me, keeping Stuart from grabbing me again. His spirit shimmers away and Ethan drops the knife, reaching for me instead.

“Anora!”

I sit up, gasping for air. “Y-you saw that?” I croak out.

“I did. Was that him?”

I nod.

“I’m going to fucking kill him. Again,” Ethan growls and turns on the bedside lamp to inspect my neck. I’m going to have red marks in the morning, I know. The bedroom door bursts open and Nik rushes in, holding an iron fire poker. The end is wrapped in fabric, since fae are sensitive to iron as well.

“It’s okay,” I tell him, though it’s far from it. Because if a vengeful spirit was here, in my house, it means someone undid my warding.

Chapter

Twenty-Two

Dammit. I knew something felt off. Hunter did too. But how would I have known it was the warding? And who could have done it?

“What happened?” Nik tosses the fire poker onto the couch in the sitting area of our room and shakes out his fingers. The iron did hurt him after all and he still came in here, ready to defend me. Now’s not the time to get emotional, though.

“Stuart,” I say and then look at Ethan. “You’re right. His name lacks urgency and danger. “We could call him the PV Killer.”

Nik tries to hide a snort of laughter and the look on Ethan’s face lets me know he’s thinking the same thing. “Get your mind out of the gutter.” I roll my eyes and swallow hard, my throat hurting. “Ugh.”

“Does it hurt?” Ethan leans in. “I’m going to fucking enjoy watching his bones burn.” He gently touches my neck and I wince.

“What happened?” Nik asks again.

“Stuart was here. In the house. He tried to strangle me.”

“But the house is warded,” Nik shoots back, eyes widening with worry. “It’s impossible unless—”

“Unless someone undid the warding,” I finish. “Something felt, I don’t know, a little off when I came home, but I thought it was from being freaked out and tired.”

“It’s not your fault,” Ethan tells me, knowing exactly what I’m thinking. “There’s no way to know that. I never would have thought of it if you told me something felt off.”

I tap my phone to check the time. It’s nearing five AM, which is so fucking early but we did go to bed not long after nine, so I got a decent amount of sleep before Stuart decided to be a dick and choke me to death.

“We need to cleanse the house.” I pinch the bridge of my nose, knowing what a headache it’s going to be. “Every single square inch of it, starting with the attic.”

“You two take the attic. Hunter and I will start in the basement and we’ll drive whatever is in the house to the main floor and out the window,” Nik offers and I’m again touched by his bravery. Fighting demons and facing murderous ghosts aren’t his thing.

“Good plan.” Ethan’s fingers gently sweep down my collarbone and he takes my hand. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m ready to get this asshole out of our house.”

I go to use the bathroom and Ethan heads to the library to get my stock of sage smudge sticks and salt. I have red marks on my neck that will probably bruise. Every swallow hurts and I’m getting angrier and angrier by the second.

I use magic to light the smudge sticks and Ethan and I go upstairs into the attic. It’s cold and cluttered even though we’ve made progress in cleaning out a lot of the junk that was shoved up here. It’s been a slow process since I don’t want to just throw things away. I have no idea what Aunt Estelle could

have stashed in the house, hiding magical objects in plain sight—like demonic ashes stashed inside a wooden box. So far, we've donated a bunch of old furniture, boxes of twenty-plus year old fiction novels, and a ton of old clothes. Still, it's hard to navigate and it takes twice as long to smudge the space since we have to climb over things.

The basement, on the other hand, is pretty much empty. We have some workout equipment and a deep freezer, along with some storage shelves for my holiday decorations, but that's pretty much it. It's chilly and doesn't smell the best and would take a lot of work to finish. We have plans to turn the attic into a "hangout space", which is what I call it because I refuse to use the term "man cave". I'm not a man but you can bet your ass I'll be hanging out up there right along with Ethan.

Nik and Hunter get through their section faster than Ethan and I get through ours. Hunter shadows around the house, making sure there aren't any lurking spirits. Stuart wasn't expecting to be confronted by another spirit at all, let alone one of a different kind. Unlike ghosts, familiars were never human. They've always existed as they are, and the origins vary depending on who you listen to. Like other magic, I've learned to just accept it and more than anything, be grateful.

Nik has already gotten the kitchen smudged by time Ethan and I get downstairs. I'm coughing from the smoke when the house is finally done. We forced all negative energy out through the front door, and then sealed it with salt. Hunter shadows out of the house to check the barns, and I'll smudge them too once I can turn the horses and donkeys out and move the chicks into their outdoor run.

While he's out checking on the animals, Hunter picks up a scent. It's human.

"We need to go outside," I tell everyone, tipping my head slightly as I listen to Hunter. "Someone was here, in our yard, and they buried something."

Anger crosses Ethan's handsome face and he reaches behind him, subconsciously feeling for his gun. I know my demon hunter won't hesitate to shoot anyone he thinks is a threat.

"They're gone," I tell him. "There's no one out there now."

The sun is starting to rise and I grab my jacket off a hook by the back door. Stepping into my barn boots, I disarm the alarm system and step onto the porch. Ethan is right behind me, and Nik follows not far behind.

"What is it?" I ask Hunter, conjuring a ball of fire to use as a flashlight. He's standing about a foot from where the line of my warding should be on the side of the house. The ground is freshly disturbed and I hold my breath as Hunter noses at it, revealing a small, flat stone with a hole in the middle.

"Hagstone," we all say at the same time. Enchanted hagstone can be used to block witchcraft. Clenching my jaw, I hold the stone out in front of me and telekinetically break it in half.

"Is this the only one?" Ethan asks Hunter.

"Yeah," I say on his behalf.

"Someone put this here just to break the warding."

We all fall silent again and Ethan takes the broken pieces of the hagstone from me, throwing each in a different direction

in the street. He nods with his head toward the house and we go back onto the porch.

“I’m going to recast the warding,” I tell everyone and grab my book and a candle, going onto the front porch. If I wasn’t so rattled, I’d be proud that I hardly had to look down at my book, reciting the spell from memory. Lines of magic circle my house, and I feel instantly better when the warding is up. It’s like I’m tucked under a weighted blanket and everything is safe again. Well, safer.

“Inside.” Ethan opens the front door and ushers us in. I grab my phone, needing to check the cameras in the barn just to be sure nothing is lurking. The horses would react to a spirit, and they’re all lazily standing in their stalls, starting to perk up and wait for someone to come in and give them hay.

“The night Keith called and said a ghost talked about you,” Nik starts. “Something hit the warding.”

“Oh, right.” Was that the same night Ethan got arrested? The next day? I close my eyes, my brain feeling all scrambled. So much has happened in so little time.

“Whoever that was would have seen where the warding line was, and how to trigger it,” Ethan notes.

“Do you think it was him?” Nik asks.

“Not if Hunter picked up a human scent,” Ethan says.

“I don’t know why,” I start, “but I have a feeling this is connected to whoever framed you.”

“On what basis?” Ethan asks, not to be argumentative, but to try and follow my train of thought.

“Because neither of them make sense.” I close my eyes and reach up, wincing when I touch the raw skin on my neck.

“I don’t know.”

Ethan puts his hands on my shoulders and kisses my forehead. “Why don’t you go sit in the living room and watch TV or take a nap if you want to. I’ll put on a pot of coffee and feed the horses.”

“It’s my turn to take care of them.”

“You can make it up to me later.” His lips curve up in a lopsided grin. “Do you want ice for your neck?”

“No, maybe some healing balm if we have any left.” I pull my hair to the side and show him the patch of skin where Stuart’s nails scratched my skin.

“I’ll get you some,” Nik offers and he and Ethan both go into the kitchen. Still dressed in pajama pants and one of Ethan’s t-shirts, I grab a blanket from the hall closet and go into the living room, wrapping up and sinking down on the couch. Hunter joins me and we snuggle together. I am still tired but know for sure I won’t be able to fall asleep right now.

Instead, I opt for reruns of *Friends* and try to relax but I keep looking outside, expecting to see someone standing in the yard. I’m still looking out the window when a truck drives down the road. It slows as it passes the house, but it’s not unusual for Donna to spy.

Seeing her truck reminds me of the familiar lurking around the area, which in turn makes Margret’s words echo through my mind: he didn’t just bring out her dark side, he encouraged it. If this is the same warlock, then what the hell is he doing back here? He’d have to know Estelle was dead.

Nik thought whoever framed Ethan was trying to unnerve me, but what if they wanted to do the opposite? If they’re

going to make me mad, take me from Wanda Maximoff to full *Scarlet Witch*, there is one sure way to make that happen. Mess with Ethan, the one person I love more than anything on earth and you're begging to see my dangerous dark side.

Chapter

Twenty-Three

“Got it,” Ethan practically cheers, turning his laptop around. We’re sitting in the library and have spent the last hour going through property records to find the owner of the house back in the 1980s. Owen Jones owned and ran the apartment complex, but died ten years ago. The property sold a handful of times, and we tracked each owner and were eventually able to find the people who bought the house in hopes of turning it into a wedding venue. They started blogging their “renovation journey” on social media and posted a bunch of historic photos, including one from 1985, showcasing the beautiful gardens, cared for by the “1988 Winner of the Midwest Horticulture Society’s Master Gardener of the year.”

From there, we were able to get a hold of someone from the Horticulture Society who was confused as to why we asked for info on the winner from so long ago. Thankfully, Ethan is charming and convincing and we were able to get Stuart’s last name: Brown. Being a common surname, it took a bit of weeding to find the right guy.

“He’s buried here in Paradise Valley.” He highlights something on the screen, showing me the grave’s location in the cemetery.

“Wow. I didn’t know *Find a Grave* was a thing,”

“It’s made my job easier a few times, which is probably not something the creators of this site thought of.”

“Yeah.” I agree with a laugh.

“We should check out the cemetery in the daylight and clean out the burn pile.”

“Sounds like a date. Want to grab lunch on the way?”

“Of course.” Ethan closes his computer and puts his arm around me. “We really do make a good team.”

“We do.” I turn my head up to kiss him, feeling a sense of relief. *We’ve got you now, fucker.* My phone rings and Ethan grabs it for me off the coffee table. It’s Harrison, and I quickly answer. He prefers to text instead of call.

“Hello?” I answer, ready to yell at him if he’s calling to say he broke things off with Saanvi.

“Hey, sis. Yes, I’m fine. I’m driving so I’m calling.”

“It’s like you know me or something,” I say with a slight laugh. “What’s going on?”

“I have a meeting with that client who owns the riverboat dinner cruises. Are you guys available this weekend?”

“In theory,” I reply. “But we should probably leave an exact date as, uh, TBD for the moment.”

“Sure. Is everything okay?”

“Well, the smell of my house reminds me of your dorm room in college because I burned literally all of my sage making sure the ghost of a serial killer who’s still serial killing post mortem has been properly banished so I could recast my warding that someone else broke probably so they could send more demons after me.”

“All that happened since Saturday?”

“Yeah, and I don’t even know what day it is right now. Remember the remains I said Hunter sniffed out?”

“Oh, fuck, they were human?”

“Those weren’t but he found a coffee tin full of said serial killer’s trophies.”

“Fuck,” my brother repeats. “What are you going to do?”

“First, dig up the killer’s grave, steal his bones, burn the casket, and bring the remains here to burn to ash with magical fire.”

A moment of silence ticks by. “Like I said before. We live very different lives. Wait, ghosts can kill people? You’ve always said they can’t do that.”

“They can’t, so we’re thinking this guy made a deal with a demon as he lay dying. Julia was able to connect thirteen different murders ranging from 1896 to this year.”

