

LILLIANA ROSE



DARK MOON
SECRETS

— • 1 • —

THE WITCH MOON SERIES

DARK MOON SECRETS

THE WITCH MOON SERIES

BOOK ONE



LILLIANA ROSE

Dark Moon Secrets © 2023 Lilliana Rose

Ebook ISBN: 978-0-6458070-3-5

Print ISBN: 978-0-6458070-4-2

All rights reserved under the International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning: the unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000.

To Kimba,

You daft dog!

You were here for the start of this but not the finish.

Miss you boy.

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

DARK MOON SECRETS

Untrained, Tanjie must stand up to the wolves to protect the coven.

Chosen for a life she doesn't want, Tanjie has been thrown into a magical world she never knew existed. And she now has powers she needs to learn how to control.

Managing a store that is a cover for those who aren't human, she's the hope for the future.

Tanjie must learn quickly. Otherwise, her mistakes will cost her, her life.

Alaric has an immediate attraction to Tanjie, even though she is a witch, and the pack is going to attack the coven. He can't let his pack know about his bond forming with Tanjie, it's his secret—one, that if they find out, he knows will cost him not just his position but his life.

Can he keep vital information from the alpha and keep seeing Tanjie? Or will he lose everything he values because he's fallen in love with the wrong woman?

Wielding her untrained magic could destroy Tanjie, or maybe it will be her attraction to a wolf shifter.

CHAPTER 1



*J*anjie

THE CHILL in the air should've been a warning, even though it was summer and the temperature mild. Ahead, an unnaturally huge dog crossed in front of us. My skin prickled, and I shivered for a moment. Then the memory of the dog was gone.

"Someone walk over your grave?" asked my friend, Mia.

Our heels clicked on the pavement, echoing into the quiet night as we walked back to my apartment after a night out. I hadn't drunk too much not to pick up on the shiver and its meaning.

"Don't get her started on the spooky stuff," joked Caleb, who linked his arm with mine. "You'll ruin a good night out."

"No fear, it was nothing like that." It's better to forget about my past and easier to push caution aside. I wished I had drunk more shots, then I wouldn't even be thinking like this.

"Maybe you're finally regretting not taking up that guy's offer to go home with him," said Caleb. He looked down at me and winked, his eyes full of cheekiness.

I groaned as if in pain. "Would my dearest friends really have let me go home with a loser like that?"

"No way." Mia linked her arm with mine, sandwiching me between them.

Since losing my parents last year, Mia and Caleb have been my biggest supporters. They'd been driving back from the Blue Mountains when a truck hit their car, killing them instantly.

Ever since their deaths, it's been me against the world.

I wanted to choose my own life path and forget about the hippie shit my parents had tried to teach me. They had wanted me to live a very different life—one I didn't want.

My parents had been whispering about how I needed to be ready before I turned eighteen.

Then it was too late.

They were gone, along with whatever it was they needed to tell me.

I turned eighteen without them and got an admin job that paid well enough. My small inheritance from them meant I could afford to buy a small apartment. With no debts, a job, and solid friends, my life for all of nineteen years was great.

At least it was on the surface, and I wasn't about to dig any deeper.

Sometimes, you need to push shit down and get on with life, tell destiny to fuck the universe and all that hippie shit my parents had tried to teach me. I didn't need that stuff, knowing I could make my way as long as I had Mia and Caleb with me.

I didn't want to know what they had to tell me. It would only ruin my life anyway.

“What about you, Mia?” I asked as we stumbled down the street toward my apartment. “Wasn't there that super-hot chick you were eying off?”

“No, you're mistaken,” Mia argued. “I wasn't into her at all.”

“Yeah, right,” Caleb contradicted. “You couldn't stop staring at her.”

“I think we better go back next weekend, Caleb. Maybe by then, Mia will have the courage to speak to her.”

“She might not be there,” Mia answered, making sure she looked straight ahead and didn’t make eye contact with Caleb or me.

“She might be there,” Caleb teased. “Let’s have a vote about going back there next weekend.”

“Good idea,” I agreed. “Raise your hand if you want to go again next weekend.”

Caleb unlinked his arm with mine and raised it. Mia turned to me, wrestling to stop me from raising my hands. We burst out laughing, which made it hard for either of us to gain the upper hand. After much struggling, I managed to get my arm in the air.

“We’re going next weekend!” I shouted with joy.

“Not with me, you’re not.” Mia pretended to be a grump about our decision.

“Come on, you two,” Caleb called as he walked on ahead. “No need to vote. We’re going there next Saturday anyway.”

“Oh, really. And why is that?” I ran up to him, laughing as we turned and walked the length of the apartment building.

I instinctively noticed the lights in the windows to see who was awake on the ground level. I couldn’t help it. I liked to know whether or not my neighbors were at home.

“Because it’s time Mia got hooked up,” answered Caleb in a somewhat arrogant tone.

“It is not,” said Mia, catching up to us.

“I reckon there’s someone Caleb has his eye on at the club,” I baited. That was the most logical reason I could think of why he’d want to go back.

“Maybe I do.” Caleb spun around to face us, hands on his hips, looking smug.

“I knew it,” I whispered triumphantly, trying not to be too loud. I didn’t want to draw more attention to us for being out in the early morning hours.

“Who? The redhead? Or the blonde?” Mia asked.

“Not saying. You’ll just have to come along next weekend to find out.”

Mia huffed with frustration. “Fine, then.”

“And make the first move on the chick you have your eyes on, then I might reveal who has caught my attention.”

“That’s blackmail,” Mia snarled, looking a bit stormy at how Caleb manipulated her.

Caleb shook his head. “It will make for a fun night out and give us all something to look forward to while suffering through our boring jobs during the week.”

“Mine’s not that bad,” Mia challenged. She was training to be a veterinary technician.

“At least you get to cuddle animals all week while I’m stuck at a desk,” I spoke before pausing in front of apartment number thirteen.

The lights weren’t on, and that was unusual. The elderly lady, Maria, lived alone. She was an alternative person, and while I had rejected that part of my parents, Maria was the only person in the building I’d connected with.

At the beginning of each month, I’d bring down a pot roast to her apartment, and she’d bake a cake. We would talk during our meal, dissecting aspects of our lives, the weather, the loud neighbors we’d want to kick out of the place, and what we hoped for our future.

“Tell me... why did I choose to be an accountant?” Caleb shook his head.

“You love numbers way too much for an ordinary, sane person,” Mia stated while she walked with Caleb.

I was rooted to the spot and couldn’t move. A shiver shot through me again.

“Come on, Tanjie, you better get inside to warm up.” Caleb must have seen me shiver and called out as he waited by the door he’d pushed open that led to the stairs.

My apartment was on the second level of the older five-story building. It wasn't one of those modern places with only one entrance, sliding electric doors, and a key code to be able to use the elevator. The building had multiple entrances, and the bottom door was always unlocked.

I kept looking at the window, knowing Maria enjoyed sitting up late watching Netflix, especially if they involved mysteries.

Why wasn't her light on?

This building was built in the fifties and had the charm of the era. Concrete staircases were located at multiple points along the length of the building, and mine was at the end in the shadows.

I bought it because it wasn't only what I could afford, but I had also fallen in love with the rustic nature of the place—its simplicity. All I needed was a bedroom, a bathroom, and a kitchen to be comfortable. I didn't even need a car.

The small living area was large enough to squeeze air mattresses in for my besties to sleep on the floor after a night out. They still lived at home and preferred not to disturb their households by stumbling in late. That was how much I'd grown up in the last year or so after losing my parents—I was the only one of us out on their own.

Plus, the apartment was close to my work. In the trendy eastern suburbs of Sydney—Randwick, to be exact—I had the best of a few different areas where I could enjoy life. Pubs, clubs, beaches, and shops meant I could get out and enjoy myself with friends when I wasn't working.

Maria was a friend too. Even though when she started talking too much 'New Age' stuff, I'd call an end to our chats and leave. It reminded me of my parents too much and what I didn't want to know. One time, she'd even pulled out a pack of tarot cards.

There had been something she wanted to tell me, but I'd refused to hear her out. My gut twisted uncomfortably, thinking how I'd fobbed her off over the last few months.

Why hadn't I wanted to listen to her?

The chance of ever knowing seemed to slip away from me in a way I couldn't explain. An emptiness grew inside me, reminding me how I'd felt when I found out my parents were dead.

I rushed to the window and peered inside, cupping my hands to try and block out the beams from the safety lights systematically placed in the small garden that lined the path by the building.

It was dark inside, and I couldn't see a thing. That was odd. Why wasn't she watching her favorite television shows? Something had to have happened.

"Tanjie, I didn't know you were into spying on your neighbors," Caleb called out.

"Shh, everyone can hear you," Mia hissed. "Tanjie, come on. Let's get up to your apartment, then you can tell us what's bugging you."

I couldn't leave, not without seeing Maria first. I took out my phone, turned on the light, and tried to shine it through the window, hoping to see something.

Maybe Maria had fallen asleep, and the television had shut off on a timer. But that didn't explain the room's light not being on.

"I didn't take you as a peeping Tom type," Caleb spoke close to my ear.

"I think something's happened to Maria." I glanced at him.

"The old duck you keep chatting to that you've told us about? Nah, I'm sure she's gone to bed early."

My skin tingled. There was that warning again.

"Are you getting sick or something? You keep shivering." Caleb draped his arm around me, but the warmth of his body close to mine did nothing to stop my skin from prickling.

"Here, I'll help." Caleb switched on his phone's light and shone it into Maria's apartment.

That's why I loved these guys. They were there for me even when I wasn't making sense and doing odd things like peering through a window with concern because a light wasn't on.

Caleb angled his phone, and suddenly, I saw what I hoped I wouldn't.

Maria lay unmoving, face down on the floor.

CHAPTER 2



*T*anjie

MY HANDS SHOOK as I tried to remove my key chain from my clutch. I needed to get inside.

Maria had given me a key in case I needed to help her. It was as if she'd known that something like this would happen. I don't know, was this how elderly people thought?

I found the key, then, with trembling hands, unlocked the door and rushed inside.

"Maria?" I kneeled by her side, shaking her, hoping she'd wake.

I knew before I'd even touched her that she was gone.

I sobbed, sitting back on my knees and taking her hand. Oddly, I wished I could've been there when she passed so she wouldn't have been alone.

"Hey, come on, let's get outside," Mia spoke softly, resting her hands lightly on my shoulders.

I couldn't move. I stared at Maria, tears streaking down my cheeks. *Why did her death impact me so much?*

Then I thought of my parents. Suddenly, I missed them more than I ever had before.

"The ambulance is on its way," Caleb advised before putting away his phone.

“I don’t want to leave her alone.” Memories of my parents’ deaths filled my mind, but at least they had each other when the accident happened.

“You’re shaking.” Mia reached over, pulled a crochet throw from the sofa, and wrapped it around me.

I didn’t feel any warmer, but a calmness did wash over me. It was like how I felt after I chatted with Maria.

I was going to miss our monthly get-togethers. I couldn’t help thinking something more was happening here, but I didn’t know what.

“Hey, miss, let’s get you outside,” a young ambulance attendant spoke to me in such a way that I listened to him.

On my feet, my knees gave way, but Caleb caught me.

“Lean on me,” Caleb said gently while wrapping an arm around my waist.

I had no choice since my legs seemed to have lost all control. Caleb helped me outside, leaving the ambulance team to attend to Maria.

I sat on the edge of the raised brick garden bed, the blanket wrapped around me. Mia and Caleb sat on either side of me. I was sandwiched between two people I trusted while they wheeled out Maria’s body and into the ambulance.

“Miss, we’re taking your mom away,” said the ambulance attendant.

My throat constricted for a moment. Memories of being told when my parents had passed flooded my mind, blurring my vision. I’d been home alone when the police informed me of the accident.

“I’m sorry, it’s too much right now...”

The ambulance attendant placed a hand on my arm. “I understand.”

I inhaled slowly, using my breath to push the memories best forgotten away. “She’s not my mom,” I whispered hoarsely.

“Oh, next of kin?”

I shook my head. “A friend. I live upstairs.”

“A good friend. Do you know who we should contact to let them know what has happened?”

“She has no one.” She had no children. The man she married died in the Vietnam War. She’d been into New Age things after that, but I couldn’t say what since I’d always rushed away. How I wished I had stayed now.

“No one at all?”

Then I remembered Maria had told me about a brown A4 envelope in the top drawer of her bedside table I was to open if anything happened to her.

I had to do that for her now.

Maria had pleaded with me to do this for her.

And I had promised.

I got up, swaying slightly before Caleb and Mia helped to steady me on my feet.

“You should sit down,” Caleb spoke with concern.

“There’s a letter I have to get,” I insisted, pushing their hands away.

“What letter?” asked Mia.

Determined to complete my promise, I staggered inside. The place I enjoyed coming to once a month now felt foreign and no longer welcoming.

I paused where Maria had laid on the floor. It was almost like I could see her, a ghostly form on the brown carpet, an arm reaching out toward her bedroom as if she were indicating for the letter she wanted me to open.

Not wanting to stay longer than I had to, I hurried into the bedroom. The drawer caught, and I tugged at it, desperate to open it quickly.

“Fuck,” I whispered, panic rising quickly, urging me to get out.

Then the drawer jerked open—the force was more than was needed—coming loose, and it dropped to the floor, spilling out the contents.

“Fuck!” I’d messed up Maria’s normally neat home.

Then I saw the envelope with my name written in a large cursive script. My heart pounded, the sound echoing in my ears.

With shaky hands, I picked up the envelope.

Should I open it now? I thought.

Of course, silly, came the reply.

I gasped and turned, expecting to find Maria standing behind me. It was her voice I’d heard, but there was no one there, and I reminded myself she was gone.

Holding my breath, I tore open the envelope and slipped out a spiral-bound document. I had no idea what this was about. Maybe Maria wanted me to organize her funeral or something like that.

What I read wasn’t anything close to what I was expecting.

This was Maria’s will—a legal document.

Maria had left me a bookstore!

My hands gripped either side of the document as I read quickly, not believing what was written. *What the fuck would I do with a bookstore?*

I’d not read much after my parents’ deaths. There wasn’t time with full-time work and having fun with my friends as much as possible to forget the grief that ate away inside me.

There were also the many books my parents had tried to get me to read, all because there was something they wanted me to learn. I didn’t pay much attention to the titles of the books as I refused to read them. The entire experience put me off reading altogether.