“Fuck. You’re sure he’s dead?”

“Well, his spirit tried to attack me this morning, so yeah.”

“Okay, um, well. You handle that and let me know when you’re free for dinner.”

“Will do. If all goes as planned, I’ll break my grave-robbing cherry tonight.”

“You’re so fucking weird, Annie. Do you need help?” he adds, wanting to play the role of protective big brother.

“Nah, we’re good here. And you’d be tired at work if you were robbing graves with me all night.”

“I’m gonna say it again: very different lives.”

“I laugh. Are you seeing Saanvi tonight?”

“I am,” he replies and I can tell he’s smiling. “We’re going to a friend’s open mic night at a standup comedy bar. He’s horrible so I’ve been practicing my fake laugh in the car.”

“Hah, good luck with that.”

“Be careful, Annie. Text me later?”

“I will. Love you, Har.”

“You too.” I end the call and Ethan and I go upstairs to get dressed. It’s another nice day so I open the windows in the house, stopping by the one in our sitting room that looks out over the front yard. I thought it was odd the hagstone was buried on the side of the house until Ethan pointed out it’s one of the few places in the yard that isn’t monitored on camera. He already ordered more so every angle will be covered. My gut tells me it’s that warlock, the one who encouraged Aunt Estelle’s dark side.

“What did you do that was so bad?” I whisper, turning around. “Things would be so much easier if you’d just told me the truth.” Sighing, I go into the spare room and put Romeo’s harness on him and carry him downstairs.

“You’re bringing Romeo?” Ethan asks.

I shrug. “We’re already having a picnic in a cemetery. Might as well bring a ferret.”

He opens his mouth only to close it again. “I can’t argue with that.”

“It’s been awhile since he’s been out of the house. I really need to get him a buddy.”

“I still like the idea of a ferret room in the barn.” Ethan reaches out and pets Romeo.

“I do too. You know I’ll be the first to admit ferrets are stinky.”

“You do a good job keeping his cage clean.”

“Thanks.” Ethan kisses and and we head out, getting takeaway from Paradise Valley and go to the graveyard. I have Romeo’s leash wrapped around my wrist, letting him hop along with us as we walk through a row of graves.

Unlike a dog, though, Romeo just hops along and I have to constantly pick him up and carry him a few feet before setting him down again.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Ethan huffs and turns, motioning for me to be quiet. He points to a sign posted next to a tree. I lean in to read it.

Birth and death are not two different states, but they are different aspects of the same state - Gandi

Scan the QR code to watch our “hatch-cam” for twenty-four hour surveillance of a nest full of life!

There’s the code and info about the church sponsoring the trail-cam. Ethan gets out his phone and scans the code. Service out here is slow, and it takes a minute for the footage to pull up. We step back several paces and he points to something on his phone.

“That’s Stuart’s grave.”

It’s a little to the left of the nest and in clear view.
“Seriously?”

“Yep.”

“Can’t we cover the camera?”

“In theory, but it takes time to dig up a grave. If someone notices the camera view is blocked, there’s a chance they could come out and try to fix it. And that camera records audio.” He inhales, thinking for a moment. “I can get the grass laid back out pretty well, but it will be obvious the ground was disturbed. That alone can raise suspicions but pair it with the camera being blacked out at the same time.” He shakes his head. “We’ll have to hack in and play something on a loop, cover it to be safe, dig up our corpse, uncover the cam and get the hell out of here as fast as we can.”

“Knowing how to do all that is not a flex I thought I would find hot, yet here I am.”

“I’m gonna have to have Jules help with the hacking and it’s going to take some time. We won’t be digging up graves tonight.”

“Darn. And yes, I actually mean that.”

We sit on a bench and finish eating lunch and then head back home. There are a few things to do around the house, with my biggest one being I need to catch up on laundry. I should probably vacuum and dust because it’s been a while since either of those have been done. Hunter isn’t an actual German Shepherd, but he sure sheds like one.

I’m happily surprised to walk into the house and smell cleaning products. Nik is in the kitchen wearing yellow rubber gloves, scrubbing the fronts of the cabinets.

“Wow,” I say, taking off my shoes. Romeo squirms in my hands, excited to be somewhere new. He wants to get down and bounce around, but there’s too much for him to get into on the first floor. “You don’t have to do all this, Nik.”

“I know, milady. You know what they say about busy hands and idle minds. Granted, there are other things I’d prefer to be doing with my hands, but I canceled my date tonight just in case you need me.”

“Thank you,” I tell him. “Really. You’re a good friend and I’m really glad you came back when you did.”

Nik looks up from the soapy cabinet door, eyes a little misty. “I’m glad I did too.”

“I’m going to go put this guy away. I can come help you and then maybe we can go ride?”

He smiles. “I’d like that a lot.”



“SOMETIMES YOU GOTTA LEAN on him a little,” I tell Nik, rolling my eyes and Sundance. “But once he knows you want to pick his hooves, he’ll lift up the others for you right away.” I duck back into Mystery’s stall, running a brush over him. We both got sweaty riding this afternoon and had a great ride. Sundance was content just walking around the arena with Nik and coming out here was exactly what I needed. Keeping a clear head and a steady mind really is important when it comes to fending off any sort of psychic attack, including those from spirits.

Nik helps me sweep and dust the barn once we put the horses back out. The temps are supposed to drop significantly next week, so I decide to keep my baby chicks in their little enclosure in the garage for another week. This also gives us more time to build a bigger run. I’ve always wanted goats as well, and once we get a paddock built, the chickens can have

free run in it along with the goats, who can act as good guardians over chickens.

I wander through the house, forgetting where I last had my phone. Ethan has to call it for me, and it's upstairs in the closet where I left it when I changed into breeches. My heart skips a beat when I see that I have a dozen missed calls from Keith.

"Fuck," I mumble and call him back.

"Thank god," he breathes into the phone. "We have a problem."

"What is it?" I put the call on speaker and hurry out of the room and down the stairs.

"My aunt figured out the radon spike was bullshit and she says we're being ridiculous to be that scared of a ghost. *Everyday, I'm losing money,*" he says in a voice meant to imitate her. "She has an interior designer scheduled to come over tonight for a walk through so they can start putting together ideas. Her specialty is Feng Shui and she's wearing a big ass pentagram necklace in her bio photo on her website.

"Shit." I motion for Ethan, who is sitting in the living room playing video games, to take his headphones off so he can hear.

"That's literally like throwing chum into the water."

"Right, and the more I try to explain, the crazier I sound. Even to me."

"It's a lot for someone to believe in faith. Is your cousin still on board? Can she fake her appendix hurting or something?"

"She could, but it wouldn't go over well since she had it removed last year."

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.” I push my fingers through my hair, closing my eyes as I think. I could go down and cause a scene, but it wouldn’t solve the problem. “There’s a bird cam watching robin’s eggs in the graveyard right in front of Stuart’s grave. It’s running on ethernet, not Wifi, if that means anything to you. Julia is checking if she can hack into the livestream and give us an hour loop. Digging up the grave isn’t gonna happen tonight.”

“Is there any other way you can keep your aunt off the property?” Ethan asks, brows furrowing.

“Save for setting the place on fire, no. She’s a determined single mom who’s in a lot of debt. Normally I’d admire the shit out of her determination .”

“She’s bringing her interior designer today,” I tell Ethan since he missed that part. Nik pokes his head in from the kitchen, face paled. “Who is Pagan.”

“I’ll drive over there,” Ethan starts. “And say I’m with the county and—”

“She knows what you look like,” Keith says apologetically. “She asked if it would be weird to follow Anora on her socials and I said yes, so of course she did.”

“Nik?” Ethan suggests and Nik shakes his head.

“Druid, remember? That thing could sense me the moment I walked in.”

“Okay,” Ethan says calmly. “We’ll handle it, don’t worry.”

“I have an idea,” I start. “You’re going to hate it, but I know one way for sure to keep her from setting foot on the property. We turn it into a crime scene.”

Nik cocks and eyebrow. “You’re gonna kill someone?”

“No. I mean, I’m going to go to the police and I’ll tell them everything.”

Chapter

Twenty-Four

“**A**bsolutely not,” Ethan rushes out. “That’s a horrible idea.”

“Is it?” I ask, wincing. “They can’t arrest me for any of it. And the police have worked with psychics before. That’s what I’ll say. I had a vision and I think it’s something they should check out.”

“We shouldn’t raise suspicions until after we desiccate a corpse.”

“I normally would agree but right now, saving the Feng Shui lady’s life is urgent. And—shit—there’s that Wicca gathering or whatever it’s called coming up soon.”

Ethan closes his eyes, shaking his head. “Fuck. There’s a chance they could exhume Stuart’s grave to get a DNA sample.”

“And if that’s the case, they’d be doing half the work for us. The coroner’s office in PV is pretty small, as I found out today when doing all my research. They’d take the body there, right? Or do they just grab some crusty hair and put him back in the ground? That sounds insensitive but the guy is a massive prick. Either way, at the least the ground will be softened up.”

“It would depend on what they’re doing,” Ethan tells me and lets out another slow breath. “I can come with you.”

“I’ll be fine. Stay here in case I get held up and you have to go kick some ghost ass or something. Keith, you have Ethan’s number, right?”

“I do.”

“Good. How long until your aunt is supposed to go to the house?”

“She didn’t specify, but it won’t be until after she gets off work around five. She’ll be there before the designer.”

“I have a couple hours then. I’ll update you as soon as I can,” I tell Keith.

“I feel like I need to wish you luck, so, uh, good luck,” he replies.

“Thanks.” I end the call and sit on the couch next to Ethan. I’m sweaty and smell like horses so I need to run upstairs and take a quick shower before I go into the police station. As much as I hate admitting the looks matter, appearing put together will help me look a little more credible.

“I’m really uncomfortable with this,” Ethan tells me, hand landing on my thigh.

“You’re uncomfortable with anything I do that’s slightly risky. Unless it involves a horse.”

“That’s true,” he says honestly. “And I trust you’re a good rider.” Now’s not the time to tell him accidents happen to even the best riders, especially us jumpers. “You’ll be fine, I know. I hate not being with you to keep you safe.”

“Worst case scenario is they think I’m crazy and point to the door.”

“You’re right, I know.” Our eyes meet and my heart flutters in my chest. “You’ll be fine.”

I will be...I just hope I can convince the cops to listen to me so everyone else will be okay too.



I’M HALFWAY to the Thorne Hill Police Department when I remember I should have gone to the Paradise Valley PD instead. I got in the car all jittery and panicked that I wasted too much time helping shut all the windows in the house when another storm quickly blew in, and drove on autopilot to the police department we had just recently visited.

“Shit,” I mutter and pull into a parking lot to turn around. I speed through a yellow light, accelerating fast, and reach over to grab my phone from my purse. I don’t know the address of the Paradise Valley Police Department. It’s somewhere in the downtown area, but exactly where, I don’t know. I swerve slightly and stop reaching for my phone, not wanting to cause an accident. I’ll grab it and check for the address at the next stoplight.

But then I see flashing lights in my rearview. Fuck! Speeding through an intersection and then swerving probably makes me look like a drunk driver. It’s been years since I’ve been pulled over and tonight I’m hoping I can flirt my way out of a ticket so I can get on my way.

Shaking my hair back, I look down and adjust my shirt to show off as much cleavage as I can, which is hard since I’m not gifted in that department. Then I turn down my music and look in the rearview mirror, waiting for the cop to come out of the car.

“Oh fuck’s sake,” I huff when I see Officer Maxwell start to walk over. Is this the universe’s way of telling me going to the cops and saying I’m a psychic is a terrible idea? Trying to keep a pleasant look on my face, I roll down my window. Maybe he won’t remember me.