I continued to glance through the document. There was no doubt that Maria had an eye for detail. I couldn’t help suspecting she was up to something. She’d voiced a few times

that I should go and study. My parents had made the same suggestion. I didn't want to study, so I ignored them all.

My chest tightened.

It wasn't as straightforward as inheriting a bookstore.

There were conditions.

Maria stated I had to run the store myself for a year, beginning within a week of her funeral. Then it was all mine. If I didn't want to keep the store, I could sell it, but I'd have to donate the money to a children's literacy charity.

There was no way I wanted to manage a bookstore.

What the hell was Maria thinking, making me do this?

I couldn't do it. I'd sell it and donate the money. I'd organize her funeral and then get on with my life.

You won't.

This time, I didn't look behind me. It was nothing more than my mind playing tricks after the shock of finding Maria dead on the floor.

I turned the document pages slowly, my eyes misting with the responsibility challenging me.

Maria had appointed me to look after her estate.

Fuck, I'd already done this for my parents. There was no way I could do it again, and not for a virtual stranger.

I noticed the name of the legal firm on the bottom of the page—Jones & Michaels. I'd contact them on Monday morning to see what needed to be done. Mainly for me not to have such a big responsibility.

No, you won't.

It was as if Maria was inside my head. Great, now I was going batty. I'd dealt with death too much already, and my mind was going bonkers with the strain of everything.

A hand on my shoulder caused me to jump, and I spun around, expecting to see a ghostly form of Maria ordering me to get on with what she wanted me to do.

I sighed, glad to find Mia standing behind me, her facial expression full of concern. I couldn't believe Maria was having such an influence on my life.

First, my parents and now her. I'd told destiny to get fucked, so why couldn't I choose for myself what I did with my life? I was trying to show I was a responsible adult, owned my apartment, and had a job.

That should be enough, right? I wasn't greedy or anything. Yet, it was like something inside me had changed instantly, and now I wasn't so sure.

"You found it," Mia exclaimed.

"Yeah." I sighed heavily.

Maria had outlined everything that needed to be done by *me*. I just had to follow through for the sake of Maria's wishes. While I didn't want to do this, at the same time, I felt rather odd at the thought of not doing what was asked of me. As if reading the document had bound me to her or something odd like that, I was compelled to, even if I didn't want to do it.

"What's wrong?" asked Mia.

I handed her the document, giving her a moment to read it. I put things back into the drawer, slipping them into the bedside table.

I got up, wondering where I'd find the strength to do this when the memories of what I went through with my parents constantly pushed to the center of my mind for attention. I also didn't want to live inland in the Blue Mountains, where the bookstore was located, for a year.

"This is a lot to take in," said Mia diplomatically.

"It's too much. I can't run a store," I grumbled.

I set a hand on my belly as it flip-flopped painfully.

Could I pay someone to run the store for me? The strange sensation gripped me again. A sort of force pushed at me as if trying to steer me out of here and to get on with what needed to be done.

I guess that was my answer, though when I took the papers back from Mia, I glanced and found the answer. There it was in a typed serif font that I wasn't permitted to have an assistant. It was clear *I* needed to be in the shop.

Maria, why are you doing this to me?

Disappointment weighed on my shoulders when there was no answer.

"I'm sure she had her reasons," Mia consoled.

"Fucked-up reasons." I shook my head, clutching the documents to my chest.

I should shred them and destroy the evidence that they even existed. Then I'd be free.

You'll never be free if you do.

Now, you answer me, I shot back before sending the thought rumbling harshly from my mind.

"You don't look good," Mia warned. "Come on... you need to go lay down."

Mia's voice sounded distant, and the entire incident caught up with me once again. I swayed, and she grabbed my arm to steady me.

Bile rose in my throat, and I swallowed hard, not allowing myself the embarrassment of vomiting here in Maria's well-kept home.

It's not her home anymore.

I didn't like the bitterness of that thought in my mind. And it was going to be me who had to sell it. I would've left the place empty if Maria hadn't stipulated specific times for me to organize things. Walking by her home every day and seeing someone else living here would be incredibly difficult.

"Did you even read the document?" I asked as Mia helped me back outside.

The cold air stung my face, sobering me up. I had to face the reality of what was going on around me.

“Quickly. You saw me... I skimmed it,” answered Mia, her arm firm around my waist to keep me steady.

“What am I going to do with a fucking bookstore?” I demanded to know. “I can’t leave here.”

I glanced back at the apartment, pain crushing my chest. What a reminder I would have every time I walked past in the future.

“Maybe Maria knew that,” Mia spoke softly.

“What do you mean?” It was getting harder to concentrate, my mind overloaded with emotions and conflicting thoughts.

“Going to run a bookstore will mean you won’t have to face the apartment and the constant reminder of her death. It’s a good thing for you.”

I frowned. This wasn’t the response I was expecting from my friend. Why was she siding with Maria?

“It is a good reason for you to go.”

“But it isn’t what I want.”

“Maybe not yet, but you have a year to work that out. How about I help you get to your apartment, and you can start by getting a good night’s sleep so your head is clearer before you make any decisions?”

I nodded. I didn’t have the energy to argue. Why did everyone want me to run a bookstore? It made no sense to me.

Give it time.

Maria’s voice was back in my head. I shivered.

“You’re in a bad way, miss. Let me make sure you’re all right.” The attendant stepped closer.

“I’m fine,” I mumbled. “I just need to sleep.”

“Good idea. Sit over here, and I’ll check your vitals first. Won’t take long,” he insisted.

I didn’t protest. My focus was on the bookstore and my future.

My mind was made up and couldn't be changed, no matter what.

There was no way I would manage a bookstore for one day, let alone one year.

CHAPTER 3



Alaric

THE PRESSURE WAS ON to get the bones of this house up before the end of the week. My muscles strained from the repeated labor of heaving long planks of wood above my head for the roof all afternoon.

It was past knockoff time, but we hadn't been told to stop. There were no union rules in the pack. No time for rest, and even if there was, I wouldn't. It would show I was weak, and I'd get hours of teasing from the others.

I slipped from having to hold the beam awkwardly, splinters slipping under the skin on my hands. I cringed inwardly. Tonight, I'd spend time trying to get them out like I had for the past three days.

"Steady, Alaric," called Raine, perched on an upper horizontal beam.

"Keep your eyes open, and you won't have a problem," I answered him gruffly.

"You nearly whacked me in the head," he grumbled, taking his fucking time to get a proper grip.

I'm sure his delay was deliberate—the bastard that he was. I would get him later when we were having our knockoff beers. That's if we were allowed to stop tonight.

"Don't be such a pussy."

“Concentrate,” growled the alpha, Rafe.

His sharp tone stopped any escalation of the banter between us. Sure, Raine and I were mates since pups, but the long hours on the building site were taking their toll on us and everyone else.

Rafe hovered close by to keep an eye on the quality of our work. He picked up any mistakes before they happened. It added to everyone’s stress. A building boom in Katoomba meant we had more than enough work and another house to build.

“It’s quality that gets us paid,” Rafe added.

I held the plank a few seconds longer to ensure Raine had it before I let go. The alpha might want quality, but he’d also given specific instructions to finish nailing the framework together before the dark moon had risen.

Even though we were no longer bound to change at the full moon, our pack was always conscious of the moon cycle, as if it were part of our blood and could never be ignored.

On automatic, I walked over to the pile of freshly cut planks, picked up another, and hauled it back to Raine. No one complained about the overtime. It was in the pack’s interest to keep working.

Since it was summer, the daylight hours were long, and we could keep working into the evening. The longer we worked, the more money the pack got.

My steel-capped boot hit something solid, and I stumbled forward to the side, the plank hindering me from regaining my balance.

“Fuck.”

I couldn’t afford to crash into any of the structures. I would be toast if I damaged it, even by accident.

The weight of the plank lightened, and I steadied. Tyr was ahead of me, holding the plank, keeping it from hitting anyone or anything.

“Thanks, Tyr,” I said. “I’ve got it from here.”

“No, you don’t,” said Rafe.

He always had a negative voice that had tormented me my entire life. I tilted my head to see the alpha approaching, a stormy glare on his face.

“I do,” I answered.

Fuck, I’ve gone and done it again. Not many answered back to Rafe like that. I always had and paid the price.

“You’re not pulling your weight,” said Rafe.

The entire vibe of the site chilled even though the day was warm. Sweat dribbled down my back from the work, but now my body shivered as if it had cooled down too quickly.

“I am so.”

Rafe came up close to me, glaring straight at me. This was when I should lower my eyes, but I didn’t. I held his golden gaze with my own.

I wasn’t afraid. I should be. He could rip me apart easily. But here I was, standing up to the alpha with no value to my life.

“You’re too busy roaming at night, out alone when you should be supporting your pack.”

“I’m not. I’m too tired from working all day.”

Why the fuck did I say that?

He knew I was out prowling for a woman to lose myself in and forget about the life I lived bound by stupid rules. These rules were not set out by the pack but by the witches who made sure we didn’t convert all of humanity into wolf shifters with a well-timed bite or scratch at the full moon.

Tempting as it sounded, it wasn’t what I would do, or would anyone in the pack. We weren’t a group of unruly animals. We were disciplined. Well, maybe not me for picking a verbal fight with Rafe.

Me and my big fucking mouth.

“Like hell you are. It’s not healthy when you shouldn’t be alone like that. You’re not part of the pack when you’re not with us.”

“I am with you.”

I didn’t like being repressed. It was time to change, not just for me but for the pack, but he never listened to me when I spoke up. When was he going to see this?

Rafe inched closer to me, his golden eyes ablaze with anger.

“You are. You’re the one meant to take over this pack when I’m gone. How will you do that when you don’t pull your weight?”

I caved. My eyes lowered with the respect I should’ve shown my alpha in the first place, but it went deeper than that. The blood we shared created a bond between us, even though we were at odds with each other most of the time.

The problem was I didn’t want to wait to be the next alpha. I wanted the power now, even if he gave me something like a beta position. But I didn’t say the words to him or anyone else.

We lived peacefully with humans, so why couldn’t we begin to relax some rules? Because the pack was sacred, and the bond that held us all together in our human and wolf forms had to be upheld no matter what.

That is what I struggled with—rules that no longer made sense.

“Alaric, answer me. How will you show that you are part of the pack and not looking out just for yourself?”

“I’ll work harder and forget about my evening outings.”

I kept my eyes low.

“Will you really do this?”

“I will, Dad.”

And that was the issue. I wouldn’t. I was restless for something more. I didn’t know what, and my wolf encouraged me.

“You better.” He leaned in closer to me so only I could hear. “Or when it’s time, the pack won’t follow you as the leader, and I bet you would regret how you’ve behaved. You need to think more about the future because your *needs* will end up haunting you.”

“I understand.”

I didn’t. Fuck, I was only twenty. And while Rafe was old, he would be around for at least another twenty years. It wasn’t like any wars were going on with the vampires. The witches had everything stitched up in harmony and order. How would I learn if I couldn’t have a position in the pack? I was just one of the plebs.

I don’t know why it didn’t sit well with me. I had plenty of time to go and have some fun, sow my seeds, play around, and do what young people should do. Then I could face up to the overwhelming responsibility of having the position of alpha—that was, of course, if I proved I could. Or the position of beta. What else was I meant to do while I was waiting?

But the question was, could I? When it came to that, could I prove to the others I was the one to follow?

My stomach churned with the meat pie I had for lunch.

“If you doubt, it will be your regret, not mine,” he snarled at me. “Pull your fucking head in before it’s too late.”

“I will, Dad,” my voice croaked.

Fuck, was I getting weak already? I had to pull it together. I had a reputation to keep intact centered around making my dad’s life as hard as he did mine. It was our unwritten code for each other.

“You better. I’ve got plans to test you.”

Rafe spat on the ground near me, then turned away before I could ask what fucking plans.

What did he have in store for me now? It was going to be painful, for sure.

“Knock off in five minutes.” He paused, looking around to engage all of us here. Most had gathered closer to hear our

argument.

“That’s if you get the beams up on the roof done.”

No one answered him. They didn’t have to. Instead, they got to work.

“Come on,” said Tyr, pulling the plank and nearly causing me to lose my balance.

That’s the way it should be. No one argued with the alpha. Everyone got on with the work, even when the requests were unreasonable.

Not wanting to be accused of not pulling my weight and holding back the pack, I got on with helping. Goddamn, these beams will get up in record time now.

Daylight fading fast was a struggle, and the beams were not up in five minutes. But Rafe sweetened the hard work by bringing out a case of draft beer.

Something was up. Dad never did anything like this, not unless he wanted something.

I sat on an upturned plastic crate, beer in hand, my T-shirt sticking to my back with sweat. Raine sat nearby on the dusty ground, still a bit dark with me, sipping his beer as if it would change his life.

“I reckon I’ll take the boat out on Saturday,” said Tyr, excited about the chance to go fishing.

“That’s if we get Saturday off,” I grumbled.

The beer cooled me down, the bitter, hoppy taste refueling me after a long day of hard labor. I finished the can and reached for another.

Maybe that’s why we were given beers. It was only Monday, and we were ahead of schedule, but it was never enough for Rafe. With more money, the pack was stronger. We all got it, and that was why we worked so hard for him.

I couldn’t help but wonder if I would ever get the respect from the pack to lead them. But it wasn’t like I’d get a chance

anytime soon, and more than that, how was I to learn when I was always in his shadows?

“He’ll give it to us. It’s too much otherwise, and he’d have a rebellion,” said Raine.

I shrugged my shoulders. I wasn’t so sure.

“I’ve heard whispers he’s been having more meetings with the pack’s elders,” said Tyr.

“Really?” I raised an eyebrow, interested to know more.

How had I not known that? Maybe Dad was right, and I’d been spending way too much time looking for women at night and the other pleasures that came with that.

“Yeah, but my old man won’t say much... says he’s taken an oath as an elder,” said Tyr.

“But he’s said something?”

“Something about the witches. It’s big, and it’s got him nervous and excited all at once,” he leaned forward, whispering so only I heard him.

“What do you think it could be?”

“I don’t know, but I reckon we’ll find out.”

I glanced around, noticing everyone on the worksite had gathered, drinking, chatting, and wiping sweat and dust from their faces. It had been a hell of a start to the workweek. Most of the pack was here on this site, the others coming in from other construction sites that were ongoing around Katoomba.

Rafe cracked open a beer, the sound silencing the chatter in the group.

“Good work today.” He looked around the group as they shuffled closer.

The elders moved to stand behind him. This was top-shelf serious.

“There’s been some rumors circulating,” he started. “Now, I don’t know what had exactly been said or made up, so I will tell it to you straight.”

Fuck, I'd been an idiot not to get on top of this. What can I say? Would it matter if I had? It wasn't like Dad trusted me.

“Too long the witches have constrained us and what we could do.”

A few mumbles of agreement echoed around the group.

“Our numbers are low. Inbreeding means we risk losing our pack, who we are... wolf shifters.”

Several members howled.

“We have the right to turn humans if we want.”

The energy of the pack intensified.

“We should be the ones to lead the pack and only us.”

I added my approval. So many times I'd told this to Dad. I never thought he'd been listening to me.

His eyes locked with mine, and my skin prickled. My inner wolf pushed to the surface, and it was hard not to let my animal loose.

“It is time to make a change and turn things around so we are the ones in charge, not the witches.”

Rafe raised his beer. “To the pack.”

I raised my beer, my eyes remaining locked with his.

“To the pack,” I responded with everyone else. Then we drank, sealing the start of a change.

Would I be ready to stand with the pack and do what my dad asked me?

CHAPTER 4



*T*anjie

THE COFFIN LOWERED into the ground, and I repressed a sob. The sun was high in the sky and did nothing to cheer me up. The solemnness of the funeral weighed heavily on my shoulders.

What was Maria thinking, leaving me a bookstore?

It wasn't as if being surrounded by books would get me to study. Why would she, like my parents, think I needed to study?

I'd finished high school. My grades weren't excellent, but they didn't need to be. I wanted to get out, make my own choices, and not be pushed down a path I neither liked nor wanted.

The coffin stopped.

"I invite you to say farewell to Maria," said Reverend Fields. Her words blurred in the soft breeze, barely audible to my grief-fogged mind.

I went forward, throwing the lily I held onto the coffin. It felt like my choice was inside the wooden box, resting in the soft material with Maria, both cold and dead.

"Goodbye," I whispered.

Regret squeezed tight around my chest. The 'if onlys' were building up. If I had taken the time to talk to her, I might know

why I had to manage the bookstore.

I turned away, seeing the dozen or so of Maria's alternative friends. I hadn't even known them. She'd mentioned no one.

Had I really even known Maria? Or had I shut her out, too scared to hear what she might say?

Maria had a list of who needed to be contacted, and Caleb and Mia helped to ring them during the last week of preparations for the funeral. It had been too much for me. I kept working as much as possible, actively looking for ways to distract myself.

Fortunately, Maria had everything organized, including Reverend Fields. I had no idea why Maria had chosen a more traditional and not alternative option. But it was what she'd wanted, and I upheld her wishes as instructed. I felt I had to. I also wanted to honor her, say farewell properly, and then get on with my life. Yet, this ball and chain was on my ankle, waiting for me to acknowledge it was there. It was weighing me down, stopping me from doing what I wanted.

"I'm Willow. I knew Maria when we went to uni."

The soft voice broke through my thoughts, dropping me back to reality. First things first, I had to get through the funeral.

A middle-aged woman looked at me, her eyes moist with unshed tears. Her black dreadlocks fell below her shoulders. She wore a summer dress of different materials patched together, which looked oddly fashionable.

"She went to uni?" I frowned. She never mentioned that.

"A private uni."

That made more sense.

"Luna wished she could come," added Willow.

"I don't know who Luna is."

I didn't even remember seeing Luna's name on the list of who to invite. Maybe she had been known by a different name.

“Well, if she could’ve been here, she would’ve. I contacted a few of our friends to come.”

That made more sense.

“Thanks. Maria would appreciate that.”

Who was this woman I was farewelling, so cut up to have lost in my life and was now fucking up my future?

I sobbed. Willow embraced me.

“You are strong,” she whispered.

Somehow, I didn’t think she was referring to my physical strength.

Before I could ask her what she meant, she waved her hands over me as if giving me some sort of hippie blessing or something. Then Willow stepped to the side, allowing the others to see me.

Why did they want to see me? It wasn’t like I was her daughter or anything.

A shiver eased through my body, prickling my skin. But this time, I didn’t feel as if it were a warning like the night a week ago when I found Maria dead.

Caleb moved to my side, wrapping his arm around my waist. I immediately felt his warmth counter the coldness growing inside me.

“Are you all right? We can go now if you like.” He squeezed me tightly to him.

I so wanted to say yes, let’s go. It was over. Maria had been buried, and now, I had to work out how to handle the bookstore situation.

But I couldn’t.

It was as if the people casually lining up to see me were there not for Maria but for me.

I trembled as if something I didn’t understand wrapped around me, something that came from within me.

“Tanjie?”

“I have to do this.”

I looked straight ahead, stiffening and finding inner strength for the first time. I had run away from my parents and Maria, and they both ended up dead. Maybe it was time I started to grow up.

Instead of running away, I would stay here and greet these people, ignoring the mystery of why they wanted to see me.

“I’m Tabitha, and you were lucky to get to know Maria.” An older woman stepped forward, taking my hand in hers. Her smile eased the building tension at the thought of meeting these people I knew nothing about.

“She spoke kindly of you,” said an elderly man, clearly Tabitha’s partner. “I’m George Parker, by the way, and I’ve been looking forward... well, I’ve said too much.”

Tabitha had poked her elbow into his ribs, stopping him from talking.

Whatever it was he was going to say spiked my curiosity. I was about to ask him to continue, but Tabitha whisked him away.

They walked away, arms linked, wandering along the line of graves back to the entrance.

Frustration burned through me. Here I was staying, not running away, and no one was being upfront.

This isn’t the time. Patience.

My heart squeezed hard at hearing Maria’s voice, and I leaned forward against the sensation. I thought she’d have left me now that she was buried. Shouldn’t that be what happens? Yet, her voice was just as straightforward as ever in my head.

I can’t do this, I thought back.

Don’t be weak. The answer brought tears, and I blinked to keep them from spilling.

“Dear, relax. We won’t hurt you. Maria will watch over you to be sure you know what to do,” said a younger woman.

A woman in her thirties rested her hand on my shoulder.

“Is she serious?” asked Caleb, softly leaning protectively toward me.

“It’s all right,” I answered, forcing myself to stand. “I just had a moment.”

“I’m glad you’re all right. I’m Pepper, and I’m sure we will see more of each other now.” Now what?

Of course, she was gone, and I was going to run after her, but another person came forward. All of them introduced themselves to me, their names rolling around in my head, etching into my memory.

Reverend Fields had asked me if I wanted to have an afternoon tea, but the thought of standing and talking to strangers made it easy to say no. It also wasn’t in Maria’s wishes for her funeral, but if I had, then maybe I would’ve had the chance to get some answers.

“Go rest,” added the last person. “I’m Petal, by the way, and I can see this entire event has left you wrung out. I had tried to tell them not to overwhelm you. Of course, they wouldn’t listen.”

I was going to say I’m not tired, but then exhaustion washed over me. I saw the woman a few years older than me, dressed in a summer dress with a thin, long shawl over her shoulders. She moved her hand deliberately, and the energy seemed to shimmer.

Fuck, now I was hallucinating.

“Rest is healing for you before your big trip to the Blue Mountains.”

What? How did she know? Did they all fucking know about the bookstore?

I went to move forward, but my legs wobbled, the strength draining from them. Caleb caught me.

“Now, I am taking you home, no matter what.”

I didn’t have the strength to argue. Mia came and helped, and they took me away from the grave. The questions conflicted in my head. What was I going to do? No matter how

much I resisted running the bookstore, part of me knew it was something I had to do. I shivered. I was now actually scared of what might become of me if I didn't.

CHAPTER 5



*T*anjie

RAIN PELTED THE WINDSHIELD, making it difficult to see the green sign showing me the turnoff to the township of Katoomba. My stomach was a mess, wobbling as if it was made of Jell-O.

What the fuck was I doing driving with my few belongings jammed-packed into the car on my way to the bookstore?

It had taken me the last few days to get the courage to get in the car. Now midweek, I was finally on my way to see what Maria had in mind for me by leaving me this unexpected inheritance.

Katoomba may be one of the gems of the Blue Mountains where so many Sydney-siders escaped the bustle of city life, but I wasn't entirely sure it was the place for me to continue my life, even if Maria had secretly thought it was.

I was no closer to finding out why that was the case either. Hours were spent with Mia and Caleb trying to figure out what her motivation might have been.

We couldn't agree on anything, and the discussions soon turned to debates or ridiculous suggestions in an attempt to lighten the mood. One thing we could all agree on was that there were bound to be secrets within the bookstore. I didn't tell the others, but I was determined to find out what they were.

Possible secrets filled my mind.

Maybe the bookstore had a secret treasure Maria had stolen on the black-market worth millions because she'd been a high-flying thief in her younger years. Those people at the funeral all had stakes in it.

Or maybe a Narnia-type wardrobe was there. Caleb said I wasn't to enter unless he was with me. *As if I'd wait for him to arrive.* He was so annoyed when I told him that.

Then, my favorite secret was that maybe there was a book about life and death that would give me powers beyond what my human mind could comprehend.

I was starting to miss my friends.

"It's only for a few weeks," I said aloud to reassure myself.

It will be for longer, and you know it.

That was another thing. Maria's voice hadn't left since her death, but I hadn't told anyone about how I heard her. I wasn't stupid. If I admitted hearing dead people speak, they'd ship me off to the doctor, and I'd be hospitalized in the mental ward or whatever they called it these days.

The easiest thing to do was to ignore it, get to the bookstore, and see for myself what it was like and how I would manage the damn place. There were small living quarters at the top of the store, and since I figured I'd be there for at least a week before coming back—at worst, two weeks—then I could treat it like a small holiday.

I'd taken some of the leave I'd built up at work which I had hoped to use for on an overseas holiday. I'd be back to square one when I returned to work in two weeks. The trip overseas would need to wait for another year, if not two, before I had enough time saved to travel and still have a job to return to.

I wasn't adventurous like some who quit their jobs and traveled. I was playing it safe and had to be responsible now that I was alone in the world with my parents gone. Since they'd been vocal about being on my chosen path, I was

determined to prove I had a choice and didn't have to settle for what the fates chose for me.

For the last two weeks since her death, I'd slipped between anger toward Maria for setting me on this path I didn't want, to tears for the generosity she'd shown me. I also missed her, especially when leaving or returning to my home and seeing her place empty.

It was a big reason why I was leaving now. The rest of the estate would be handled by the lawyers who drew up her will, at a huge expense, of course, but it meant I could get to the bookstore within the required week after Maria's funeral as the will had stated.

Mia and Caleb were going to come with me, but in the end, they had their jobs, and it was a long drive. Plus, by the time I packed the car, there wasn't any room for passengers.

The last few weeks had been busy, arranging Maria's funeral and beginning the huge task of going through the jobs she'd designated. Since she'd wisely given me a deadline to get to the bookstore, I'd decided I'd better go sooner rather than later. With no deadline, there would've been a real chance I'd have never gone to see it.

It was a good thing Maria had a car I could use. It was almost new, hardly used, even though it was about ten years old. I should sell it, but since I didn't have a car, and I had to run this fucking bookstore, I'd decided to keep the vehicle. I'd sell it when I got back from this side adventure. I didn't need one, living where I did, always close to public transportation.

My phone buzzed, connected to my iPod, causing my ears to vibrate. I pressed the touch screen on my phone, one eye on the road, and accepted the call from Mia.

"You there yet?" Her loud voice pounded in my ears.

"Nearly." I spied the green sign indicating I was getting close to Katoomba. The turnoff was approaching. I'd memorized the directions to get there since it wasn't a lot to commit to memory. Basically, I get on the highway out of

Sydney, drive for nearly two hours, then look for a sign for Katoomba. I just hadn't counted on it raining.

"You should be there by now. Are you driving too slow, or did you turn around and come back? That's more like it. You're hiding around the corner, aren't you?"

I had to smile. Mia had my best interests at heart, and she knew me well.

Like me.

Maria's voice chilled me.

Then show me that you do, I thought angrily.

My headspace would be much more peaceful without *her* voice ensuring I did what she wanted me to do. If only I could resist, but every time I tried, I'd feel as if a huge weight was on my shoulders, pushing me back to where I didn't want to go.

There was no answer, and like always, I was left wondering if I had really heard her.

"And tell me, Mia, what would I find in my apartment if I turned up? All your things, as if it were yours?" I laughed softly. Mia had wanted me to rent my place to her while I was gone. As if she thought I'd be gone longer than two weeks.

Mia gasped as if hurt by my words. "I'd never do that to you."

I turned the car, taking the exit from the highway. My stomach flopped, knowing I'd arrive at the bookstore soon.

My knuckles whitened as I gripped the steering wheel.

I could turn back now.

The pressure on my shoulders caused me to gasp.

No, I couldn't.

"Hey, are you all right? You should've waited until next weekend. Then, I could've come with you."

No. This was something I needed to do alone.

I'd already organized to meet with the woman currently running the shop, and I didn't want to cancel on her. It was such a bizarre situation. Why did Maria even own a shop if she wasn't there to manage it?

How did I not know this about her?

You didn't listen as well as you should have.

I swallowed hard to stop myself from yelling for Maria to get out of my head. Mia would definitely drag me to the doctor if she thought I was hearing Maria's voice.

"Tanjie?" Mia's voice broke through my thoughts.

"I'm concentrating on driving," I answered, not entirely a lie.

I slowed down to take the bends of the winding road carefully. Unfortunately, I was a bit out of practice driving since I didn't own a car.

"You must be nearly there by now," Mia's voice crackled in my ear as the phone reception weakened for a moment.

Mia's impatience began to send the butterflies fluttering in my belly completely out of control. It was bad enough having to deal with my nerves, let alone her excitement.

"Nearly," I said, turning into the main street of Katoomba.

It should be a bit farther down past the Chinese takeout and the secondhand shop. I'd looked up the area on the internet, and oddly, there hadn't been a clear image of the shop anywhere.

The internet hadn't been one of Maria's strong points, and while that was the most logical aspect, I couldn't help thinking it wasn't a coincidence. No matter how many searches I did online, I couldn't find any recent images of the bookstore.

"Hurry up," said Mia. "I want to know what it looks like."

"I'm sure it's going to be full of books," I answered while focusing on my driving.

Shops on either side of the road—a general store, pharmacy, optometrist, even a post office—meant there was

life here, even though it felt well away from the city's hustle. Cars were parked in front of the shops, and people casually strolled along the sidewalks.