“Hi,” I say and Officer Maxwell’s face lets me know he already ran my plates and knows exactly who I am. “Long time no see.” I mentally wince. What the fuck is wrong with me?

“Miss Benson. Do you know why I pulled you over.”

“I, um, think I might have run a red light and I might be speeding. I’m sorry, I’m in a hurry.” My plan is to talk to the cops and there’s one right here in front of me. “I was on my way to the police station.”

He raises an eyebrow. “You’re going the wrong way.”

“I would be if I were going to the Thorne Hill one, but I need to talk to the police in Paradise Valley.”

He gives me a *you really expect me to buy this bullshit* look and slowly inhales.

“I have info that can solve a cold case,” I blurt.

“You do?” He puts his forearm on the top of my door and leans in. “Dare I ask?”

“I am a psychic and my friend’s aunt bought that big house in Paradise Valley where those girls were murdered in the 80s and asked me to come do a reading. I did and now I have info.”

“You know wasting an officer of the law’s time is a crime, right?”

“I’m well aware.”

He stares at me for a few seconds. “Where’s your boyfriend?”

“At home. These murders happened in 1988, it couldn’t have been him.” God, I really need to learn to stop talking when I’m nervous. “And I’m being serious. I know who killed those girls and I know he’s still out there, killing more people.”

“You know I was on a team that reopened that case about twelve years ago. I’m familiar with it. Prove to me you’re actually a psychic by telling me something the public wouldn’t know. Because that case is still talked about in Paradise Valley today.”

“Both girls practiced Wicca and they had a pentagram wreath made out of sticks hanging on the wall between their beds. Marissa was killed first and Allison was drugged, unable to move, and had to watch. The killer strangled them, cut out their tongues, and drew an upside down cross on their forehead with their own blood. Marissa was in blue pajamas at the time of her death and Allison was just wearing a tank top and her underwear. They both had locks of hair cut off, kept as trophies.”

Officer Maxwell straightens up, taken aback but how accurate I was with the little details, I’m sure. “Breaking into evidence and reading confidential files is also a crime.”

“A crime I’m not guilty of.” I nervously bite my lip. “I wouldn’t go to the police after my boyfriend was just framed for murder if this wasn’t serious.”

Officer Maxwell looks at me, considering everything I just said for a long moment. “Are you familiar with Susy’s Café?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“We can talk there. I’ll follow behind you.”

This means he believes me, right? “Okay, thank you.”

He pats the roof of my Prius and gives me a curt nod before walking back to his squad car. Fingers trembling, I hit the lock button on my door instead of rolling up my window. I need to get it the fuck together. Forcing myself to take a breath, I get my window rolled up and turn on my blinker, waiting for a car to pass so I can pull onto the street.

I’m not far from Susy’s café and we’re a good hour before the dinner crowd comes in. I find a spot in the parking lot, grab my umbrella, and get out, waiting a beat before heading inside. I stop under the awning and wait for Officer Maxwell and then feel awkward walking through the little café with him. Several members of the coven work here and I pray they’re not working tonight.

“You’ve caught my interest,” Officer Maxwell says when we sit down. “Who killed those girls?”

“It was Stuart Brown, the groundskeeper.”

“He was ruled out as a suspect. Solid alibi.”

“Some gardening thing in Michigan, I know. But it was him. He killed them and others. There are trophies buried under his cabin, which was turned into a storage shed. They’re still there.” I close my eyes, remembering the vision. With it comes the uncomfortable feeling of Stuart pushing me out of his mind. “He kept them in a coffee tin under the steps. Buried maybe only a foot or two down. He intended on moving it and destroying the evidence but then he had a heart attack and died.”

“And how would you know all this?”

“I told you, I’m a psychic.”

Officer Maxwell narrows his eyes. “Like your great aunt.”

His words catch me off guard. What else does he know about Aunt Estelle?

“You knew my aunt?” I lean back, shock obvious on my face. Before he can answer, a waitress comes over. She knows Maxwell and brings a cup of coffee to the table and asks if he wants his usual, which is a double bacon sandwich.

“And what about you, miss?” the waitress asks. I don’t recognize her, thank the fucking stars. “Do you need a minute to look at the menu?”

“Um, no, I’m good. Can I have an iced tea and a side of fries?” I tell her, feeling bad about not ordering anything when we’re sitting here.

“Sure. I’ll bring that right out for you.” She smiles and walks away and I look back at Maxwell.

“You knew her?”

“My father did. Before he was shot on the job.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. He was a police officer too?”

“He’s the reason I became one. Wanted to follow in his footsteps.” He wraps his hands around the cup of coffee, looking at me like I’m a suspect. “I knew of your aunt. Most of this town did.”

“She seems to have had that effect,” I say with a nervous laugh. “She told you she was psychic?” The more I learn about her, the more questions it raises. And now that I know about the whole dark side thing, I’m almost scared to hear about her reputation among law enforcement.

“She did. You’re like her then, aren’t you?”

Fuck, that's a loaded question. "She was much more gifted than me, but...uh, yeah. In a sense being psychic seems to run in the family."

"She must not have been that good," he spits. "It was thanks to a so-called *tip* from her that led to the death of several police officers."

"Your father was one of them," I say, connecting the dots.

"Yeah," he replies and now it makes sense why he's been so on guard.

"What happened?" I ask softly.

He slowly spins his coffee mug on the table and looks out the window, watching raindrops roll down the glass. "A family known for their organized crime was fleeing Chicago and had plans to shelter in Thorne Hill on their way down south. Your great aunt tipped off the police but when they showed up, they were greatly outnumbered. When she was brought in for questioning, you know what she said?"

"No, I don't know."

"She said she shouldn't have bothered with human law enforcement and should have handled it herself, whatever that means," he scoffs. "The whole thing had 'set up' written all over it."

"But she did exactly what she said, right? Gave the police a tip about what I think you're alluding to is the mafia?"

"That's what the records show."

"Look," I start. "I'm not here to defend my aunt or get into what she did or didn't do. If I'm being honest, I didn't know her all that well and I'm realizing she had a lot of secrets that I probably don't want to know. But she's dead and I'm not

trying to set anyone up. Marissa and Allison deserve to have their cases closed so maybe they can move on.”

“Move on?”

“Allison’s spirit is still in that house. It’s how I know what I know. And their families can finally get closure as well.”

Maxwell inhales and leans back, looking right into my eyes. “Say I believe you and find this coffee tin full of trophies. It still won’t be enough to get the rest of the force on your side. I might be able to convince a couple of my guys in the Thorne Hill department—unexplainable things happen in this town—but the PV force will laugh in our faces,” he says in such a way that leads me to believe they’ve laughed before.

The joke is on them, of course, since I’m confident to say every single unsolved murder in this town has been due to demons.

“Before, I considered having my friend call it in and say he discovered it during renovations. But we didn’t want to risk messing with evidence that could have DNA on it. Maybe I shouldn’t have told you that, but maybe that would work?” I suggest, fully knowing Officer Maxwell isn’t the kind of cop who likes anyone to suggest how to do his job.

“You said there were others.”

I nod, head bobbing quickly up and down. “Yeah. Eleven others to be exact.”

“Eleven?” he echoes.

“That I was able to track down.” Shit. How do I explain this? Another psychic vision? What do psychics on TV always say? They say they did a reading yet never explain what the reading actually is. Or should I say play the angle of being an annoying internet sleuth and that I spent an energy-drink

fueled twenty-four hours scouring the Internet for any sort of similar cases?

“Go on.”

I hold up my hand and turn to dig through my purse, pulling out a folded piece of paper. “I’m a visual person, so I made a list. The first murder actually happened in 1986.” I slide the paper over to him and watch his face, though his expression remains unreadable.

“Are you aware that Stuart Brown died in 1993?”

“I am.”

He looks up from the paper. “You’ve listed crimes past then.”

“I know.” The waitress brings my iced tea and we wait for her to walk away again before we continue.

“Are you suggesting that he faked his death?”

“I’m not. I’m suggesting that his spirit is carrying on with the murders.”

“All right. I see this is all a joke to you and you’ve wasted my time.”

“No,” I interject and move my hair over my shoulders, showing him the red marks on my neck. The annoyance on his face turns to concern.

“Who did that to you?”

“Stuart. His spirit attacked me and I know it sounds crazy but he was evil when he was alive and sometimes evil doesn’t die.” I tap the paper. “Every single one of these victims considered themselves witches or spiritualists in one way or another. And Stuart hated them for that. He’s still killing and a

woman who practices Paganism is on her way to that house tonight and she's in danger." The words spill out of me and I'm surprised at the sense of relief they bring me.

"Okay," Officer Maxwell says slowly. "Ghosts aren't real, and they certainly can't kill people."

"I know how crazy this sounds, trust me, I do. But if you go back to the station and look into these cases you will see that every single one of them was targeted for their beliefs. And they were all killed in similar ways but not identical so they weren't all flagged in the system or whatever."

Officer Maxwell picks up his coffee and takes a sip. The cafe is notorious for terrible coffee, but it's almost part of their charm in a weird way.

"You stay put," he tells me and takes the list from the table. "I'll be right back."

Certain he's going to have someone run checks on a few if not all of the victims, I watch him walk out to his car and then reach into my purse, texting both Ethan and Keith to let them know I think I'm making progress.

The food comes and Officer Maxwell still hasn't returned. I pick at my fries, both wanting to be polite and wait for him to eat but also seeking comfort in junk food. I'm halfway through my bowl of fries and considering ordering the fried pickles when he comes back in, taking off his rain-dampened jacket and hanging it on the back of his chair.

"How did you get this information?"

I dip another fry in ketchup. "Everything I said checks out, doesn't it?"

"It does. Again. How did you get this information? Was it a vision? Did you bust out a Ouija board?"

I almost say yes, but I'm trying hard to retain what little credibility I have here. "I have a friend who is a federal agent and they share my interest in the paranormal. I reached out and they offered to look into it for me. Of course, my source is to remain anonymous."

"Huh." He leans back, studying me for a minute before digging into his sandwich.

"I'm telling the truth."

"I believe that you think you are."

"Don't do that." I tap the screen of my phone to check the time. "We're going to run out of time. I was right about those victims and there could be more I missed." I put my hands on the table. "And there will be more for certain if you don't do something."

"I've already put in a request for the county Sheriff to send out a crime scene team, saying we got an anonymous tip about a cold case."

"Really?" My lips curve into a smile. "Thank you."

"If you're right, then I'm just doing my job."

"I am right, and then I hope you believe that Stuart Brown was a dangerous man while alive and an even more dangerous one while dead. Which is why we really have to act fast. Not just tonight, but there's an event in Paradise Valley in a few days that will be swarming with people who consider themselves witches. It'll be like an all you can eat buffet for him."

"I'm gonna stop you right there. Psychic visions...they're not unheard of. But mention a ghost-murderer one more time and I'm going to feel obligated to take you to the ER for a psych check."

“Not funny.”

“Well, then, kid...prove me wrong.”

“Most times I’d jump on the chance to.” I bite my lip and shake my head, looking out the window. The rain has let up and the air is hazy. “But this time, I really hope I don’t.”

Chapter
Twenty-Five

I drum my fingers on my steering wheel, listening to the phone ring. Once. Twice. Three times.

“Come on, Keith,” I whisper, surprised he didn’t answer right away. Finally, on the last ring, he answers.

“Hey, how’s it going?”

“Good, I think. How fast can you meet me at the house?”

“Your house or the *house-house*.”