Seeing life on the street after driving on the highway for nearly two hours was a good sign. I'd need people coming into the bookstore if I wanted to sell it for a bit of money and not be stuck trying to sell it for months on end.

"Yeah, yeah, you know what I mean," Mia chided.

The rain stopped, and I turned off the windshield wipers, making it easier to see. Finally, I spotted the Chinese takeout and slowed down.

The secondhand store was impressive. It had a wide frontage and heaps of wares outside, including old tables, a pedal sewing machine, wooden bookcases, and some outdated suitcases, which were now the in-thing to decorate your home.

The next shop would be the bookstore. I held my breath. Was it going to be a dump that I was stuck with and another burden in my life?

There wasn't a bookstore.

I frowned as I drove on.

"Well?" asked Mia.

"I missed it."

"How could you miss a bookstore?"

My thoughts exactly.

So I did a U-turn and went back. I wouldn't miss it a second time. To be sure I didn't, I parked in front of where the bookstore should have been.

I pulled out my phone and checked the address.

There was a big number six above the door.

This was it.

And it definitely wasn't a bookstore.

This had to be a fucking joke or something.

Maybe if I looked hard enough, I'd see that it really was a bookstore. No matter how much I stared at the front door with the brass six above it and the two grill-decorated windows on either side, there were no books to be seen.

A sign above one of the windows read 'The Enlightened Path.'

I supposed that's what books could lead to once read, but I was getting the feeling that wasn't what it meant. The lectures from my parents filled my head, and dread knotted in my stomach. Had what I'd been avoiding finally caught up with me?

CHAPTER 6



*T*anjie

“ANSWER ME!” screamed Mia, and I jumped. “What’s going on?”

“It’s not a bookstore,” I responded halfheartedly, still trying to let it all sink in.

Maybe Luna, who looked after the shop, had sold it without Maria knowing. Fuck, this was going to be a mess for me to sort out if she had.

“What the fuck are you saying?” Mia’s voice was loud, and I could imagine her working herself into a knot over this.

“I gotta go.”

“Like fuck you do. Don’t you dare hang up on me.”

“Bye.”

I hit the red button on my touch phone, and removed the iPods from my ears. Mia was going to panic and ring me every minute until I answered, but I couldn’t deal with her questions now.

I exited the car and headed to the storefront. It was clean but old in a sort of antique way. Nevertheless, it had an attractive charm, even if the wood was chipping along the edges of the window panels. Pewter statues of angels and dragons were arranged on a table, and beyond that, it was hard to see in the dark shop.

It was nearly midday, and the shop should have been open, yet the 'Closed' sign hung on the inside of the door. I had found out who Luna was after phoning during the week.

The mysterious Luna who couldn't make it to the funeral, and I had a feeling it was because she had to be here at the bookstore. She had said nothing about it not being a bookstore. I couldn't help feeling they were conspiring against me, though I couldn't work out for what reason.

Luna should be there as we arranged to meet. I hated it when people didn't stick to the plan, and my anxiety levels spiked.

Where the fuck was she?

Maybe this wasn't the right shop?

But there was no way I would turn on the phone and deal with Mia's calls.

Suddenly, the door opened, a shop bell chimed, and a middle-aged woman stood there, red hair tumbling down to her waist.

"You must be Tanjie. Come on in, just running a wee bit late this morning... had a spirit trying to contact me." Luna's Scottish accent was weak but clearly there.

My jaw dropped open. What was this woman smoking? *Spirit* contacting her?

"Oh, how rude of me. I'm Luna." She was a curvy woman, wearing a loose maxi dress with a tie-dye pattern.

I had been holding on to a sliver of hope that I had the address wrong, but knowing for sure this was Luna, my heart sank.

"I thought this was a bookstore," I blurted out. Hadn't I mentioned it on the phone? And why hadn't Luna corrected me?

"Maria had a plan for you, sweet one," Luna replied with a smile.

I was finding that out and didn't like it one bit.

“Come on in. I’ve already got the kettle on.” Luna waved me inside. “Tea will calm you down and clear your head.”

“I don’t usually drink tea,” I snapped as I followed her inside.

This was something I had always said to Maria each month. I had stuck with water since she never had coffee on hand.

“Oh, don’t worry, it’s herbal tea. You’ll like it.”

Luna walked toward the back of the shop, slipping behind a deep-red velvet curtain.

I hung behind, curious about what sort of shop this was. This wasn’t at all what I’d expected. There were actually some books to my left along the wall, but not too many, and they were all New Age books I didn’t want to read.

I heard the kettle boiling. It looked like I was also getting a cup of tea, whether I wanted one or not.

A bit like this bloody store.

Sets of oracle and tarot cards were arranged on shelves near the books. Glass cabinets displayed beautiful jewelry set with semi-precious stones on the other side of the room. Small wooden bowls showed off tumbled crystals in so many colors I’d never known existed. I couldn’t resist crossing the small space and touching them as I tried to process everything.

I’d been half-expecting the typical bookstore with rows of books and more books. Instead, I stood in a New Age store, sick to my stomach, knowing this was what I was to manage for the next year.

The decision was now easy. I would sell the shop as soon as I could. It was a good thing I’d only brought enough things for two weeks, then I planned to be back in my apartment, going out with Mia and Caleb, and moving on with my life.

Don’t you dare.

I shivered at the sound of Maria’s voice in my head. I was certain her voice would disappear by now, yet it was as loud as ever in the store.

“Here we go...” Luna gracefully slipped through the curtains, holding two steaming cups of tea.

“That stone will be great for you right now, you know. You’ve got great intuition, which will help you run the store.”

I looked down at the black stone in my hand that I’d picked up without thinking.

“What is this stone?”

“Apache Tears.” She placed the cups on a small round table covered in a cream-colored lace material off to one side of the shop near the crystals.

“Because?” I didn’t want to know the answer, but I asked anyway.

“Here...” She held out her hand. “I’ll set it for you so your emotions can settle with all the loss you’ve experienced.”

I placed the small black polished stone in her hand. “I’m coping fine.”

“You are, but...” She shook her head. “Your mom says I’m saying too much too soon, and I’ll scare you off.”

My eyes widened. “My mom?”

“Don’t worry, she wasn’t the spirit who’d been trying to contact me before, causing me to be late. She’s so impressed with you.” Luna took a locket from a stand and snapped the crystal inside.

“That doesn’t sound like my mom.”

“Well, then, you would know.” Luna handed back the necklace. “Put it on. It will help with all the emotions whirling around and help you to move past your grief.”

“But I’m doing that already.” I didn’t take the necklace.

“You are.” Luna smiled in such a way I felt calmer within myself, more than I had since Maria had passed, but even longer, more from when my parents had suddenly died.

“You’re the one who picked the stone intuitively. Go with it instead of resisting. You’ll find yourself much calmer.”

I sighed. What would it hurt to wear the necklace?

I took it from her and put it around my neck, falling just below my top's neckline.

"See, perfect. It hangs near your heart and will serve you well in the coming weeks as you adjust to running the store. Now, come over here, and let's have this cup of tea."

Luna didn't wait for my response, so I followed her and sat at the table.

"Go on, try it. It's a great tea for settling the stomach, and I added some honey." She took a sip. "Perfect."

I smelled the tea, and there was a hint of honey, but I couldn't bring myself to taste it. I put the cup back down.

"You've got so many questions about the shop. I can feel them bursting out from you and rattling around your aura." Luna took a deep breath. "Let me see... which one do you want answered first?"

This was too much for me. I didn't choose to run a shop like this. I'd rejected this path from my parents, so I wasn't about to walk on it because of Maria. It was my life, and I got to decide what I wanted to do.

"I'm selling the shop," I blurted out.

Luna raised her eyebrows. "Don't be so sure, sweetie."

A loud screech came from outside the shop, and then a bang like nothing I'd ever heard before caused me to jump, knocking over the tea.

I turned to the front of the shop and gasped, frozen on the spot. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I'd made a decision to leave, but in an instant, it was taken away from me.

An SUV had smashed into Maria's car.

CHAPTER 7



*T*anjie

CONCERN for the driver sent me rushing outside. Even though it had taken seconds for me to get there, bystanders were already with him, one on the phone calling an ambulance.

“Are you all right?” I asked, pushing my way to the driver.

I didn’t want anyone else to die around me, even if I didn’t know them. He was elderly, with thinning hair and wrinkling skin showing decades of experience.

My hand went to my mouth to cover a gasp. I knew this man. He was at the funeral. What was his name? Jim... no... James... Greg... that sounded better, but it wasn’t quite right.

“Stand back, please give George some space. I’ve called an ambulance,” said a young man, putting his phone back into his pocket.

That’s right, he was at Maria’s funeral with his wife, Tabitha. I couldn’t shake that maybe this hadn’t been an accident at all but a calculated act to get me to stay.

Well, goddammit, it could’ve worked as I glanced at the damage to Maria’s car. Fuck it all.

“I don’t need a bloody ambulance,” grumbled George, unbuckling his seat belt. “And that’s Mr. Parker to you.”

George’s hands shook uncontrollably, his flaky elderly skin pale. He tried to get out but fumbled unable to find the

strength to move.

“What’s going on?” George asked, looking around, trying to work out why he couldn’t get out of the car.

“Mr. Parker, you most definitely need an ambulance.”

“Young Adam, I do not,” he huffed, squaring his shoulders.

“I will call Mrs. Parker then.”

Mr. Parker blubbered something incoherent and shook his head.

“Ambulance then. Glad you saw reason,” said Adam.

“What is the person going to think about their car? Oh my god, what have I done?”

“Don’t worry, it’s my car, and I wasn’t in it,” I said quickly, hoping to reassure Mr. Parker.

“Oh, young miss, I’m terribly sorry. I will pay for the repairs. Just don’t tell the wife. She’s been on me to stop driving, and I don’t want this to be ammunition she can use against me.”

“I won’t tell her.”

Was he being a sly old man? I wouldn’t put it past him. If he was, he was putting on an award-winning performance, that’s for sure.

“Oh, thank you. Young Adam, get her details, sort it out for me, won’t you? I was good friends with... you know. Be a good lad.”

“I know. And I’m sure he’s looking down on you right now, wondering why on earth you’re still driving.”

Mr. Parker leaned back in the seat, hand on his heart. “Oh dear, oh dear.”

“Don’t worry. It will be all right one way or another,” I said.

Fuck, now I was buying into his act. Or maybe it was the real deal? No fucking way, this had to be part of a plan to

make me stay here. I nearly cursed Maria, but that was even going too far for me. I couldn't condemn the dead. That would only lead to more trouble, and I had more than enough to sort through now.

“Adam, you're right. Get her details...”

Adam turned to me. He was about ten years older than me with a neatly cared-for beard, and his clothes casual, neat, and fashionable. He was way too young to have lost his dad, but then there was my situation.

Why was I constantly reminded of what I had lost every time I tried to live? My parents might've annoyed the shit out of me at times, and I didn't want to do what they wanted, but fuck, I missed them.

“Seriously, he's good for his word. He'll have your car fixed,” said Adam. He ran his hand through his hair.

I nodded, believing him. I hadn't been in this rural town for long and was already getting to know the locals more than I had intended.

“Here, I'll take down your number.” He took out his phone. “You staying long?”

“I'll be here at this shop. I'm Tanjie, the new manager.” I nearly choked on the last word. I had no choice but to stay until the car was fixed. What could happen during this time scared me. What if I ended up wanting to stay?

Adam's eyes widened. “Sorry about such a rough welcome. We're a friendly lot around here, you know.”

“I'm sure you are.”

“I'll take you out to dinner to make up for it or maybe take you out on one of the trails through the mountains.”

Was he hitting on me, or was this simply country hospitality I always saw in the movies? I felt like a fly who had just landed on a spider's web, except instead of one spider, there were half a dozen, wanting me to stay put so I could be of use to them.

Either way, I needed the car fixed and swapped numbers with Adam. It took a while since Adam was distracted by Mr. Parker, who was in shock. I can't say this was ever how I thought I'd get a guy's number. He was easy to look at, and his caring nature was a bit of a turn-on.

Too bad I wasn't staying long enough to get to know him.

Too bad I could see through whatever these people's plan was. They would need to work harder than this if they wanted to trick me.

"I'll get my things from the car." I turned away, trying not to stare at the damage to the back of the car. How was I going to get my stuff out?

"Here, I'll help," said Adam.

Between us and a few swear words, we managed to shimmy my bags out of the car. Adam lined up the bags on the footpath, back out of the way. By now, most people had moved on, but some were helping keep an eye on Mr. Parker, who was starting to get angry and even more confused.

"Thanks," I said to Adam.

"No worries." He smiled, but I could sense his stress over the situation. It was an enormous burden for him to have to carry to sort out my car and keep an eye on Mr. Parker.

I was about to say not to worry when the ambulance pulled up behind the Land Cruiser.

"I'll be in touch," said Adam. He hurried to Mr. Parker's side while the ambulance parked behind them, flashing lights casting red shadows.

I hated to consider what Maria would think of the state of her well-kept car now. But then again, I couldn't help thinking she wouldn't care if it meant I stayed here at this shop.

The sound of the ambulance tore through the air, setting my skin prickling and my stomach tightening. So many memories I needed to forget. If only there were a spell for that or a potion.

The ambulance crew was now attending to Mr. Parker, Adam was helping, and some people were trying to work out what to do with the cars and if they could be towed away. I couldn't tear myself from the scene.

Was this how it happened with my parents? A lump formed in my throat, and I quickly pushed such thoughts away before I burst into tears.

The feeling I was being watched sent my skin prickling. I didn't know anyone here and wouldn't count Luna as someone I knew. Maybe I stood out as an out-of-towner, but the feeling was intense, and I couldn't shake it.

The sense was coming from my right, and I turned.

A shadow moved, someone moved quickly away, and the feeling of being watched was gone. Someone was watching me, and I wanted to know who it was.

Curious, I stepped in the direction where whoever it was had gone, but then yelling at the ambulance caused me to turn back.

"I do not need to get in the ambulance," yelled Mr. Parker.

I felt like I wanted to help. Adam was struggling to convince Mr. Parker to get in. I don't know what I thought I could do, but I wanted to help Mr. Parker ease the pain and fear dominating him.

But how could I do that? It wasn't as if he knew me.

Let them help you, Mr. Parker.

I pushed the thought from my mind and imagined it going to the old man, enveloped in peaceful energy to help him calm down and start to see reason.