“The *house*. I’m on my way there with a cop and a CSI team in tow.”

“Holy shit, you did it!” he exclaims.

“I did. I think. There’s a good chance Officer Maxwell thinks I’m fifty shades of crazy.”

“He didn’t buy the whole psychic thing?”

“Oh, he did, but I went on to tell him that instead of making sexy pottery from beyond the grave, Stuart is still killing.”

“Please tell me you said exactly that.”

“I regret that I didn’t. You might want to call your aunt and give her a heads up that the police will be contacting her. And

if she's already on her way there, tell her to stay in the car and don't hate me for being the one to call in the tip."

"I can't promise she won't hate you. Especially if she has to put the renovation on pause because of this."

"I can live with that. What's your ETA?"

"Probably twenty minutes. I'll drive fast. You?"

"A little longer. I'm coming from downtown Thorne Hill."

"Why are you—it doesn't matter. See you soon."

The call ends and I call Ethan, filling him in on everything. We talk the rest of the way to the bed and breakfast. Then it's a bit of a waiting game again, and the daylight is fading fast. Keith and I hang back while the police talk to Lauren, and instead of getting upset, she seems relieved, thinking that it would be good for business if this unsolved mystery finally got solved.

We all go around to the backyard and Officer Maxwell tells the CSI unit where "the caller" told them to look. Keith loops his arm through mine as they set up lights, both of us eager to see what happens.

"You're sure it's there?" Keith asks. "I don't mean to doubt you or anything."

"I know you don't. And yeah, I'm sure. If I was just going off my vision, I might be doubtful, but Hunter could smell the hair and the faint scent of coffee. It's there."

Time crawls, watching the team take photos before they start removing the wooden step. It's rotted and stuck to the ground and they're slow and careful removing it. Lauren comes over by us.

“I should have brought popcorn,” she jokes and turns to look at me. “You called in the tip, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Impressive. Keith told me how you were able to pick up on some really accurate details. Sounds like you’re the real deal.”

This is not the place to be talking about this. “Yeah,” I say again and wonder if I can cast a small protective circle around us without angering Stuart. Though, having him come out and attack us would be one way to get the law on my side.

We watch the team painstakingly remove little shovels full of dirt at a time until—finally—they find it. It’s rusted and dirty but looks exactly like it did in my head.

“Holy shit.” Lauren grips my arm. “You were right.”

“You just said she was the real deal,” Keith quips.

“Yeah, but...I just...holy shit.” Lauren looks from me to the CSI team again. A few more photos are taken and then the lid is carefully removed. I can’t see what’s inside, so Keith and I crowd forward as much as we can. Several items are removed and bagged but it’s not until Maxwell comes over that I learn exactly what was in the coffee tin. He waves me to step aside, not wanting the others to hear us talking.

“I was right, wasn’t I?” I can’t help but ask.

“You were.” Maxwell blinks a few times and then rubs his forehead, looking at me in disbelief. “Not just about the two women murdered here, but about the 1986 and 1990 murders too. Sara Clayton’s student ID card was in there with a lock of her hair wrapped around it. And Natalie Pérez’s bank card was in there as well.” He slowly shakes his head, eyes still drilling into me. “Stuart Brown killed all four of those women.”

“Just as I said. He’s a serial killer and he’s going to strike again.”

“Trusting your...your psychic instincts is one thing. Thinking a ghost is still out there murdering people.” He shakes his head again. “Come on, kid, you don’t really believe that, do you?”

“The spirits have spoken,” I say, doing my best not to cringe at myself, feeling like I’m back at the little round table, dressed in a black Victorian dress, working as a medium-for-hire. “Sorry. And I do. I told you, I’ve seen his spirit and I know it’s bound to this place because he followed me home.”

“I’ve watched those ghost adventuring shows. That happens sometimes, and it doesn’t make the ghosts capable of murder. They walk through walls. How can they strangle—never mind.”

“That event...he’ll find it. Unless...” I trail off, not finishing that sentence with *we’re able to hack into a bird cam and burn a corpse* and look up at the house. Chaotic, angry energy radiates from it, making me shiver. For years, Stuart guarded this place, scaring off anyone who could reveal his secret.

“The event has rented space at Central Park in Paradise Valley,” Officer Maxwell says. “It’s standard to have officers at any events that take place downtown. Best I can do is say we’ve heard of some threats by religious zealots. How’s that? In this day and age, those kinds of things are taken seriously.”

“Yeah, I know. But you can’t shoot a ghost.”

“But a ghost can strangle someone?”

“It’s complicated, but yes,” I sigh. “I don’t want to see people get hurt. This event is a disaster waiting to happen.”

“Look, say I bought your crazy theory. But we can’t cancel something like this without reason.”

“Bomb threat?”

He narrows his eyes. “We’re done here. Go home.”

“Can you just do one more thing for me?”

“Will it get you to flipping drop this whole undead serial killer thing?”

“Ghosts aren’t undead, but yes.”

He gives me a nod. “Go on, then.”

“Tell Lauren Peterson, the owner of this house, that she can’t set foot onto the property for like twenty-four hours. I can’t imagine Stuart is very happy right now and she shouldn’t be in the house alone.”

He stares at me, blinking, but then sighs. “The area will be roped off and the crime scene team will come back in the daylight to search the area more thoroughly, so she can’t come back.”

“Perfect.” I bite my lip and look at the house, feeling Allison’s spirit start to lighten. This was what she was waiting for. Hit with sudden emotion, I blink rapidly to keep from crying. “Thanks again,” I croak out and turn. Keith notices me and rushes over, putting his arm around me.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I say, teeth chattering. “These aren’t my emotions but they kind of are.” I tip my head up, blinking back more tears, taking a minute to compose myself. “That was Allison’s unfinished business.”

“She moved on?”

“Mh-hm,” I say and now Keith gets emotional.

“What about you-know-who?”

“He’s pissed. Guarding that secret was a big part of why his spirit was here.”

“I cannot wait to get rid of him.”

“You and I both. Are you going to hang out here with your aunt?”

Keith nods. “Someone has to make sure she actually keeps her ass out of that house. She’s much more likely to take a paranormal threat seriously after that evidence was recovered. But you go home to that gorgeous boyfriend and your sexy faery friend. He is single, isn’t he?”

I crinkle my nose. “I really like our group dynamic but who am I to stop love?”

“Honey, it wouldn’t be love. You do realize someone who’s been fucking for a century knows a thing or two.”

“I actually never thought of that. Oh my god, think of those super old vampires!”

Keith and I both laugh. “And with super speed and super strength. Mhhh. Makes me want to see if the rumors are true.”

“Once you go undead you never go back?”

Keith snickers. “I prefer warm bodies. Anyway, you amaze me, Anora.”

I wave my hand in the air. “Nah. It was nothing.”

“Well,” Lauren says, coming over to us. “They’re telling me I need to leave.” She rolls her eyes. “They’re coming back in the morning to look for more evidence. Can you believe it?”

“The nerve,” Keith shoots back sarcastically. “How dare they make sure those families get closure.”

Lauren gives him a look. “When you say it like that...”

“You sound heartless?”

“Shut it. Izzy is having friends over tomorrow so that’s what I’ll be doing after work. Thank god her friend’s moms like to drink.”

“That’s what we have to look forward to as parents?” I ask with a laugh.

“Trust me,” Lauren goes on. “I never really liked wine or coffee until after I had a daughter. Anyway, let’s get going and let them work.” The three of us start forward and then something occurs to me.

“You guys go, I just have to ask Officer Maxwell something. Text me later?”

“I will,” Keith says and I look through the small bunch of people until I find Officer Maxwell. I catch his eye and wave him over.

“I thought you were leaving,” he says.

“I am, um, after you tell me how you knew I was Estelle’s niece. We don’t have the same last name, I have no criminal record that would show up in a background check, and she’s my great aunt so it’s not like I’m immediate family.”

“You look just like her. And people in this town. They talk. And, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, there’s something in the air here.”

“It’s actually in the ground,” I say without really thinking.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I awkwardly chuckle. The Ley line attracts all sorts of life and people react to it differently. “I’m from Syracuse. Still not used to this whole small town gossip thing. Thank you for listening to me.”

“Like I said, I’m just doing my job. One thing, before you go.”

“Yeah?”

“Solving this case is going to make headlines.”

“Oh,” I say, hearing his unspoken question. “Please, keep my name out of it. I don’t want any credit.”

“Really?” he asks dubiously.

“Really. I was just doing my job too. They talk and I’m able to listen.”

“Well then, have a good night, Miss Benson.”

Chapter
Twenty-Six

“**M**orning,” I say, turning around from the stovetop.

“What’s all this?” Ethan asks as he comes up behind me, snaking his arms around my waist.

“I wanted to make you breakfast.” My eyes flutter shut and I lean back, feeling Ethan’s warm skin through my t-shirt. He’s only wearing sweatpants and it’s probably my favorite look of his.

“I thought I smelled bacon.” His lips go to my neck. “Real bacon.”

“That’s how much I love you.” I turn the burner down and push the scrambled eggs around in the skillet before spinning in Ethan’s arms. He takes a step back, moving away from the stove. “And it was going to expire soon,” I add and Ethan chuckles. “If you bring meat into this house, you better not waste it. But mostly, I’m cooking it because I love you.”

“Is it ready?”

“I think. Unless you want it a little crispier. It’s literally been two decades since I’ve eaten bacon.”

“I admire your dedication,” Ethan tells me and gives me another kiss before peaking in the oven. He says it needs just a few more minutes and pulls me to him again, pressing his lips

to mine. We stand there making out until I remember the scrambled eggs on the stovetop and madly dash to stir them.

“You’re distracting me, Mr. Bailey.”

“Should I be sorry about that?” He stands behind me again, hands on my hips.

“Not at all. But we do know how rare it is for me to cook, so let’s enjoy this while it’s hot.” I dish up two plates once everything is done and we sit at the counter to eat.

“You’re in a good mood.”

“I am,” I say with a nod. “Helping Allison cross over felt really good. I wish I could do that more. Being a witch feels natural since it, well, is. But being a medium...it’s me. It’s always been me.”

“It’s your calling.”

“I feel like it is. So is saving all the animals.” I came home last night feeling like a weight was lifted off my shoulders. With the warding recast, my house was calm and peaceful. Stuart is still very much a threat, but knowing we’re another step closer to banishing him forever is a good feeling too.

I’m clearing my plate when my phone rings. It’s my childhood best friend, and seeing her name flash up on my screen makes me realize it’s been a while since we’ve spoken.

“Hello?” I answer.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” she blurts out.

“Uh, depends on what it is?”

“The unnamed psychic who solved a cold case from the 80s.”

Right. Headlines. “That was fast. And yeah, it was me.” I smile and put my plate in the sink and then go into the library. “How do you know?”

“It’s all over social media. Last night, someone tipped off the police about the killer’s trophy case. Family was notified this morning and started posting. The Paradise Valley Times posted about it on Facebook. Like *just* posted. I’ve been stalking the page since I saw a TikTok by Sara Clayton’s cousin.”

“Send that one to me?” I ask as I pull my phone away from my ear, putting it on speaker as I wait for the link to go through.

“Play it and let me know your reaction,” Laney says.

The video starts with a woman looking into the camera with tears in her eyes. “If you lived in the midwest in the late 80s or 90s, then you probably remember the day my beautiful cousin, Sara, was found brutally murdered. Her case remained unsolved, and I’ll link my other videos about that in the comments, but last night my aunt got a phone call from the Paradise Valley police.” She inhales, doing her best not to start crying. “I can’t give away too much yet, as things legally are still being processed, but they finally know who killed her. It’s been so long I didn’t think it would hit me like this, but I cannot express how much this is going to help heal the hurt we still carry with us, forty-some years later. And when my aunt asked how this new evidence suddenly came about—you guys are never gonna believe this—but the police said a local psychic communicated with another victim.” She shakes her head, tears rolling down her face. “And this person doesn’t want fame or recognition. But whoever you are, thank you. Thank you for enabling my aunt and uncle to finally, *finally*,

be able to move on and rest. Sara's father swore he wouldn't give up until justice was served and now he can rest easy in his final days."

And now I'm crying again. Knowing Allison moved on was a lot, but knowing how much this impacted the families... I really do think this is my calling in the supernatural world.

"What the hell happened, and why didn't you call me sooner?"

"It's been a really hectic and crazy week." I sniffle and sit on the couch, telling Laney everything, starting with Ethan getting falsely accused of murder to everything going on with Stuart.

"That's fucking insane, Anora. Like talk about the right place, right time, right person."

"Yeah," I agree, knowing I have a bad habit of downplaying compliments. "Too bad I didn't walk in there when I was a baby." I make a face at my own words. "A lot of lives could have been saved."

"I'm just in fucking awe, Annie. And you're hoping to go dig up a grave tonight?"

"Yep. Between you and me, I'm more hoping to watch Ethan take his shirt off and then dig up the grave, but we have to move fast before we're seen. Getting out of two possible arrests within a week is like tempting fate."

Laney laughs. "Yeah. And getting caught red-handed is gonna be hard to talk your way out of."

"For sure. Luckily Ethan has done this before. They make it look easy in movies, but graves are deep down. I planted one tree last fall and thought I was going to die digging a two and half foot hole."

“Can’t you use magic to dig up the body?”

“I’m sure there’s some sort of spell for it, but I don’t know it...though you did just give me another idea. And we might not have to wait for the cover of darkness to pull it off. Can I call you back later?”

“Yeah. I’m working today so if I don’t answer, that’s why. Miss you.”

“I miss you too. I promised my parents I’d come visit this summer, so I’ll have to bug you then.”

“You better. I’ll get my guest room ready and everything. Bye, Anora. Love you.”

“Love you too, Laney.”

Dropping my phone onto the couch, I pad back into the kitchen, finding Ethan at the sink washing dishes. My god, it’s a beautiful sight.

“Laney said something that gave me an idea,” I start.

“Yeah?”

“It’s kind of long the lines of work smarter not harder when it comes to burning the body.”

“I’m listening.”

“Okay, so this—” I conjure a ball of fire in my hand. “—doesn’t need fuel like a normal fire. What if instead of digging up the entire casket, we make like a tunnel or something, bust through the wood, and I like shove the fire in? There will be oxygen so what’s inside should burn, right?”

Ethan sets the sponge down and looks at me thoughtfully. “If we were trying to use normal fire, no, it wouldn’t work. The fire could choke itself out. But magical fire...it seems

possible. It would definitely save us some time and trouble.” He tips his head a little to the side as he thinks. “There’s a spell to cast a circle of silence in your book.”

I nod. “There is.”

“And we have a post-hole digger in the barn. If we make two tunnels—a chimney, so to speak—smoke can come out one end the fire in the other.” He raises his eyebrows and shrugs. “I say it’s worth the try. I’ll check in with Jules and see if she’s made any progress.”



“WHAT ABOUT NOW?” Rene asks, holding the phone up to her ear as she waves her other hand widely in the air.

“You’re good.” Keith gives a thumbs up and carefully puts a piece of black fabric over the bird cam. I wave for Ethan to join us at the grave and he jogs over, effortlessly carrying the tools we need.

“Everyone ready?” I ask, knowing we have to act fast. We’re in the middle of the graveyard, not easily visible from the street, but it’s dark and the light from the fire will be really easy to see.

“Ready.” Rene pockets her phone, picks up a canister of salt and moves down two graves. Keith does the same and Ethan I stand right over Stuart’s grave. Closing my eyes, I visualize a large circle of white light surrounding us. Ethan holds a piece of paper in front of me, using his phone as light so I can read the spell.

“*Silentium nos circumdabit. Nullus sonus hunc circulum relinquet,*” I chant and feel the slight buzz of magic in the air.

“Did it work?” I ask Rene. She puts her hand to her ear, letting me know she can’t hear me. “Cool,” I whisper and then Ethan and I get right to work, removing the top layer of grass so it doesn’t get burned. Then he fires up the electronic post hole digger and I wince, waiting for Rene or Keith to react to it.

They don’t.

We start on the first tunnel, needing to stop and move the dirt a few times, widening the top of the hole so the digger can go all the way down to the casket. My heart is in my throat, and I look from Ethan to Rene and back again. She has Julia on speaker phone and she’ll let us know if there’s a problem with the loop. We won’t be seen, but a die-hard bird watcher might be concerned enough to come check out what happened.

Finally, we hit the top of the casket, and Ethan moves to the top of the grave. I shine a light down in it, startled to see that Stuart was buried in a basic wooden box, not a fancy, overpriced casket. Though it’s not like he had family to splurge on his funeral or anything. I pick up a long broom handle that Ethan fashioned into a spear and put it in the hole. Using all my strength, I shove it down onto the wooden top of the casket. The wood, softened from being underground, breaks easily and a horrible smell comes out, making me gag.

Keith, who can’t hear anything thanks to the spell, makes a face that lets me know he can smell it too. Turning away, I break off as much as I can and then wait for Ethan to get the next tunnel dug out. They’re much wider than I expected, since I didn’t take into consideration having to widen the top of the tunnel to allow for the machine to go all the way down to six feet.

Ethan takes the spear from me, jamming it down and breaking the wood. “I think that’s bone,” he says when he

pulls it up. He picks something off the blade and drops it down inside. “Ready?”

“Yeah. Let’s do this.” I sit at the top of the grave, wishing I brought a mask or something to wear to help filter out that horrible smell. It’s giving me a headache. Ethan pours a circle of salt around, hands me a kerosene soaked ball of paper, and steps back. Holding the paper in my right hand, I conjure a small ball of fire in my left hand and try to drop them both one right after another. The fireball goes in first and the paper ignites immediately. I lean back, sucking in a breath, and hope it drops right into the casket.

It does. I scramble to the second tunnel and do the same thing and then hold my hands up, magically fueling the fire. I close my eyes, envisioning the flames growing. Heat rises inside me and flames fall from my fingers, dripping down like melted wax.

“*Ignis*,” I whisper and the flames grow brighter. Suddenly, the air grows cold around me and I look up just in time to see a dark shadow swoop down from the sky.

Chapter

Twenty-Seven

The dark shadow swoops down from the sky, heading straight for Rene.

“Rene!” I shout, but she doesn’t so much look in my direction. “Rene!” I yell again, thinking maybe only I can see it, but then I remember she can’t hear me.

“Keep going,” Ethan tells me, reaching into his jacket. He pulls out a primitive looking knife made out of iron. The tip is on the dull side, but that doesn’t matter.

“Rene, duck!” he shouts as soon as he steps out of the circle and throws the knife. Rene yelps and drops down just in time, and the knife soars through the air, slicing through Stuart’s dark spirit. It sizzles and screeches, dissipating into the air.

“What the hell was that?” Rene asks as Ethan jogs over to get his knife. I turn my attention back to the ground in front of me, forcing more magical fire into the ground. Smoke starts to rise out of the other tunnel and the smell of burning fills the air.

“*Ignis*,” I whisper again and the flames pulse, igniting the remnants of fabric inside the coffin. Turning, I look out at Ethan and my friends, making sure they’re okay. It won’t be much longer. The flames start to warm the ground underneath

me. I just need a few more—something pushes me back, like a strong misty wind. It's trying to put out the flames. Gritting my teeth, I push myself forward and muster the energy to summon another ball of fire.

The wind blows again and bits of rain fall on me, making the fire in my hands hiss and start to dim.

“No,” I say, clenching my jaw and reach deep inside myself for more energy. “This is the end, you asshole. Just accept—fuck!” The flames shrink and I realize what Stuart is doing. He's in the spirit world, sucking up all the energy from the magical flames. It will make the fire go out and give him a temporary boost of energy so he can attack again.

“Uh, guys?” Keith starts, spinning around and holding out his canister of salt. “Are you seeing that?”

I look in his direction and see a gray shadow dash out from behind a grave. What the hell?

“Salt!” Ethan yells. “Throw the salt!”

Not thinking, Keith throws the entire canister of salt at the spirit. It's more than enough to make it slink back to the shadows, but now he's defenseless. Another shadow rises from the ground and it hits me that Stuart is rallying other spirits to attack us. There's one way to stop them and that's to go into the spirit world.

I open my mouth to tell Ethan what I need to do but stop because he won't hear me. There's no time to waste. Sitting back, I release the flames in my hands and close my eyes, whispering the incantation to cross from this realm into theirs. My body slumps to the side right as another shadow rises from the ground behind Ethan. The last thing I see is him slashing

his knife through the air, and then everything goes still and gray.

Pushing up, I look around the quiet graveyard, heart in my throat. Holy. Shit. There are spirits everywhere. Maybe going into the spirit world in a graveyard wasn't the best idea. Inhaling, I push up and ball my fists.

“Hey,” I start, feeling a hundred eyes on me. “I’m not here to hurt anyone else. But this asshole.” I point to the ground. I’m standing over Stuart’s grave. “He murdered innocent women and children and I have to stop him.” My heart races and I can hear it beating in my ears as I look around. Most of these spirits are residual hauntings, just a flicker of who they used to be. They didn’t want to accept death for one reason or another, and tried attaching to their physical bodies.

Now they’re stuck here.

“I can help anyone who wants it,” I go on. “When it comes to unfinished business, I’m your gal and I have a good track record, not to brag or anything.” A few spirits start to fade from view. “I don’t really know how ghost-to-ghost communication works, but whatever he told you is a lie. It’s time for you to rest. To go home.”

A spirit of a woman so far faded she can’t even remember what she looks like starts to move toward me. She’s wearing a dress, and her hair is swept back. But her face is hazy, like someone put a blur filter over her. I can feel that she wants to say something, but suddenly I feel warmth on my shoulder.

Inhaling deep, I sit up. I’m not in the spirit realm anymore, and Ethan’s hand is on my shoulder, gently shaking me.

“Anora?” he rushes out, voice panicked. I jerk my head up and see Rene and Keith standing a few feet from us, no longer

being attacked by ghosts. I didn't think I got through to anyone, but I think they listened. And now this is my chance.

I plant my hands on the ground right over the middle of Stuart's grave. "*Ignis!*" I shout and use all the strength I have to send fire down through the ground into the casket. Flames rise out of both tunnels and dark smoke fills the sky. A dark, shadowy hand reaches up from the ground and I narrow my eyes, pushing harder to burn everything in the ground.

Flames travel up from the ground and Stuart's hand burns and shrivels into nothing, drifting to ashes on the ground. I fall back and Ethan catches me. Panting, I look up at my friends. I listen and reach out feeling no sense of that evil man with a harmless name. It is cool, calm and slightly smoky around us now.

"It's over." I say breathlessly. "He's gone and this time, he's not coming back."



"THOSE TWO LOOK like they're on the world's most awkward first date," Keith whispers, gazing over at a couple sitting in a corner booth. We went to Steak n' Shake after leaving the graveyard. It's the only place open late at night and burning corpses works up an appetite.