"Let me go," shouted Mr. Parker, struggling against the two ambulance attendants trying to get him strapped onto the stretcher.

"We're helping you, sir," said one of them, ducking a punch from Mr. Parker.

"You are not."

As if my thoughts would have any impact.

Do as you're told, Mr. Parker, or I'm telling Tabitha. Stop being a stupid old fool.

This time, he looked up, his eyes locked with mine. I was a few feet away from him but knew he'd somehow heard me.

I mean it.

"Fine." He frowned and slumped back on the stretcher with a dramatic huff.

My breath caught. Was he doing this because of me? Had I just cracked open whatever their plan was and forced him to continue with it?

But there was no way he could've heard me. I hadn't spoken aloud. It had only been a thought in my head with firm intent behind it, but it wasn't like I had powers that could get him to hear my thoughts. I thought I might have telepathic abilities for a fleeting moment, but that was so stupidly funny.

"Why don't you come inside, love," said Luna, placing her arm around my shoulder.

I automatically pulled away from her, but she held me tight as if it was another sign I was staying here whether I wanted to or not. It was clear that while I tried to take control of my life and walk my own path, the universe had other ideas. There was no way I'd be driving out of here.

Mr. Parker was finally in the ambulance, and it was driving away, and as if right on time, a tow truck arrived. Adam greeted the driver, and they shook their heads, looking at the two vehicles.

Was Adam in on this too? I don't know. The longer I was here, barely an hour, the more I thought I couldn't trust the locals.

The sight of the smashed vehicles put me on edge. Nightmares of the past shifted to the surface, and I struggled to process anything. How was I meant to manage a shop that stood for nothing I believed in?

There was nowhere for me to run. I had to stay. I did not like being forced into something I didn't want.

I stood numb, unbelieving at what had happened.

I shook my head, watching Maria's car being towed away. It was in pretty bad shape. The tow truck driver thought it could be fixed, but I hated to think how much it would cost.

I'd set up my life so I didn't have to drive and have the expense of a car. Even though the accident wasn't my fault, I felt I'd let Maria down.

With my luggage by my feet, I contemplated catching a bus home, but now I was more fearful of what might be in store for me next. *Maybe getting run over?* It sounded ridiculous, but I still couldn't believe Maria's car had been hit, taking away my escape from this place.

I didn't belong here and definitely not in a shop full of crystals, tarot, and everything New Age. A bookstore I might have been able to handle, but this was what I'd been avoiding.

"Stop resisting, sweetie." Luna squeezed my shoulder. "There are things here for you to learn. Maria knew that. Let her help you from beyond the grave."

Could I stop resisting? I didn't think so.

Yes, you can.

Thanks, Maria. My thought was sarcastic, but it was followed up with a completely different one. I could really do without Maria's voice in my head. What if I looked after this store? Would that stop the weird thoughts? Had the accident been planned? Why are you trying to set me up with Adam?

I believed the latter as he so wasn't my type. I was simply caught up in the moment of the accident and his caring nature. Now that I was settling down, I was more grounded and more myself.

I was desperate enough to give staying here a go. The rain started up again, the gloominess of the day matching my mood perfectly. Fuck knows what would happen to me if I tried to

leave. I wouldn't put it past them to organize me to be run over by a truck.

CHAPTER 8



*T*anjie

WITH A DEEP BREATH, I turned to Luna. “Let’s get this over with. Show me where I’ll be staying.” I picked up a suitcase and backpack and walked into the shop.

“Oh, you’ll love the room upstairs.” Luna carried the other suitcase into the shop and shuffled ahead of me.

“This way... mind your head going up this bit.” Luna ducked hers under the low doorway that led upstairs.

It was a struggle getting my heavy suitcase, which had become my life, up the stairs.

This had better be worth it.

The first level was an open living space. A part of my soul soared with joy at the sight. It was cozy and nothing like I’d been expecting. It was the complete opposite of my modernized city apartment.

A queen-size bed was off to the right, covered with a handmade quilt, a knitted throw on top, and too many pillows. Oval rugs on the floor made from scrap material added to the eclectic feel of the space.

On the other side of the room was a kitchenette which would be more than enough to make the simple meals I preferred. In between was a big couch facing a potbelly stove with a basket of wood nearby.

For a moment, I saw myself sitting on the couch, curled up under a throw, reading a book, and snuggling into a man. My pulse increased, and the image in my mind's eye faded as quickly as it came.

"You'll fit in here, no worries." Luna placed my suitcase on the floor by the couch.

"Did you stay up here? I don't want to put you out."

"Oh no, not at all. It was time for me to move out, and I've found myself the place I need for my next chapter in life."

I frowned, wondering what exactly she meant.

Luna giggled. "I've moved in with my man."

"Well, that sounds like a good reason to leave this wonderful space."

"One made in part because of you."

"You mean because of Maria," I corrected. I dumped my suitcase on the wooden floor by the bed.

"Because of your parents, really... if you want to get technical."

"What?" My pulse increased, and I spun around to look at Luna.

Her eyes widened. "Oh, I didn't mean to say that much."

"But you did. What's going on?"

Luna's jovial vibe became more solemn. "Your parents are caring for you, and so is Maria, but all of that will need to wait because you've got bigger things to deal with."

"Not good enough." I folded my arms over my chest and glared at her.

I wanted answers.

And I wanted them now.

"Well, first of all, the dark moon is this Saturday night, and that's all you need to focus on right now." Luna was speaking in riddles.

“Luna, you need to speak plainly to me. What’s so important about a dark moon?”

“It’s a transitional time, and this one will be your first true one as such...” Luna frowned. “It’s a day of interruptions.”

“What now? Another spirit?” It wasn’t going to be easy to run the shop with Luna like this. I was used to logical people, the hustle of a big city, not the spiritual, free-choice types. For the record, I wasn’t going through any sort of transitional time.

“You better go down and meet your first customer.”

My jaw dropped. Luna couldn’t be serious. How would she know someone was coming to the shop?

I shook my head. “I can’t meet any customers, and there’s no way I can run a shop when I know nothing about...” I waved my hands around incredulously, “... all of this stuff. In fact, I don’t even believe in it.”

You will.

“Maria, get out of my head.”

“You can hear her?” Luna’s eyes widened. “That’s good because she’ll help you, and you’ll need a lot of help.”

“I’m going to end up in a madhouse at this rate.” I rubbed my temples, feeling a headache coming on. How could Luna think it was all right to hear Maria in my head?

“No, you’re not. You’ve got lots of spirits supporting you, and they’ll get you on the path you’re meant to be on.”

“I’m happy with my life. I don’t need to change.”

“You don’t know your full potential.” A seriousness reflected in her eyes at that moment.

The shop bell clanged.

“Oh, your first customer is here.” She stepped forward, hands on my shoulders, and almost pushed me down the stairs.

“All right, all right, I’m going.” I was stunned her prediction had been correct. “Do you know who it is?”

“No idea. I just knew someone was coming.” She followed me down the stairs. “Now, I’ll be back here making tea... we’ll need it to get through the day. You’ll be fine on your own.”

Luna made shooing motions at me with her hands.

I took a deep breath. Maybe this was a test. If things went well with the first customer, maybe I’d have a better idea if staying here for the next year was something I really could do.

Determined to send the customer on their way, I pushed through the velvet curtain. I needed time to work out what I was going to do, and for that to happen, I wanted to be alone.

A man stood with his back to me, perusing the incense rack. At first glance, he didn’t seem to be the sort of guy you’d expect to see in a shop like this, but I couldn’t seem to take my eyes off him.

He wore tan work pants paired with a tight black top. I admired his broad shoulders, large biceps, tight waist, and an ass I could stare at for hours. He had a tough vibe about him, unlike the city vibe of leather jackets, piercings, and tattoos I was accustomed to. His vibe was more earthy, rugged, and dirty from a hard day’s work, and a grounded air of confidence surrounded him.

I shuffled quietly over to stand behind the glass counter where the cash register and a few trinkets sat. My eyes stayed firmly on him, wondering if he knew I was there and if I should say something. I didn’t want to speak for fear it would break the secret moment I had, seeing this hot guy for the first time.

An itch on the back of my calf muscle started to annoy me. I moved to scratch it, trying to be quick, but in doing so, I bumped the side of the counter hard enough to cause the trinkets to rattle.

After staring at this stranger for long enough, I had to say something now. I vaguely remembered I was meant to be the one in charge of this shop.

“Can I help you?” I asked.

My mind raced with sexy thoughts of how *I* could help *him*. I quickly shut them down. I didn't know who he was. *Fuck, he might not even be single.*

He turned, and his eyes locked with mine for a moment. My heart raced as I stared into the sparkling dark pools. My mind exploded with lustful things I could do with him, and heat rushed to my cheeks.

I never knew I could lose control of myself so quickly and easily by simply meeting a stranger for the first time.

"I need some more incense." He held up a packet of incense from the display. "White sage."

I had no idea why anyone would want white sage. What was it for? What was it supposed to do? How the fuck was I going to fake this? I couldn't run this shop without looking like a fool.

"Good choice," I attempted to say confidently while nervously wiping my sweaty hands down the sides of my jeans.

"You're new here? Summer job?" The man approached.

He was about my age, maybe a bit older, and I found it a little insulting he'd even consider I was a student and this was a summer job.

"I'm the boss lady." I thrust out my chin. "Tanjie."

"Oh..." He raised an eyebrow. "I like a boss lady."

Was he flirting with me? Heat rose to my cheeks, and I tried not to show I was flustered.

He placed the box of incense on the counter, and I looked at it like it was some kind of alien. I had no idea what to do with the box or even how much it cost. During high school, I didn't have a typical part-time job in retail. I'd worked at the local veterinary office for a bit, then took the safe option of a desk job, pushing a pen around and clicking on a keyboard.

"What are you doing here, Alaric?" Luna asked as she pushed through the velvet curtain. Her tone was stern and put me on alert.

“You know how I’m attracted to new smells.” Alaric turned his lustful gaze on me, and it was like a thousand butterflies took flight in my belly.

“Should I give you a warning, Alaric?” Luna moved to stand next to me, a protective air about her.

“Hey, I’m free to come here and buy what I need. You cater to many different types in this shop, so what’s changed?” Alaric challenged before taking out his credit card.

Luna frowned as she processed the sale and scanned his card. “Of course, but I suggest you don’t go liking any new scents around here…” Luna glared at the man. “I’m sure you get my meaning.”

“Free world, isn’t it? Or would you prefer to put me in chains?”

His attitude spiked my interest in him even more. I suspected he might be a bit of a bad boy—maybe things would be more interesting around here than I thought.

Maybe, but only time would tell.

It would be much better than going out each Saturday night with Mia and Caleb, which hadn’t resulted in any action for me in a long time. But then, looking for a sexy time or even something more serious hadn’t been easy, with the heaviness of grief weighing me down.

“Wouldn’t dream of putting you in chains.” Luna handed him the incense. Then she mouthed something to him and caused him to smirk.

Fuck, he was sexy.

There were a few things I’m sure we could do together that involved chains.

To the very depths of my core, I knew I had to get to know this man.

“See you around soon, I hope,” I blurted out like a lovestruck teenager.

“I’ll be back to check on you, boss lady.” He winked, spun on his heel, and left.

I sensed this could be the turning point I needed in my life.

Maybe being here at the store, even though it wasn’t what I’d expected or wanted, might be just where I needed to be.

CHAPTER 9



*T*anjie

“YOU KEEP AWAY FROM THAT BOY.” Luna’s tone was one of warning.

My heart was beginning to warm to this place even though I didn’t want it to. There could be good reasons for me to stay, starting with getting to know Alaric. Then who knew what else might happen?

Who would’ve thought there was more potential in this opportunity Maria had given me than I’d first realized? I’d completely forgotten about Adam and his caring nature. Alaric screamed fuck me now, and the allure of danger that oozed from him was reeling me in.

Luna shook her head as the bells in the shop clanged with Alaric’s exit.

“Why, he seemed nice enough?” I wanted to add ‘*for a bad boy,*’ but I didn’t want to annoy Luna further. There was obviously something between the two, something I didn’t understand.

“You’ve got a lot to learn and not a lot of time.”

Clearly, Luna wouldn’t elaborate on why I should keep away from Alaric. I’d let it all slide for now. There were too many questions building up I needed answers to, but if Alaric came with a warning that I should keep away, then I was sure as hell going to ignore it.

“You’re telling me.” I rolled my eyes. “I wouldn’t have a clue how to ring up a sale or how much things in here cost.”

“We better start with the basics then.” Luna’s facial expression and body relaxed.

“Let me guess... this place doesn’t earn enough to employ two people?” I didn’t mean for my comment to sound harsh. I mean, since I’d been here, Luna had opened up late, and there had only been one customer. Not exactly a thriving business, it appeared.

“It does better than you think. And I’m sure with your unique touch, it will be even better.” Luna smiled warmly. She seemed the sort of person who was cheerful most of the time.

“Considering I know fuck all right now, I don’t think so.” That was me being—insert sarcasm—positive. “It would be better to sell now and save us all any future stress.”

“You can’t do that,” Luna snapped.

“Here we go again. If it’s not Maria’s voice, then it’s you telling me I can’t sell this place.”

“Because there are lots of things you don’t know. One of them is how many people rely on this shop, like myself.” Luna moved away from the counter, and I followed her to the back room, where she put the kettle on once more.

Luna and her damn tea were going to drive me nuts. Give me a strong coffee any day.

“You won’t be here anymore, I will be.” I clenched my jaw to stop myself from adding *I’d happily change places with her*.

“But, sweetie, I will be.” Luna took clean cups from the cupboard under the small sink, then tipped out the old leaves from the pot.

“You will?”

“I’ll check in on you every day.” She ran her finger over the row of tea canisters on the shelf above the sink. “Let’s try something that will clear the mind... a bit of peppermint would do nicely.”

“I’m more of a coffee drinker.” I thought about how much I could do with a coffee right now.

“I won’t hold that against you.” She giggled, spooning some of the tea leaves into a pot. “I’m clairvoyant, and I also read tarot cards. People can book in to see me here on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons and, on occasions, Saturday mornings.”

“People really believe in that mumbo-jumbo shit?” I never had time for any of that rubbish.

“Yes, and you will too. Give it time.”

“Doubt it.” I wasn’t trying to be negative, but this was one point no one would shift me on. “I’ve never even had a tarot card reading before.”

“Never?” She poured the boiling water into the pot. “How about we change that over a cup of tea?”