We filled in the tunnels the best we could and patched up the grass. I used magic to scatter the salt, and we uncovered the bird cam. Julia said she'd keep the same loop going for another hour and then will cut it back to the live feed.

It's done. We did it and Stuart Brown won't kill another person ever again.

“If someone took me here at two AM for my first date, I’d skip the awkwardness and go right for pissed off,” Rene scoffs.

“Ohh, I think he’s a vampire.” I lean in, taking another drink of iced tea.

“Should we order him a muffin to be sure?” Ethan nudges me and I laugh.

“A muffin?” Rene and Keith ask at the same time.

“It’s an inside joke.” I look into Ethan’s eyes, heart all fluttery. “When we first met I was a little tipsy.”

“A little?” Ethan laughs. “You were drunk.”

I make a face. “Fine. I was drunk. And he took me to get coffee and food to sober up but he didn’t order anything himself so I made him eat a bite of my muffin to prove he was human. It made sense at the time.”

Rene laughs. “Oh, yeah. You told me that before. That’ll be a story for the grandkids someday.”

Ethan takes my hand in his. “It’ll be a fun one to tell.”

“So,” Keith starts. “What’s on the agenda for tomorrow? Any other lost souls to save? We’re like the Supernatural Avengers and I kinda like it.”

“Hah. I do too, but hopefully I can get a few days off. The footing for the indoor arena is back in stock and I really need to ramp up training with both horses.”

“You mean amp up?” Rene asks.

“I do? I always thought it was ramp.”

Ethan gives my hand a squeeze. “It’s amp, babe.”

We all laugh and Keith nudges my foot under the table.
“He’s eating a fry!”

“Not a vampire,” Rene notes. “I’m kinda disappointed.”

I laugh again. “Me too.” Ethan laces his fingers through mine and I smile, feeling so damn lucky to have such good friends.

Chapter

Twenty-Eight

O *f course.*

I roll my eyes, watching my white horse find the muddiest place in the pasture to plop down and roll. “Why do I bother bathing you?”

We had a great ride, and now it’s Sundance’s turn. Nik took care of the animals for us this morning, and Ethan and I both slept in until nearly ten AM and then had a lazy start to our day. It’s nice and warm today and not as humid as I thought after the recent rain. Sundance is a good boy as well, and we both had fun going over a few small jumps.

I go inside to shower and eat lunch, taking my salad onto the front porch. Despite telling myself I wasn’t going to look at any sort of article about Stuart Brown, I cave and open a Google search. News has spread nationwide, and the family of his most recent victim have spoken out as well. Natalie Pérez had a five year old daughter at the time she was murdered, and she also made a video on social media thanking the person who finally lead police to close this case.

A suggested article pops up, titled *Who was Stuart Brown?* and I shouldn’t care, but dammit, I’m curious. I just skim the article but am surprised to see that Stuart has an estranged daughter who wasn’t available for any comments, but this

article makes it seem like her mother had a one-night kinda of relationship with Stuart and he had never been in the picture.

The sound of a car driving down the road makes me snap my attention up. It's Ethan, and he's on his way home from work. It's nice he can pretty much make his own schedule right now, though I know he's more eager than he'll admit to start teaching martial arts classes again. And I know he'll have a full class both because he's good and he's very enjoyable to look at.

Someone else might be bothered by that, but I trust Ethan completely and am already envisioning the jealous looks I'll get when I bring him lunch or something, walking past all the women in tight workout gear trying to show off.

"Hey, babe," he says, coming around to the front porch. "Did you have a good ride?"

"The best!" I smile when I talk about the horses and never realized it until it was pointed out to me years ago. Grabbing my empty salad bowl, I go inside with Ethan, who goes straight to the fridge for something to eat.

"A couple guys at the gym are having a party tonight," he says and I don't mean to cringe, but I do. That's how antisocial I've become. "Don't worry, it's not a party like that. It's a pizza, beer, and playing a new video game that just came out."

"Nerd."

"Says the girl who dressed up like a hobbit and had me take pictures of her posed with her horse last month."

"Hey, that was my most liked picture on Instagram ever," I shoot back, trying to keep a straight face. Ethan laughs and takes me around the waist.

"You don't care if I ditch you for the night?"

“Of course not.” I tip my head up to him. “Look at us, really building a life here. You have non-demon hunting friends, a normal job, and a super hot girlfriend.”

He lets out a growl and buries his face against my neck. My arms go around him and he picks me up, carrying me to the living room couch. I think he’s going to lay me down and have his way with me, but instead he tickles me, making me laugh and shriek and push him away at the same time.

He stops and flips us over, laying me on his chest.

“What time’s the party?”

“Five. And I’ll probably be home by nine.”

“Wow. Crazy party.”

“Shawn’s hosting and has to be up early for work the next day.”

I rake my fingers up and down Ethan’s back. “Nik has a date tonight. Looks like I’ll be spending the evening wearing sweatpants and hanging out in the barn. I might get crazy and make a margarita to bring with me.”

“That sounds like your perfect night. Only thing that will make it better is filling out adoption applications for the nearby animal shelters.”

“Ohhh, now you’re talking my language.”



“HEY, SIS,” Harrison answers on the first ring. He must be in the car again to answer so soon. “What’s up?”

“Right now, nothing and it’s glorious.” I lean back against Mystery’s stall wall, stretching my legs out in front of me. I

brought everyone in for grain and am enjoying just sitting in the barn watching them eat. “And next weekend is good for that double date if it works for you guys.”

“Yeah. I’ll double check with Saanvi, but it should work. You, uh, killed the ghost? Is that the right thing to say?”

I laugh. “Banish is correct, I think. And yeah. I did. All in a day’s work, ya know, solving like thirteen cold cases.” I recap everything that happened, imagining my brother’s shocked expression as I talk.

“What if it was a person? Like...if someone else decided to carry on his life’s work.”

“Well, then that means I didn’t get the bad guy.” I shake my head, forgetting he can’t see me. “Stuart was able to leave the house and physically attack me. If he could do that, he could do it to others. Others who don’t have the actual power to fight him.”

“Yeah. Good point. You gonna take it easy for a while now?”

“That’s my plan. I might have found a small hunter/jumper show only two hours from here I want to take Sundance to at the end of the month.”

“You said showing gave you anxiety?”

“It does, but damn, Sundance is a talented jumper. No offense to you, Mystery,” I tell my horse and choose not to try to explain to Harrison why my Arabian—who I love to fucking death, don’t get me wrong—can’t fairly compete in the jumper ring against bit warmbloods and thoroughbreds.

We talk a bit longer and I was right; Harry left work and is on his way to Saanvi’s. I set my phone down next to me and

close my eyes, feeling calm and happy. My phone buzzes with a text from Rene.

Rene: Okay, so don't laugh, but that gathering looks pretty fun.

Me: Are you at your store?

Rene: Yeah. I can hear the music from inside. Want to check it out with me?

Me: I'm already in sweatpants

Rene: omg just change! LOL I'll order veggie tacos for us

Me: You had me at tacos. Give me like fifteen minutes to get dressed and then I'll meet you at the store.

Rene: Yay! See ya soon!!

“Well, guys, looks like it's extra hay for you tonight.” I say and get up, double checking that water buckets are full and the stalls are locked. I toss everyone two extra flakes of hay and go inside. Harrison's words about someone carrying on the legacy nag at me, and I send a group text to both Sam and Julia.

Me: You guys need to teach me how to do this so I can stop bugging you about it, but if you could run a background check on Ariana McMillian (age 43) from Columbus OH, I would forever grateful

I hit send and go inside, not expecting a response from either of them right away, but Sam texts me back before I even get upstairs.

Sam: I got it. Yumi and I are running checks on a few others right now so we're already in the program. I'll get this to you in an hour or so.

Me: Thanks so much. I'm sure it'll come back with nothing, but you know me. Just want to be sure.

“It will be nothing,” I tell myself, annoyed I let Harry get into my head that easily. Now...what exactly should I wear to this Wicca Gathering?



“YOU WERE RIGHT. This is pretty damn fun.” I put my straw to my lips and take a drink of some sort of “goddess cocktail” that tastes a lot like a watery vodka tonic spiked with cranberry juice.

“Right?” Rene loops her arm through mine. “They might not be your kind of witch, but the vibe here is perfect.”

“It is,” I say as I look around. The turnout to this event was huge and it’s just like Rene said. No one here can cast a real spell, but they do know the basics. And it’s nice to be around a whole group of people who respect the dead, know the value of the elements, and don’t judge any of us for believing what we believe.

We walk around, visiting some of the different booths. I buy half a dozen new sage smudge sticks since I used all mine clearing out my house. Rene gets a few crystals and we’re both tempted to buy “fairy-inspired” dresses until we see the price tags. I choke down the rest of my drink and then we both get spiced ciders and cinnamon rolls and go to a table to eat them.

“Hi, can I join you?” a woman who appears to be in her late forties asks us.

“Of course.” I motion to the space across the table from us.
“The more the merrier.”

“Right.” She smiles but her eyes don’t reflect the same emotion. “There are a lot of people here. Like a lot.”

“I’m not a fan of crowds either,” I say, understanding now why she doesn’t look happy to be here.

“I’ve never been here before,” the woman goes on. “But I couldn’t resist meeting like minded people, right?”

“That’s exactly why we’re here,” Rene says. “I had no idea this many people in the area shared my love of finding the power in nature.”

“Yeah. It’s, uh, amazing,” the woman goes on. “I wish more people would be like us, existing in harmony with the world.”

“Exactly!” Rene says loudly. She’s a little drunk and I love her excitement so much right now.

“I’m Amy,” the woman introduces, reaching across the table to shake my hand.

“Anora,” I say back and give her hand a shake.

“I’m Rene.” Rene waves with a broad smile. “Have you caved and shopped yet? I’m thinking I need to hit the crystal stand one more time.”

“I’ve been restraining myself.” Amy smiles and then lets out a breath. “Well, I’m going to get back out there. I just needed a minute.”

“Of course,” I tell her and pick up my cider, taking a drink. After the watered down cocktail, this is delicious. Rene and I share the rest of my cinnamon bun and then she gets up to use the bathroom. I’m starting to feel a little tired and I mentally

roll my eyes at myself. Wasn't I just teasing Ethan for being lame with his party ending at nine PM?

My phone buzzes with a text and I open it to see a photo of a report from Sam about Ariana. I enlarge the photo, heart skipping a beat when I see she has an extensive record. She would have been only six when her father committed the first murder. I scroll down and see that she joined the National Guard as soon as she turned eighteen and then served four years overseas. It looks like she came back for a bit and then served another four years.

And then things get interesting.

She was arrested for assault with a deadly weapon, drug possession, breaking and entering, and currently has a restraining order against her for stalking.

“Damn. I guess the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.” My vision gets a little blurry and I blink a few times, trying to clear it. My stomach twists, bringing about a sudden wave of nausea. Ugh. It has to be all that sugar I shoveled in my face.

I look back at the dates of her arrests and jail time and the sick feeling intensifies. “Holy fucking shit,” I whisper as something clicks in my head. The dates of her time served overseas and jail time coincide with the time gaps in the murders after Stuart died.

Harrison was right.

Springing to my feet, I get hit with dizziness. What the...I blink, body begging to lay down and fall asleep right here on the ground.

“Oh, fuck,” I grumble. That woman, Amy, reached over my drink to shake my hand. I should have known better but I

let my guard down, not expecting to be drugged by a forty-something year old Wiccan.

But Amy isn't the passive, peace-loving witch she introduced herself as. She's Ariana McMillian, and she's here to kill as many of us as she can.

"Rene," I start, but slump back down at the table.

"Oh, you poor thing."

My eyes shut and I can't get them to open.

Tsk. Tsk. You shouldn't have had so much to drink." An arm wraps around my shoulders and the last thing I remember is a look of pure hatred on Ariana's face. And then I pass out.

Chapter
Twenty-Nine

My heart throbs and vomit burns in my throat, threatening to come up. I try to open my eyes but I can't. Or maybe they are open and it's dark? I'm so confused and have no idea what's going on. I lose consciousness again but wake up with a start, hearing the music from the festival in the background.

What is going on?

I inhale, smelling gasoline and fertilizer. It's jarring, and I try to sit up but my hands are tied behind my back. Panting, I roll over onto my side and grunt as I get to my feet, dry cement biting into my knees. I knew I shouldn't have worn a dress.

"Is someone there?" a trembling voice calls out.

"Yes," I reply but my voice is hoarse and my throat is dry.

"Quiet," someone else hisses. "She'll be back soon."

"Who?" I ask, still disoriented.

"That...that woman," the first person replies. "I...I don't know her name."

"Okay," I say, trying to think what Ethan would do in this situation. First thing I need to do is figure out what the hell is

happening. I was drugged and it was the lady who introduced herself as Amy.

But why?

I blink again and shuffle forward a few feet.

“Where are we?” I ask, coming to a stop.

“I think we’re in the garage behind the plaza,” someone else answers. That’s three different voices. I think. “I saw a lawn mower when she opened the door and brought you in.”

“Are you guys tied up too?” I ask.

“Yeah,” one of them replies, voice breaking. “With zip ties.”

“I’m Anora,” I go on, knowing that we all need to stay calm. This is exactly what I feared would happen but it shouldn’t have because Stuart has been banished. “Are you able to move? We can free each other.” I pull against the binds, tipping my head up and sniffing the air. The smell of gasoline is strong in here. Will the place go up in flames if I summon fire?

I still don’t know what would happen if I held fire in my hand and tried to melt something, but right now it’s a chance I’m going to take. Because if I don’t, we’re going to end up murdered.

“It’s going to be okay.” I slide my foot in front of me, feeling for obstacles before I take a step forward. “I’m going to get us out of here and—”

A side door opens and the women in here start screaming. “Help! Someone help us!” Their screams are drowned out by cheering coming from a crowd and then a new song starts up again, base thumping loudly.

Right. There was a new band playing. It's an all-girls gothic cover band and right now they're singing *Paint it Black*. I close my eyes, trying to center myself. That fucking bitch slipped something in my drink and if she thinks she'll find me laying down powerless, she has another thing coming. I Might be drugged to hell but I will fight with everything I have.

Hunter, I call and reach out to my familiar. Something clicks in my head and I know he heard my call. It won't be long before he's here. There's a scuffle to my left and someone screams in pain.

"Ariana McMillian!" I yell, pushing my shoulders back. "This ends now and you're not going to get away with it."

The sound of a body thudding resounds through the building and then suddenly, lights are turned on. I blink, eyes hurting. Ariana—the woman who introduced herself as Amy—stands only a few feet from me. She took off the coat she had been wearing and has a utility belt around her waist with a knife, handcuffs, and night vision goggles hanging from it. I take a quick moment to look around. Two women who I recognize as the organizers of the event are huddled together. Another is only a few feet from Ariana with her back up against a garbage can. And a fourth woman is on the ground, purple hair over her face. She's not moving.

"I already have." She reaches down, hand going to the knife.

"Your dad thought so too. For nearly forty years. But I found out his secret and now the world knows what he did."

"I know you did, bitch. I saw you sniffing around his grave. People like you...you're unnatural," she sneers in disgust. "My father was right. We need to purge the wicked."

“I’m wicked? You’re the one killing people you fucking psycho!” I carefully gather heat around my fingers, trying hard not to nervously glance at the gas cans only a few feet from me.

“I’m doing God’s work. *Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.* I’m doing what needs to be done before you can corrupt more innocent souls.”

“Okay, Ms. Exodus.” I rub my thumb over my index finger, summoning a small flame. I swallow hard and wait a few seconds. Nothing explodes, thank fucking god. “Then let the others go. They’re not real witches. Not like me. I get down and dirty with Satan every night. Sometimes in the morning too. He’s just *so needy*...like can’t a girl get a break? I’m chafing down there!”

“You think this is a fucking joke?” She pulls the knife from her belt. “I’ll see how much you laugh after I cut your tongue out of your mouth.”

“Trust me,” I say and feel flames surround my hand. I grit my teeth, prepared to feel the burn of melted plastic on my skin. I haven’t gotten my nails done since I discovered that I’m a witch with the power of pyrokinesis in fear that the acrylic would melt and burn me. I’m going to find out if that’s going to happen tonight. I command the fire to creep up my arm, able to feel the heat. It doesn’t hurt. “I will be getting the last laugh.” I pull my hands apart, breaking the weak plastic, and throw my hands out in front of me, fire balls hovering above my palms.

But then I feel a depletion of energy, just like I did the first few times I used magic. I rush toward Ariana but go sideways, feet hitting each other. The room spins as the drugs start to take hold of me and I stagger to the side. I get dizzy when I try

to catch myself and put the fire out before I crash into the gas cans. No! They go tumbling down and one spills across the floor. I jump over it but trip and fall face first into a metal shelf. My forehead takes the brunt of my fall and pain radiates through me.

Ariana laughs and I fight to remain conscious. I grab the shelf, pulling myself up. Blood drips down my face and the smell of gasoline fills the air, making me cough. Fuck! If I summon more fire, I could blow the whole place up. My thoughts start to jumble and I think I might be sick.

But I'm back on my feet and I spin around, thrusting my hand out in front of me. I send a jolt of energy at Ariana, hitting her in the chest hard enough to knock the knife out of her hand. The woman close to her springs forward, kicking it as hard as she can. It slides under one of the riding lawn mowers. Yes! Score one for the witches, bitches!

Ariana squares her shoulders and pulls her lips back in anger, reminding me of a rabid dog. She shoves the woman who falls to the ground, head hitting with a sickening thud. Everything spins again and I feel like I'm going to pass out. My ears ring and my vision blurs.

"N-no," I groan, holding onto the shelf behind me to keep from falling. My eyes flutter shut and then I feel body heat right in front of me. Ariana punches me hard in the stomach and kicks my feet out from underneath me. I collapse hard on the ground, trying to summon a small flame, not caring if the whole place burns.

She'll burn with it.

The small flame extinguishes when she kicks me hard in the ribs. Once. Twice. Three times. I try to curl my legs in, protecting myself as I cough up blood.

“I thought saving you for last would be more satisfying,” she grunts between kicks. “But this....this is—” She cuts off suddenly when something large and heavy flies through the air, knocking her to the ground.

Hunter.

Fuck. Yeah. Spitting out blood, I plant both hands on the ground and push myself up. Gasoline slowly spreads across the garage floor and my shoes are wet from it. Hunter shadows over to me, shifting back into dog-form. He pushes his head under me and helps me up.

Ariana scrambles back, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a syringe that’s full of some sort of paralytic—like the one her father used. She’s going to inject whoever is closest to her and I don’t know how I can stop her when I can barely keep my eyes open.

But then something else growls, and the world spins around me as I look up, gripping onto Hunter for dear life. A gray wolf stands in front of Ariana, fangs bared and fur on end. Her eyes widen in fear and the wolf lunges, knocking her to the ground. It stands over her, guarding and ready to rip her throat out.

“No!” I yell. “We...we need her alive.” If she’s alive I can force a confession out of her. The wolf turns, eyes meeting mine. A moment of understanding passes between us, and Ariana brings her arm up to stab the needle into the wolf.

“No!” I yell again, and the wolf shadows away. She nearly stabs herself in the process and then scrambles back, looking around, terrified.

“Get her,” I tell Hunter and my familiar slinks forward, a low growl coming from deep inside of him. My vision is

blurry and it takes everything I have to see the syringe on the ground. Grunting I throw my hand out, telekinetically sliding it away from Ariana.

She reaches for it, madly slapping the ground as Hunter advances. He shifts into his true form and his huge, shadowy figure looms over her, red eyes glowing like coals plucked right out of the fires of Hell.

“I told you,” I say, holding onto the shelf. “I would get the last fucking laugh.” I stagger forward as Hunter shoves her down, whacking her head against the ground hard enough to knock her out. Unable to stay on my feet, I fall and end up crawling across the dirty garage floor. Fingers wrapping around the syringe, I rock back onto my feet and smile. “This ends now.”

I shove the needle into her arm, injecting the drugs into her system. Hunter comes back to me, pulling me away right before I black out again.

“Hey,” a voice says, sounding far away. “Anora!”

My eyes blink open and I see Rene standing above me. There’s no more music and the energy that surrounds us is chaotic.

“Oh, thank god. She’s awake!”

“Did someone call 911?” I hear a voice ask.

“Yeah. I did,” another answers.

Rene grips my arm and I grunt as I try to sit up, feeling like I’m going to puke. “She’s...she...”

“I know,” Rene tells me, eyes wide. “They told me. It’s going to be okay. I called Ethan. He’s on his way.”

My eyes fall shut and things move in a blur around me. People are crying. Lights flashing. I hear sirens in the distance and voices all around me.

“It was her,” someone says. “She saved us.”

“How?” another asks. I blink my eyes open and see EMTs rushing toward me, telling Rene to move back and get out of their way.

“Magic.”

Chapter
Thirty

“**A**nora.”

I slowly open my eyes only to close them again.

“Hey, I’m here.”

“Ethan,” I mumble and blink my eyes open again. He’s at my side, holding my hand in his. Slowly, I become aware of everything and try to sit up.

“Easy, babe.”

“What..what happened?”

“You were drugged but now you’re in the hospital.”

“The others—”

“They’re okay. They’re all okay.” Ethan rubs his thumb over my hand. “And Ariana is in jail.”

My vision finally clears and I look at Ethan’s handsome face. It’s pulled down with worry and I can see the guilt in his eyes.

“Wait, I stopped another serial killer?”

Ethan’s lips curve up in a smile. “You did, and my god I’m going to ravish the fuck out of you once you’re better.”

“Better?” I try to sit up again and am hit with horrible pain in my middle. “What?”

A nurse comes in, turning off the call button Ethan must have pressed when I woke up. He sits me up and checks my vitals—and that’s when I learn I have two broken ribs, several bruised bones, and a concussion.

“How long before I can ride my horses again?” I ask as he takes his stethoscope from around his neck.

“Told you that would be the first thing she asks,” Ethan whisper-talks to the nurse, who chuckles.

“I’m going to have to ask the doctor about that,” the nurse tells me. “Typically, it takes a month or two for broken ribs to heal.”

“That’s like all summer,” I say, automatically emotional from the drugs. “I wanted to take my thoroughbred to a show in a few weeks.”

“I’m sorry,” the nurse says and I know he means it. “Give yourself at least four weeks.”

I groan and Ethan puts his hand on my thigh, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“What you did, babe, was fucking incredible.”

“It’s true?” The nurse flicks his eyes from me to Ethan. “I don’t mean to pry. But you’re the one who fought off the attacker?”

“She is.” Ethan looks at me proudly. “My badass bitch.”

“It was just self preservation and I, um, had my dog with me.”

The nurse shakes his head in astonished disbelief. “I swear, we don’t deserve dogs.”

“I agree. They’re the only things in this world that love us more than we love ourselves.”

Once the nurse is done with his assessment, I rest my head against the pillow. Ethan sits on the edge of the bed, knowing me well enough not to say anything right now. I start to doze off when the doctor comes in, telling me pretty much exactly what the nurse said. She leaves, saying she’ll be back in a few hours.