I rolled my eyes. “Only if you tell me why Maria left this place to me and how you seem to know my parents.”

Luna sighed heavily. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Then how about I get myself a coffee, and you can run the place? And if I’m feeling charitable, I might let you run it for a bit and not sell it.” I hated the idea of looking at the bookkeeping notes for this shop—it had to be running in the red.

More than that, I’d had enough of being kept in the dark. If Luna wasn’t going to tell me, and there was a chance of things worsening for me, I would put my foot down. Fate, or whatever the fuck was at play here, could start shedding some light on what this special path I was meant to be on was all about.

I waited for Luna to begin telling me about this secret plan I was caught up in, but her mouth remained firmly closed, and a dark expression creased her face.

“I can’t. Not yet. Not before the dark moon—”

“Why is the dark moon so important?”

“It’s your...” Luna sighed heavily and shook her head. “There’s a strict procedure for handling this situation, and I’m bound by the guidelines and processes.”

“By who? What fucking hold can they have on you that you can’t be decent and tell me?” I was close to yelling as anger burned through me. This had gone on long enough. Destiny, fate, the universe, or whoever was pulling the strings in this situation could fuck off.

“I’m bound,” she whispered, sadness in her eyes.

“I’m not.” Not wanting to hear any more from Luna, I stormed from the shop.

And I wasn’t sure I could bring myself ever to go back.

CHAPTER 10



*A*laric

FUCK, she smelled great. More than that, her scent lingered in the air, and I inhaled deeper, savoring the sweet pheromones she was giving off.

Fuck, I wanted her.

But it was forbidden.

And I was already in a hell of a lot of trouble.

Like, I gave a fuck about that, but things were changing. I had to be careful not to disrupt the balance between Rafe and me.

“Al, you coming?” asked Tyr, tilting his head down the street toward the pub.

The pack was going there for a late lunch. The construction site was too wet anyway, and Rafe called it a day. He then tempted us all with a pub meal and a chance to discuss what we would do. The pack was on edge with excitement to change the order of life for us, and the witches motivated everyone to go and hear more.

We were going to take over the witches. The plans were forming as fast as the local gossip spread. No longer would we be oppressed by them. We would be free to turn others into our kind if we wanted.

Then I smelled her again.

Oh God, she was making me hard.

I had to check her out.

I couldn't help it. Something about her scent drew me to her—sweet and musky, in full bloom with a hint of edginess and power that matched my desires. She was ripe, and I was ready to take her.

And, of course, there was that detail I shouldn't do this. Not when there was a chance I would be fighting against her.

I didn't think it would bother me.

This was probably the main reason my cock was getting hard at the mere smell of a bitch in heat, one I'd not even met.

I kept my nightly roamings discreet from the pack, so why couldn't I with her?

Get in, have my fun, get out. So what if we wolves were going to have the fight of our lives? It wouldn't affect me. It never did.

"Al? You'll miss out on hearing... stuff," said Tyr, stumbling over his words to stop himself from blurting out what we needed to keep secret.

"I gotta get something. Go ahead, I'll catch up."

"What?"

"About a thing."

I turned away quickly before there were more questions. I didn't want to draw more attention to myself. They would go to the pub, eat, have a few beers, and then I would slip in, and they wouldn't care.

I couldn't come up with an excuse quickly enough. I had to go find her. The thought of losing her scent tore at me. I was a good tracker. I shouldn't lose her, but the irrational fear that I would never get to see her drove me to hurry toward the source.

I hurried down the main street, the scent becoming stronger. People were gathering ahead, and I knew she had to be there.

Hopefully, she was all right. The worry about her well-being confused me. This wasn't like me.

She stood in the street in the center of the commotion, looking confused and alarmed. The idiots, George and Adam, were there. Those witches were up to something, but for now, they weren't my focus. She was. Now that I saw her, I only wanted her more.

Instinctively, I kept my distance. I wasn't ready for introductions. While my body wanted her now, I showed caution. I wasn't a complete fool. There were too many people, and it wasn't my style to be so open about my pursuits.

Lousy luck with the car.

I wanted her to stay longer when I saw her and matched her with the scent I was quickly addicted to.

But good for me, as it would take a few weeks at best to fix her car. Maybe longer if I had a word with Jordan at the local garage where the car would end up. That could mean she would have to hang around.

Fuck, I hoped so, and I had to hold my breath for a moment as I realized what I was contemplating. This wasn't like me. Was her scent poisoned or something? I was losing my mind over this woman I hadn't spoken to.

Her curvy body, tight jeans, loose top, and low-cut neckline teased the likes of me. Her hair was long and wavy, tumbling past her shoulders in a frantic mess that begged to be tamed. The edge about her screamed she was from the city—the clueless look about her as she saw her car and the accident.

I had edged closer, wanting more of her and forgetting about myself. At least I had to cover for being an annoying bystander, but I was slow to leave.

She almost saw me. Pretty sure she didn't.

I should've left right there and then. Of course, I couldn't do that. Her scent drew me back to her. It was like an addictive drug, and I hadn't had my fix.

Keeping a safe distance, I watched her, wanting to know where she was going and find out where she was staying so I could find her at a more appropriate time. My mind was already planning how I could accidentally bump into her tonight. This was my skill set—watching, waiting, and then pouncing on my prey.

Then I saw her go into the shop, and my heart sank.

She was a fucking witch.

Does it matter?

Apparently not to my cock because I went in after her, and I now have a wad of white sage to prove it.

Damn, Luna was on to me. She's got it coming to her, along with the other witches.

I wasn't thinking clearly. I should go to the pub, be with the pack, and center myself.

But I couldn't leave her.

I had to know more about her.

Instead, I lingered outside, across the road, waiting, hoping that she would soon leave and I would have a proper chance to talk to her. The sooner that could happen, the sooner I could get on and have fun with her.

I ditched the white sage in the bin—didn't need that shit, but perhaps I did. It might've helped to clear my mind before I took things too far. For me. For her. I knew the stakes, and I didn't stop. Fuck, I didn't want to. Would it mean my actions would put our lives in danger?

One thing was sure—I was going to answer the question myself.

I kept the shop window in my line of sight, pretending to be on my phone, nodding occasionally and mumbling yes. It seemed she didn't know her power as a witch, if she did then she would've known who I was, the enemy. That gave me hope. If that were the case, she wouldn't know about my kind and that we were forbidden to mate, let alone have adult fun together.

“Hey, Al, come over and give me a hand.”

I looked up sharply, wondering if my cover had been blown.

Jordan waved frantically at me.

That was lucky.

“Damn thing won’t go on,” said Jordan. “Help me.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“George Parker happened.”

“He’s still allowed to drive?”

“Apparently.”

Jordan pulled a thick chain tight, straining on it, trying to get it closer to the car.

“I just need another inch. Adam isn’t strong enough.”

“No shit. I wouldn’t imagine he would be,” I answered, glaring at Adam, who stared darkly at us. It was never a good sign when a witch thought he should watch over us.

“Come on, before it starts raining again,” said Jordan, heaving on the chain.

I grabbed the chain, cold and wet, and pulled. My hands burned in the cold and the strain, even though I was used to hard physical labor. The end of the chain came closer to the tow hook at the back of the car, but not enough to hook it on.

“You have to get the car closer,” I said.

“Fuck it.” Jordan shook his head.

I looked at the car. It was pretty smashed up.

“George did a good job,” I said.

“Push the car back... that might work,” said Jordan.

“Adam, give us a hand instead of standing there,” I called out. I stopped short, asking him to use his magic to help us. I knew what his answer would be—against the rules.

“You’ll be fine,” the tosser answered.

“Don’t be a pussy and come help,” I growled. The war on the lazy-assed witches wasn’t coming a moment too soon.

I don’t know why Adam was hanging around. George had been taken away in the ambulance already. And the Land Rover he’d been driving was already on the long truck.

“I’m making sure her car gets where it needs to go,” he said, coming closer.

I knew who she was, and I didn’t like Adam referring to her with the tone he did. Not that there would be any competition, but if they were both witches, it wouldn’t end well for me, and I couldn’t let that happen.

“Ready?” called out Jordan.

Adam quickly put his hands on the bonnet and mirror on the other side of me.

“Yeah,” he called out.

I grunted, using the pack connection to communicate with Jordan.

We all heaved together, the car moved just enough, and the chain attached with a clunk.

“Done. I’ll winch the car up, then I’m done.”

“You be careful, Jordan,” warned Adam.

“You’re more than welcome to do it for me if you think you can do a better job.”

Jordan glared back, then moved under the cover of the street veranda as the rain started again.

“Thought so,” mumbled Jordan, only I hearing.

Being closer to the shop was messing with my head. Her scent was stronger. Now that the car was winched onto the back of the tow truck, I could indulge her scent in the air, enhanced by the falling rain, moist and delightful, tickling my nose and stirring my desires.

“Keep away from her,” warned Adam.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said, squaring my shoulders back. His comment only motivated me to want her more.

I helped Jordan finish securing the smashed-up car on his truck and the Land Cruiser, then told him I’d meet him at the pub.

I didn’t have a reason to stay. I couldn’t hang here with Adam staring me down. I began walking to the pub, taking my time, hoping something would happen to change things around.

A slamming noise caused me to spin around.

I saw her hurrying away from the shop, anger burning the air around her. I followed her. This was my chance to see what potential was between us.

CHAPTER 11



*T*anjie

WHOEVER WAS TRYING to force me to remain in this situation could bring down hellfire, plagues of locusts, or whatever the fuck they wanted. I wasn't going to put up with hearing about processes being followed while not being told what I had a right to know.

How the fuck could Luna stand there and justify not telling me? What was it she was trying to hide from me?

I'd find out eventually, so it made no sense. If I wasn't ready to hear it, why even bother forcing me to be here?

Would my head really spin like in some horror movie if I heard too much at once? I didn't think so.

I was made of strong blood and bones, and over the last year, I'd grown beyond my youth to learn so much about life and death. And, of course, myself.

I had to get out, get some fresh air, and a good cup of coffee. That would help to clear my head, and then I could think of what to do next. *Maybe I'd go to the nearest real estate agent and get a 'For Sale' sign up at the front of the shop.* The thought was tempting.

The sight of Maria's car came to mind, and I felt that if I didn't do what I was told, then disaster might happen to me next.

The mountain air felt refreshing as I walked down the street. I spied a sign up ahead—*Café Nuts*—and could already taste the bitter coffee in my mouth.

The aroma of strong coffee greeted me with a welcome that made me smile. There was a range of raw organic treats and pastries in the display cabinet. I could tell this café would become my favorite place if I stayed.

“You’re new around here, staying long?” questioned the woman behind the counter, arms full of tattoos and hair in long, well-kept dreads.

I swallowed hard. “I’ll see. I’m the new owner of The Enlightened Path.”

“Let me guess... you’re a witch like the rest of those associated with the store?”

“No, I’m as ordinary and boring as they come.” My mind raced from the accusation. *Witch?* That was a bit of a jump. I was under the impression there wasn’t any such thing, at least not in the movie sort of sense, where they could actually wield magic.

“Shame,” shrugged the woman. “You do tarot? I’m due for a reading.”

“No.” I shook my head.

“You must have something else you do. Reiki, maybe?”

“Um... you’ll have to wait and see.” She had me feeling like a fake, running a store where I didn’t believe in the products I was trying to sell. Wait a minute, I was a fucking fake. Another reason not to stay, but right now, I was too scared to leave and pretty sure I’d be run over by a truck if I tried. I might not want to run the store, but I didn’t want to end up dead.

“Oh, I can’t wait to find out.”

Me either. I swallowed hard.

“I’m Jessi. I’m sure you’ll be a regular here like I’ll be in your shop.”

“I’m sure.” I smiled, but I was pretty sure it looked strained and far from friendly. I could do with a friend or two in this town *if* I were staying. It hit me how alone I was here, especially since I was really annoyed with Luna.

“So, what can I get you?”

“Coffee and a cherry choc raw slice.” I was going to treat myself and put it on my credit card. At least I still had my job in the city. With the time I had taken off work, would this be long enough to properly consider if this place could be part of my future?

“Take a seat, I’ll bring it out to you.”

“Thanks.” I turned, ready to scan for a table where I could sit in peace. Instead, I came face to face with Alaric walking into the shop.

My body responded straightaway at seeing him. My knees weakened, and I wanted to melt simply from his presence.

“Hello, boss lady. I’m pleased to see you again so soon.” Alaric’s voice was smooth and deep, luring me to him as if he were a siren singing a song and I was the lost sailor.

“Alaric, twice in one day. One might think you’re stalking me.” I didn’t know how my voice could sound so calm and confident when my insides were flaming with hot desire for him to the point it was hard to focus.

He laughed, the sound raising the energy of my soul. I wanted him even more. Fuck, if there were no one else here, I’d take him now and give freedom to my desire.

“My friends call me Al, and I didn’t get your name before?”

“Tanjie.” I stared into his dark eyes and could feel myself getting lost.

“Beautiful name for a beautiful lady.” He raised his eyebrow suggestively.

Heat rushed to my cheeks, and my body flared with desire. Yep, he was flirting with me, and I wanted more. So much more. My intimate muscles contracted with need.

A fresh wave of moisture dampened my panties. If I didn't get myself under control, I knew I'd do something rash that I might regret later. Though I didn't believe anything would be regrettable with Al. *Fuck, he was good to look at.*

"I'm sure you say that to all the ladies." Though I was still pretty flushed from him saying it to me. He was a bit of a bad boy. I could only assume this was a line he used frequently.

Al moved closer, the heat from his body blasting me with a wave of desire I struggled not to yield to.

"I don't," he spoke quietly, close enough for his breath to tickle my ear and send a thunderous shiver through me.

I'd have to go back and change my panties at this rate. I was so wet for him.

I turned to look up at him. His eyes were warm and alluring, his lips slightly parted as if tempting me to lean in and kiss him.

"Aren't you the charmer?" I fluttered my eyelashes and dared not move. I was close to him but wanted to be even closer.

"Not at all, just speaking the truth."

"Well, then, I look forward to hearing more truth from you very soon." I put on what I hoped was my best flirty expression. Then, with the last of my resolve, I turned away.

I sensed him watching me, and I swung my hips suggestively. My aim was to leave him wanting and lure him into needing to see me again.

A sign indicated garden seating outside, and I headed to the back of the café. The encounter with Al had raised my spirits, and instead of thinking about my predicament, my head was full of hundreds of ways to undress the man.

I sat on a wooden chair and glanced behind me. Al wasn't there, choosing not to follow me. I suspected that was part of his game plan—to leave me wanting—and fuck, he'd succeeded.

I leaned back in the chair, enjoying the gentle breeze on my face and the birds singing in the nearby trees. This was completely different from city life, and with a shiver, I realized it was one I could start to enjoy.

“Here we go.” Jessi arrived a few moments later, her voice breaking through the dirty thoughts reeling in my mind.

I sat up straighter, glad to finally have a decent cup of coffee. “Thanks.”

“You know Al likes you.”

“Really?” My stomach lurched, and another wave of moisture flooded between my legs.

“He doesn’t flirt with just anyone, so if you’re interested, go for it.” Jessi smiled. “Enjoy.”

Hell, I’d go for it, but I would need to see him again. I had no idea where to find him, though he was excellent at finding me. I was at his mercy, which frustrated me to the core. I liked to be in control.

I sighed, sipping the coffee. The bitter taste coursed through me, and my mind sharpened. It was all very well for me to get hot and flustered around Al, but that would only happen if I hung around here. If I did that, I would have to face running the store and finding out what was being kept from me.

By the time I finished my coffee, my mind was made up. I couldn’t leave now. Not only did I *need* to find out what was really behind me getting the shop, I *wanted* to know. Meeting Alaric gave me the perfect distraction to help get me through this.

The way my gut churned, I had a feeling that whatever it was I was going to find out, I wasn’t going to like it.

But now, after a coffee and a break, I was going back to Luna, and I would get it out of her, no matter what.

CHAPTER 12



*T*anjie

RETURNING TO THE SHOP, the wings of lost creatures fluttered inside me. How would I get Luna to spill and let me in on this secret?

I pushed on the shop door, and a sense I was coming home washed over me. There was my intuition again, working overtime to guide me. Then I remembered something I'd spent so long trying to forget.

On the night my parents died, I had such a feeling of dread that I stayed at home. I'd tried to convince them to stay home and was embarrassed and confused that I hadn't told them my reason. They were so happy, and when they insisted I go out, I reverted to the excuse of having to complete homework. Ever since, I'd pushed it aside, trying to ignore the fact I should have been in the car with them.

Since Maria's death, all these emotions and memories had resurfaced, tangling and mixing together, reminding me of things I wanted to forget. So many things.

The door closed behind me, the bells sounding and indicating someone else was in the shop. At that moment, I knew I'd get rid of the string of bells too.

No, you won't. They're to help bring happiness.

The problem was I wasn't feeling happy, especially not with Maria's voice in my head again.

Luna finished serving a woman and handed her a large paper bag full to the brim. It was good to know there had been at least one other customer today, though I worried it wouldn't be enough.

“You'll find you can think clearer with these candles.” Luna had her best smile on for the customer.

I stopped myself from saying ‘what a load of nonsense’ as the woman walked past me. *As if candles could help one think more clearly.*

Maybe you should have one in your room? It will help you. Maria's voice was once more in my head.

I didn't mind burning a few candles occasionally, but it was for relaxation and because I liked the scent more than anything else.

The sound of the shop door closing meant Luna and I were alone.

“You have a lot of explaining to do.” I stood with hands fisted on my hips, staring directly at Luna.

To my surprise, Luna nodded. “I've contacted the others and have permission to tell you.”

“Everything. I want to know it all. Don't give me part of a story,” I spoke sternly. “And who are these ‘others?’”

Had Luna been contacting the dead while I had a coffee? I'd been so desperate to get the answers I wanted that I hadn't considered I might not trust what I might be told. Could any of this get any crazier?

Luna bustled past me to the shop door, turned the sign to ‘Closed,’ and locked the door.

If I were going to be running this store, then the opening hours would be the first change I'd make. There needed to be consistent hours to have a more stable flow of customers and income.

“Let's sit over here on the couch by the books. I'll just put these candles away... they're one of our best sellers.” She picked up the candles, stacking them carefully.

“I’ll leave one of the mind candles out for you. Maria says you need to have it up in your room,” Luna called out as she went to the other side of the shop to return the candles to the shelves.

I rolled my eyes and plonked down on the couch. Of course, Maria said that, as if I needed another sign that what I was hearing wasn’t part of me losing my mind.

I slipped off my shoes and put one leg under the other while waiting for Luna to return. The music in the shop consisted of singing bowls, chimes, and chanting, and added to the relaxing atmosphere. It created an ambiance I could see would be good for business. I decided to keep this soundtrack, especially since I’d noticed how much more relaxed I was feeling, even though my insides were a knotted mess in anticipation of what I was about to hear.

Where were these thoughts of what I would and wouldn’t change here coming from? Was I slowly giving in to the fact that this shop would be my life for the next year?

I had to stay strong. I had fought so hard to have my own choices in life, to go against what my parents wanted for me. I couldn’t give in now.

“Trust me, this tea blend will help you adjust to change.” Luna returned, holding two cups of steaming tea.

“You won’t give up, will you?”

“Not until you at least take a sip. Really, it’s good. All the tea here is. It’s locally made.”

“By whom?” Locally made would be good for business. The change in my attitude had taken on a direction of its own.

“Me.” Luna smiled and handed me a cup with the word ‘positivity’ painted on it along with flowers. I bet she had great pleasure selecting this cup for me.

“You did?” I took the cup. Even though it was a mild day, the warmth of the tea on my hands was soothing.

“Yes, it’s what I do Mondays and Wednesdays.” Luna sat next to me carefully so as not to spill the tea, then shimmied

around to face me.

“What do you do on Fridays?” I remembered her saying earlier Tarot readings were Tuesdays and Thursdays. I savored the steam from the tea rising into my face, and I had to admit it smelled good.

“Washing.” She grinned.

Even I had to smile at her sense of humor.

“I also fill orders, and depending on how the week is going, I might see clients here in the shop.”

“Since *you* made the tea blend, I’ll try it.” I braced myself and took a sip. The flavor was gentle and clean with a slight hint of sweetness and a lasting hint of lemon.

“Well?” asked Luna.

“I still prefer coffee.” I peered at her over the top of my cup. “But it is better than I thought it would be.”

To prove my point, I took another sip. Maybe it was a combination of the music or the softness of the couch, but I was feeling more relaxed and ready to tackle whatever might come my way.

“I guess that’s a start,” Luna admitted.

“What flavor is it?” I found myself sipping more of the tea. It was actually making me feel better.

“White tea with a hint of lemon myrtle. I like working with Australian native plants when I can.”

“It’s different than what I’m used to.”

“The tea is ethically sourced, and there are not the usual chemicals for sweeteners in it like most store-bought tea blends.”

“But there’s a hint of sweetness.”

“Local honey. I don’t have bees, but my man does, so I do help him from time to time.”

I nodded, liking what I was hearing about some of the products being sold in the store. Local and natural were always

good selling points, but this wasn't what I wanted to be discussing. It was time to get down to the nitty-gritty and stop avoiding it.

"What do you have to tell me?" I asked.

"Are you sure you really want to know?" A shadow crossed her face.

"I am. I want to know. I *need* to know."

Luna paused, then inhaled slowly. She took a sip of her tea and closed her eyes.

I was about to interrupt to ask her *just to hurry up and tell me* when her eyes flickered open.

"Tanjie Shaw, you're a witch."

I spluttered on the mouthful of tea. When I stopped coughing, I stared at Luna in disbelief. I was many things, but I was *not* a witch.

"The Coven of the Blue Wren called you to take your position."

"I'm *not* a witch." I was sure I wasn't hearing her right.

"You're called to help us fight those who seek to stop us from having the powers of our birth," continued Luna as if I hadn't denied what she'd said.

I shook my head.

"You wanted to know. Now you have to listen."

I swallowed hard, shaking my head.

This was completely crazy.

I didn't know what I had expected Luna to tell me, but it wasn't that I was a witch and part of some coven. I didn't take orders from anyone.

This wasn't going to be the conversation I wanted because now I was quickly losing respect and trust for someone I thought might help me make sense of Maria's wishes.

CHAPTER 13



*T*anjie

SHAKEN by what Luna told me, I sipped more of the tea, finding it soothing. There was absolutely no way I could be a witch. At best, I had good intuition, but nothing more than that.

“You’re mistaken. I’m not a witch.” I rested the cup in my lap.

“You are, and your parents were. That’s why they wanted you to learn all the ‘hippie stuff’ you apparently called it.”

My eyes widened at the reference to hippie stuff. It was what I called it but only to my parents.

“Did you know my parents?” It was the most logical explanation.

“They were part of the coven.” Luna’s eyes misted. “I miss them, as we all do. They were taken too soon, which devastated us all.”

I frowned. “What do you mean taken? They died in a car accident because of a drunk driver.”

Luna shifted on the couch, adjusting her position. “That was the cover story for humans.”

“Wait... so there’s discrimination between whether or not you can wield magic?” I held the cup of tea tightly as if it were my anchor to reality.

“Not discrimination, more of a big difference and a hell of a secret to keep from those who can’t cast spells.”

This was too much and sounded like all the fantasy-based television series were real. They weren’t. They couldn’t be. This was only make-believe and something you’d believe in when a child, like Santa and the Easter Bunny.

“We’re jumping ahead too much. You won’t be able to keep up with all this mind-blowing information.”

Mind-blowing was right.

“You’re saying my parents didn’t die because of a drunk driver, I’m a witch, and there are other witches, which is a secret from humans?” I took a deep breath. “I’m keeping up well, don’t you think?”

Luna smiled gently and nodded. “There is, of course, so much more.”

“Like the cover story?”

“They were murdered, and it wasn’t an accident.”

A chill rippled through my body. *Why the fuck would anyone want to kill my parents?*

“See, it’s too much. I should stop.” Luna reached over and put her hand on my knee.

I brushed her hand away. “Keep talking.”

If someone or something had murdered my parents, I wanted to know the details. Revenge simmered within me.

Luna inhaled slowly. “The role of the witch is to keep the balance between those like us and others with supernatural powers, but it’s more complicated than that. We also need to keep the balance between those with magic and humans. If we don’t, we’ll be hunted, and chaos will erupt on Earth.”

This sounded incredibly like a prophecy written by someone with a great imagination. I kept my mouth shut, sipping at the tea. It was surprisingly soothing, though no way would it replace my love of coffee.

“I know it’s hard for you to believe, but you’ll get used to it all in time.”

“Who murdered my parents?”

“The wolf shifters... at least they’re the top suspects.”

“Really? There are wolf shifters out there? They’re not just in books?”

Luna nodded as she drank her tea. “They’re very real.”

“Why would they want to kill witches?”

“Because we keep them in line, and they answer to us. Usually, that’s not an issue, but from time to time, they want to be in charge and challenge our position of power.”

A numbness eased through my body as I listened. *Could this really be what had happened?* It seemed too surreal to be true.

“Over time, our powers have diminished with inbreeding with humans in particular, and with the evolution of technology, much of what we do isn’t needed. Well, that’s one theory anyway. We look to the next generation to see how strong their powers are to determine if the witch line continues.”

“Let me guess, that’s why you want me in the coven?”

“In part, and because your parents were both witches, they were strong in their magic. You could be the one who helps us reconnect with our true power so we can continue to keep the balance on Earth and not allow it to descend into chaos.”

“Wouldn’t that be the job of the angels or something?”

“In part, but when it comes to powers, it is us, the witches, who reign over the others.”

“Because we’re not angels.”

“Sort of. What’s important now is that you begin your transformation as you should’ve done when you were eighteen.”

“Too late, there’s no transforming happening for me.” More so because there was no way I accepted that I was a witch. I only sat and listened because I wanted answers to what was happening.

“We can start on the dark moon and use its shadow to bring out your witching abilities.”

“No. And why start when I’m eighteen and not from birth?”

“To ensure the secrets were kept from humans and also to give you time to live with them so you could better understand while keeping the balance.”

“Why didn’t my parents tell me?” I still didn’t believe any of this. In fact, I was close to reaching my limit of hearing such crap.

One thing I was planning on doing now was hiring a private detective to research my parents’ deaths. While I didn’t believe what Luna was saying, it niggled at me that they might have been murdered.

“You weren’t exactly being cooperative, now were you?”

Stabs of guilt shot through my gut. “With good reason. It’s all bullshit!”

I found myself drinking more tea, wanting to rid myself of the uncomfortable emotions surfacing from the past. The heat flowed through my body, helping me to remain calm and not explode into a rage of denial.

“It’s not, sweetie.”

“What if I click my fingers? Will a flame shoot out? I don’t think so.” I held my fingers up as if ready to click them.

“It will, but you haven’t had training. But then again, if your power is strong, you might get it on the first try.”

“You do it then.”

Luna squared her shoulders, holding the cup of tea in one hand, the other she raised, her fingers together. A simple click sounded at the movement of her fingers.

I was about to say, “See, nothing, it’s all bullshit,” but then I gasped. My hand shot to my mouth in disbelief.

A single orange flame burst into existence and fluttered from her fingertips.

“That’s not possible.” I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. “It’s some magic trick, right?”

I might have to reassess this whole witch thing. Though Luna could be a witch, it didn’t mean I was. I mean, I’d know if I was by now, wouldn’t I? You can’t live your life not knowing you can create fire. It would be such a great party trick.

“It’s possible, and it’s real.” She moved her hands, and the flame disappeared. “You try.”

I stared at her for a moment, wondering if she was for real.

“You want to know if you’re really a witch or not, then you try.”

I wasn’t one to back away from a challenge, and it wasn’t like it would work anyway. I’d do it to appease Luna, and then we could start to talk more seriously about how this shop was managed before it landed me with a debt I couldn’t escape.

I lifted my hand and moved my fingers, ready to click.

“You need to think about flames coming from the click,” said Luna. “Otherwise, it’s just an ordinary click of the fingers.”

Fine. I had nothing to lose and everything to prove this was nonsense.

I imagined flames coming from my fingers.

Then I clicked.

Flames shot out from my fingertips.

CHAPTER 14



*T*anjie

SURPRISED BY THE flames between my fingers, I jumped.

Tea spilled all over me, the warm liquid soaking into my jeans, making me feel even more uncomfortable.

Worried I'd set the place on fire or something, I studied my fingers as the flames withered and died.

"Well, that went better than I thought it would." Luna had a huge grin on her face.

"You knew I could do this shit?" My fingers were normal—not burned or changed in any way. However, they did tingle like pins and needles.

"Yes, of course." Luna stood and grabbed a towel from the kitchen.