“How are you doing?” Ethan asks and I know he’s not asking how I’m feeling physically.

“Everyone is okay?” I ask before I can answer.

“Yeah. The four women Ariana drugged are down the hall and should be released soon.”

“I really thought it was a ghost serial killing. It does sound ridiculous.”

“I mean, not really when you think about everything else.” He takes my hand again. “I haven’t brought it up in a while, but let’s not forget that you have an army of reaper demons under your command.”

“And I kinda miss them,” I confess. “I’m glad it was me. In a weird way, I guess.” I slowly inhale, ribs hurting every time I breathe. “No one else would have been able to call—” I stop, memories coming back. Everything is hazy since I was drugged, but Hunter wasn’t the only familiar who came to my aid.

Before I can go on, there’s another knock at the door. It’s Officer Maxwell and he and Ethan exchange an awkward stare for a few seconds before he comes in.

“Hello, Miss. Benson. I’m helping out the Paradise Valley police and am here for your official statement.”

“Oh,” I say and let Ethan help me sit up more. “Um... everything is kinda mixed up in my mind.”

“She was drugged,” Ethan tells him.

“I know,” Maxwell says gently. “We have Ms. McMillan in custody and, thanks to Special Agent Mulder here,” he says with a wink. “We should be able to connect her to those murders.”

“She was carrying out her dad’s work,” I say, feeling stupid for not seeing it. I was so sure it was Stuart I didn’t consider any other possibility.

“Now, I was able to gather from the others that Ms. McMillan sought out the five most prominent figures in the community. She drugged you all, lead you to the city’s utility unit and attempted to murder you. But here’s where things get fuzzy. According to the others, a wolf and a large German Shepherd “materialized inside the room” and together the three of you were able to subdue McMillian.”

“Uh, yeah. That’s what happened.” I nod.

“Better than an army of cats,” he grumbles and I’m not sure I heard him right.

“Hunter,” Ethan says, voice steady. “Is our German Shepherd. Anora brings him with her pretty much everywhere. He got spooked when he heard sirens and ran off, but luckily a friend was able to find him and bring him home.”

“And the wolf?” Maxwell raises his eyebrows.

“I don’t remember a wolf.” I swallow, feeling Ethan’s eyes on me.

“All right. I’ve got all I need. Take care, Miss Benson.” He turns and takes a few steps toward the door. “And don’t be surprised if we request you consult with us in the future.”

He leaves and I try to get comfortable, which is hard with the IV lines in my arm.

“A wolf? Ethan echoes.

“It was there. With Hunter. It helped save us. And then it was gone.”

He doesn’t say anything, but the look on his face speaks loud enough. And I’m thinking the same thing. What the in the ever loving fuck is going on?

There’s another knock at the door and I look over to see Nik rushing in. He comes right to the bed and throws his arms around me.

“Oh my god, Anora. Don’t you ever do that ever again!”

“I don’t plan on it,” I grunt and he releases me.

“How’d you get in?” Ethan asks. “They wouldn’t let Rene up.”

“Immediate family only,” Nik replies. “I said I was your brother.”

“My brother?” I echo.

“We do look alike and we share an address.” Nik grins. “It’s on my ID.”

I blink. “You got a fake ID?”

“It came in?” Ethan asks and I shake my head. Of course he’d hook Nik up with a fake ID. I know Ethan has several aliases from his Order days. “Come out in the hall. I’ll tell you everything.”

I try to get comfortable again, lay back and close my eyes.. The sense of peace I felt only hours ago is gone, and something else nags at me. I want to say it's just me feeling silly for thinking Stuart could kill from beyond the grave, but I know it's deeper than that.

Demons are evil. They have no soul. They exist for one reason and one reason only: to cause pain and destruction. But people...people are supposed to be good. Ethan's joked a few times that my best and worst quality is how I want to see the good in people. I want to trust that they'll do the right thing.

And *that* is what's bothering me. It's no secret, it's nothing new in the world. But it's hitting me hard right now just how unsettling it is to have to accept that people are far more dangerous than demons.



“YOUR PARENTS JUST LANDED,” Ethan says, adjusting my pillow. I'm camped out on the living room couch, with my feet propped up on the ottoman. I got home from the hospital a few hours ago and am comfortably drugged up.

“Our mom can be very overbearing,” I warn Saanvi. She and Harrison rushed to the hospital this morning after hearing what happened. The news made headlines again, and this time there was no keeping my name out of it. They didn't list me as a psychic this time, at least. The news outlets have painted me as a true hero: a small-town girl who, along with her dog, fought off a psychotic killer and saved innocent lives.

I've declined interviews from CNN to Fox News and everything in between. I meant it when I told Maxwell I don't

want fame. I was given the gift of magic for a reason, and I'm just doing my job.

"I never thought anything would top surprising Mom with the news I have a serious girlfriend," Harrison starts. "But you kicking a serial killer's ass takes the cake."

I laugh and then wince. "Don't make me laugh. And I'm glad to be of service."

Rene and Keith brought over breakfast this morning, and the vet texted me, asking if I needed help taking care of the horses. Even the owners of the feed store sent flowers to the hospital. It's weird, being a bit of a local celebrity like this. And now, between Nik, Harrison, Saanvi, and—most of all—Ethan, I'm being completely doted on. Not that I mind, of course.

"Do you need anything else?" Ethan asks, putting another blanket over my legs.

"I'm good, thanks." I smile up at him, wanting to just take a nap. But then the doorbell rings, and Hunter lets me know that it's Donna. "You can either run upstairs and hide or meet my nosey neighbor," I tell Harrison and Saanvi.

"I say hide," Nik grumbles and waves them upstairs, knowing that Donna will stay longer if she sees new people. Hunter joins me on the couch and Ethan answers the door, letting Donna in. She's carrying a casserole dish of something that smells amazing.

"Oh my goodness gracious!" She bustles past Ethan and comes into the living room, setting the dish on the coffee table. She sits on a chair opposite me. "When I heard what happened." She shakes her head. "Of course, I knew you of all

people would be a fighter. That's what I told the paper. My next-door neighbor fought off a murderer!"

Just wait until the news comes out that Ariana is a serial killer, I think to Hunter. Only my friends know the truth, since it's going to take time for the police to gather physical evidence that will prove Ariana killed all those other people.

"I just did what I had to in order to survive," I say and run my hand over Hunter's head. "And I'm lucky I brought my dog with me. He's very protective."

"And humble to boot!" She pats my leg.

"I, um, was actually just wondering if you've seen that wolf around your property recently."

"What wolf, honey?" Donna laughs and looks at Ethan. "Must be the drugs."

"You...you had footage on your doorbell camera of a wolf wandering around your property."

She gives Ethan a wink, thinking I'm off my rocker. "Oh, right. Don't worry. He tried to huff and puff but couldn't blow our brick house down."

What the fuck?

"You did mention seeing something," Ethan tries. "You were concerned it would attack your animals."

"You both are thinking of someone else, I'm afraid."

Silence falls over the room and Ethan gets to his feet. "It's important Anora gets her rest. Thank you for bringing us something to eat."

"Of course. The last thing you want to do is deal with cooking. Please, let me know if there is anything you need. I

can send the kids over to help muck out stalls and if you need me to come help straighten up, I am a great housekeeper.”

“Thank you,” I say, knowing she’s only offering to help so she can come poke around the house.

“That’s vegetarian,” she adds, standing up. “I was told you don’t eat meat.”

“No, I don’t. Thanks. That was very thoughtful.”

“Of course, dear. You take care, okay?”

Ethan shows her out and comes back into the room, eyes meeting mine. I know we’re both thinking the same thing.

The wolf *was* there last night. Hunter remembers it. He doesn’t, however, know where it came from. His main concern was me and by the time I was safe, the wolf was gone.

“Someone wiped her memory of it,” Ethan says and we exchange another look. “Just like someone wiped the memories of that couple in the apartment.”

“I can’t stand the woman but if anyone was going to mess with her memory I wanted it to be me,” I say as a chill makes its way down my back. “Why would someone—” I stop when Harrison comes back into the room.

“She’s gone?”

“Yeah. Thank you, Ethan, for getting rid of her so fast.”

“My pleasure.” He takes a seat next to me again. “You should get some rest before your parents get here.”

“I’m kinda nervous,” Saanvi admits and looks down at herself. “I need to change. My suitcase is in the car.”

“I can get it,” Harrison offers.

“It’s fine. Some fresh air will help calm my nerves.” Saanvi smiles and goes outside. I rest my head on Ethan’s shoulder and bury my fingers in Hunter’s thick fur. I could easily doze off right now, but only a minute later, Saanvi comes back in, holding a large box.

“This is for you. Some guy stopped halfway down your driveway and said he couldn’t go any farther.” She shrugs, because it sounds weird...unless you knew the line of my warding goes right through the middle of my driveway. “Looks like flowers. Want me to open it?”

“Yeah, please.”

She puts the box on the coffee table and pulls off the lid. “Huh. That’s...interesting. I’ve never seen flowers like this before. There isn’t a card, either...” She steps aside and picks up a bouquet of odd-looking purple flowers.

“It’s wolfsbane,” Nik says and I tip my head to the side. Magical uses aside, wolfsbane is highly toxic, like toxic enough for it to be banned at Grim Gate Academy. In controlled doses, it weakens werewolves and prevents them from shifting. Why would someone send—holy shit. My blood runs cold. I wasn’t given this as a way to stop werewolves or so I can add a hard-to-get herb to my witch’s pantry. I was given this because of the symbolism. *Wolfsbane*. The warlock who encouraged Estelle’s dark side has a wolf for a familiar... and he knows I’ve seen it. And if he can’t cross my warding it only means one thing: he’s not a warlock at all.

He’s a demon.



Book five in the Grim Gate Series, Midnight, is coming soon!
Check my website for updates!

www.emilygoodwinbooks.com

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About the Author

Emily Goodwin is the New York Times and USA Today Bestselling author of over a dozen of romantic titles. Emily writes the kind of books she likes to read, and is a sucker for a swoon-worthy bad boy and happily ever afters.

She lives in the midwest with her husband and two daughters. When she's not writing, you can find her riding her thoroughbred, Loki, hiking, reading, or drinking wine with friends.

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Also By Emily Goodwin

Contemporary romance:

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All I Need

Never Say Never

Outside the Lines

First Comes Love

Then Come Marriage

One Call Away

Free Fall

Hot Mess (Love is Messy Book 1)

Twice Burned (Love is Messy Book 2)

Bad Things (Love is Messy Book 3)

Battle Scars (Love is Messy Book 4)

Cheat Codes (The Dawson Family Series Book 1)

End Game (The Dawson Family Series Book 2)

Side Hustle (The Dawson Family Series Book 3)

Cheap Trick (The Dawson Family Series Book 4)

Fight Dirty (The Dawson Family Series Book 5)

Paranormal romance:

Dead of Night (Thorne Hill Series Book 1)

Dark of Night (Thorne Hill Series Book 2)

Call of Night (Thorne Hill Series Book 3)

Still of Night (Throne Hill Series Book 4)

Curse of Night (Thorne Hill Series Book 5)

Queen of Night (Thorne Hill Series Book 6)

Immortal Night (Thorne Hill Companion Novella)

Dystopian Romance:

Contagious (The Contagium Series Book 1)

Deathly Contagious (The Contagium Series Book 2)

Contagious Chaos (The Contagium Series Book 3)

The Truth is Contagious (The Contagium Series Book 4)