"I don't know how you could be so confident I would."

She handed me the towel, and I patted my legs. It didn't do much good since I was soaked with tea.

Standing, I tried to soak up the spillage on the couch.

"The tea helped you." Luna picked up the blanket and set it aside since it was partially soaked.

I glared at her sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I had to do it. I had to be sure of your skill. You don't have any sort of training, and you missed your

initiation.”

“Do what?” Anger rumbled inside me.

“I added some special herbs, nothing serious, so don’t get your panties in a knot. It was to help you to relax so you could use your magic.”

“You shouldn’t have.”

“It was too important to show you what you’re capable of.”

“Like, I have a choice.”

Luna shook her head. “Your destiny lies with the coven, and our future depends on you. You have no idea what sort of chaos will reign on Earth if you don’t step up.”

This was a lot of pressure Luna was putting on me, just like Maria had by sending me here. I didn’t ask for this. Whatever happened to me having more choices?

“How do you feel now? Do you want to try more magic?” asked Luna.

My fingers tingled from the magic I’d awakened. I wriggled them, suddenly wanting to do more.

“You want to, don’t you? You won’t be able to stop now even if you tried,” Luna spoke smugly, seeming to think she had me beaten.

“What if I refused to do more magic?”

“It will quickly eat away at you because you haven’t been initiated.”

Could I stop myself? Curiosity surged through me.

Without thinking, I clicked again. Flames burst from my fingertips, but not as strong as before.

“See, the herbs are already wearing off. You’ll have to concentrate much harder without their effect. So let us help train you to claim your birthright.”

I turned the fire around in my fingers, playing with the flames. This was a turning point for me, and what I’d been

rejecting so much now looked appealing.

Imagine all the cool things I could do with magic. What would Caleb and Mia think of this? Could I even tell them? I wasn't sure I wanted to go down this part when I couldn't share my life with my friends.

“Why did Maria leave this shop to me?”

“Maria was your neighbor with the sole purpose of bringing you to us.”

Luna's answer didn't surprise me, not after everything else I'd heard. The flames died out, and I strode to the front of the shop.

The feeling of being watched pressed hard on my shoulders, so I glanced out the front window.

My breath caught. Alaric was across the street, and he was looking directly at me. Three times in one day. I knew he wanted me as much as I did him.

Did he know I was a witch? Or was he one of the many humans I assumed came into the shop who had no idea what was really going on?

One thing I did know as I stared at him was that I was more determined than ever to have him. I smiled at him, and he nodded before walking away. I wished he would come back.

I turned to face Luna, who was smiling as if she already knew what I was going to say.

“Fine... teach me.”

“I knew you would agree.”

A tingle shivered over my skin.

I had no idea how to be a witch, but I would learn. I couldn't wait to get started and discover everything this new world opening up for me had to offer.

CHAPTER 15



*A*laric

I'D STAYED TOO LONG. It hadn't been the plan, but what I saw intrigued me.

It wasn't just her beautiful body, her long hair waving with her movements, the tilt of her slender hips, the anger burning around her, or a waft of her scent in the air. It was all of her that kept me watching as if I were under a spell, one I couldn't break away from.

In the pack, we were taught from young pups to be wary of the witches, and now I knew why. But I didn't care. I had to have her.

Her actions, confused expression, and struggle to form a basic magic spell of fire from her fingers told me so much about her.

Tanjie didn't know she was a witch, the incredible power coursing through her, or how to harness it.

That meant she wouldn't know what I was. We were forbidden to be together.

More importantly, it meant she couldn't hurt me.

Intrigued by her starting to use her magic, I was mesmerized. How could she not know her powers?

Tanjie hadn't used her magic and clearly hadn't undergone her initiation. I didn't really know what that meant. All I could

think of was that she wasn't a real witch, making this unexpected attraction to her acceptable. Sort of.

Then Tanjie saw me.

Her eyes locked on mine, and I froze.

What would she do? She would have to think me some creep.

But she wasn't scared. Her confidence turned me on even more, my body responding with a need I struggled to control.

She smiled, and I took that as her approval of me. But of course, she didn't know my secret, the sort of beast I was when not in my human form.

The simple act of watching her would land me in so much trouble, even though I wanted to do a hell of a lot more than just watch.

I had to leave her for now. So I nodded, hoping she would get my meaning. Her gaze never faulted.

Then, I hurried away before I did something I would regret.

What I couldn't get out of my mind was her sweet smile. The way she didn't shy away from me.

The urge to go back and continue watching her through the window pulled at me. I fought it.

If I stayed, something might happen between us, but I knew well enough that wouldn't occur with Luna there. For now, I had to be content with her smile.

The air was cooling quickly as the day began to slip toward night. My hot blood rushed around me, keeping me warm, along with thoughts of Tanjie naked and willing.

My wolf also enjoyed the temptation of her. Pushing to get out, I willed it back down. She wasn't for him but only for me because she wasn't wolf and could never be wolf on account of her being a witch.

But it was as if it didn't matter.

Maybe a walk around the block would be enough time for Luna to leave.

I wasn't sure, but I didn't like unfinished business with Tanjie. It would have to be nearly closing time, meaning Luna would leave.

I ran my hand through my hair, taking a deep breath. Where was this illogical thinking coming from? I had to forget her. She was a witch. But then, was she if she couldn't use her magic?

That had to make it all okay for me to pursue her. That way, I wouldn't technically be breaking the pack rule and could still have some fun on the side.

My intrigue toward her only grew the further I walked away from her.

My phone buzzed, the movement in my jeans taking me by surprise, pulling my awareness back to the present instead of being lost in the fantasy I could never have.

I slipped my phone from my pocket, holding the screen to see who was messaging me.

Raine: *Where are you?*

A growl started in my throat. He didn't need to be checking up on me. It wasn't any of the pack's business where I was. Or even his business. I was my own person and could make my own decisions.

I had told him I would get to the pub later anyway. There had been so many meetings over the past weeks that it wouldn't matter if I weren't there. I was over all the discussions of possibilities. The only opportunity I wanted to discuss was what I could do with Tanjie.

I went to put the phone back in my pocket when it buzzed again, another message from Raine flashing on the screen.

Raine: *Your absence is being noticed. Do you want more trouble?*

He had my attention now, and I cursed under my breath. I didn't want more trouble.

I punched in a response to say I was coming, then hurried toward the pub. The cooling air of the day stung my face, reminding me this was the time I liked to go out and roam. This was my time to be myself, and my wolf urged me to do what I wanted.

I couldn't be so reckless, not now. My dad had announced that we would bring down the witches and be free to do as we pleased once and for all. I had to be there for the discussions.

I'd seen Tanjie, even though it was only from a distance. It would have to be enough for now. I willed my wolf to see the bigger picture.

Pushing on the door of the pub, The Mystic Brew, I was assaulted by the loud chatting of people influenced by alcohol and the bitter smell of beer.

My tongue tingled, eager to get a pint. But I walked past the bar, nodding to a few of the locals. We were a pack, but no one here knew our secret. We lived our separate lives carefully with humans.

Would that all change? Would we get to live without having to be in the shadows or bound by secrets because humans might hunt us? It all seemed unreal. I had to get in on the conversations and get informed about what was going on instead of allowing myself to be distracted by my desires.

My nose quickly picked up the pack's scent despite the smells of whisky, beer, and testosterone. I headed toward a set of swinging doors, the logo of The Mystic Brew etched into the glass panels, the hinges creaking with age behind me.

The pack had dominated the beer garden out back, lights strung in a crisscross pattern hung between the trees glowing brighter with the darkening sky. I sensed sparrows in the trees fluffing their wings as they settled in for the night.

This was the time of day I came alive, and my skin rippled. This was the wolfing time, and mine wanted to get out and be free.

I greeted a few of the pack members. They lowered their eyes naturally with respect to who I was. It was power I

needed to keep hold of if I ever wanted to replace my dad as alpha. I was slowly understanding what I had here in the pack.

But I had no patience for my dad to die or give me the position. And that was why I wandered at night, searching for pleasure and comfort. I immediately thought of Tanjie and then quickly pushed her image from my mind.

I had to be extra careful now. I was surrounded by my kind with their sixth senses. I needed their respect. More than that, I wanted it. If I had it, I could be freer to do what I wanted instead of being constrained by my dad.

Possibilities I hadn't thought of came into my mind. I was becoming more calculating. Was this because of the upcoming attack on the witches? I didn't know what, but I liked it.

The excitement in the air prickled the hairs on my neck. Had something been announced, and I had missed it?

I held my breath, cursing silently. I hadn't cared while watching Tanjie when seeking her out, but now I did. I didn't want to lose my power in the pack. Not when right now I could sense I could get more. Things around here had stayed the same for decades, but they were changing quickly, so it was hard to keep up.

I scanned the crowd of pack members, all thirty men and women—no kids tonight—split off in small groups. Drinks in hand, there was a lot of quiet chatter, low voices passing on information, debating what would happen.

Something was brewing. And I knew I'd been wrong. I wholeheartedly wanted to be a part of it.

I searched for Raine, not wanting to draw attention to myself for turning up late. He could tell me what was going on without blowing my cover that I hadn't been there.

Where was the bastard?

I couldn't be angry at him. At least he'd texted me to get down here before it was too late.

Then I saw him. He held up a beer, a gesture of invitation. He was talking with Tyr, and another member, Orion, was

standing with them. I nodded to let him know I was coming.

I pushed past the milling people as they downed their beers, catching snatches of conversation that didn't make much sense. What was going on?

I had to get to Raine to find out what I'd missed. For the first time, I realized how reckless I'd been to go after a woman I didn't know at the expense of the pack.

My gut turned to rocks. That might be the case, but it wasn't like I had control over how I felt. It would have to be something I dealt with later.

I needed to find out what the hell was causing such a stir in the atmosphere and why it was affecting me to want to change my mind about everything I believed in. It was intoxicating and had nothing to do with the drinks that were being consumed.

Closer to Raine, I was about to call out to him when something went tight around my arm. Before I could react, I jolted back, spinning around.

I came eye to eye with the alpha, my dad.

And he looked like he was ready to pull me from limb to limb.

I swallowed hard, trying to shake his grip on my arm. He held tight, pulling me closer, then shuffled me to the side away from the others.

"Where the hell have you been?" he hissed at me.

"Just had a few things to sort out." I swallowed hard, keeping my eyes in a cold lock with his. I didn't think a straight-out lie that I was here would serve me well right now.

"Like what?" He tightened his pressure on my arm, and I could feel the blood flow slowing.

"I'm here now," I answered. My breath was shallow and fast. I couldn't let him know what I had been doing, not even a hint.

“Not good enough. I’ve warned you about your actions. It will bring you down.”

Yeah, I could see that. For the first time, I actually got what my dad was saying.

The problem was I didn’t care. Not since I got a whiff of Tanjie’s scent and had seen her. I had to finish what was inadvertently started between us.

“I’m not doing anything to harm the pack,” I said firmly.

Not yet, anyway, but she wasn’t a witch, so it didn’t count as anything terrible, right? It was hard to convince myself, glaring into Dad’s eyes.

He growled softly, the sound setting me on edge, but I kept his gaze.

“I’m not up to anything,” I repeated. “I want to be part of this.”

“You need to be here then. At every meeting called.”

“But nothing happened this week, no progression or anything big.” Except there was a new witch in town who didn’t know her powers.

I should tell him. But my mouth remained closed as bile rose from my stomach. The full realization of what was ahead of me slowly bled into my consciousness.

He held firm to my arm.

“I’m not.”

“If you don’t pull your weight, I’ll find someone else to replace me.”

“I’m pulling my weight.”

He leaned in closer to me. “Do better.”

“Then make me beta.” I couldn’t believe what I was saying. Had it been seeing Tanjie wield her magic, the expression on her face as she learned what it meant to have such power at her fingertips?

“You’re not ready.”

“I’ll learn quickly.”

“Then you show me you’re worthy.”

“I will.” I didn’t flinch at how close he was to me.

“We have to have a united front.”

“I’m here by your side.”

“Make sure you are. Come, I’ve told them I have an announcement. I was just waiting for you.”

I swallowed hard. This was as close to gaining power as I’d ever been in the pack. I hadn’t respected the power it gave me, but I was starting to understand now. I’d been elevated in the pack. I had to follow, no matter what.

“Do you promise?” I asked.

The look of disdain from Rafe chilled me. I had pushed too far and asked too much of him too soon.

“No promises. You show me you’re worthy, then the job is yours.”

It was as good as it was going to get. I could taste the power in my mouth, sweet and robust. I might not have to wait what felt like an eternity before having a meaningful position in the pack.

I followed him to the center of the gathering, standing by his side with my shoulders back and chin high.

“Listen up,” he commanded sharply.

The pack members quieted quickly, turning to face their alpha and me.

“You’ve waited long enough.” He paused, turning to make sure all were looking at him.

“We need guidance, more answers, so we are informed of what lies ahead when we change the order.”

A few cheered, and others raised their glasses in a toast-like action. They were all hanging off what he was saying. They were primed, ready for action. I’d never experienced anything like this.

“At the dark moon, we will have a bonfire.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. A bonfire was something we rarely did these days, more so because the witches forbade it.

“We will ask our ancestors for guidance, and we will not be told by those who aren't our kind what we shouldn't do.”

Enjoying shouts came from the pack members, and I shivered, the excitement intoxicating me.

“For now, we relax, and Saturday night, we will have the ammunition from our ancestors to take us to victory.”

He raised his beer, and everyone cheered.

I cheered, too, enjoying the vibe that was taking over.

I couldn't believe it. He was already going against the witches' creed, and it would only infuriate them if they found out. Of course, this is what he wanted. To make them angry enough, so they made the first move.

Our entire lives were about to change. And I was ready.

CHAPTER 16



*J*anjie

A BURST of light snapped from my fingers, pushing away the shadows of night in my temporary bedroom.

I did it.

But then the blue-tinged light faded along with my hope that I could ever manage to control the power in me.

I was once more left in darkness.

You should rest.

Maria's voice was clear in my head. I should listen to her words, but I didn't want to. Stubbornness burned through me.

I can rest later.

The need to know what I could do with this magic that was innate in me drove me to push myself beyond my limits. Luna had given me strict instructions to rest before she left me upstairs above the shop to go to her partner.

I broke the promise the moment she locked the door downstairs.

The bells on the door clanged loudly as I stood in the room near the potbelly stove. This was my chance to see what I really could do without her limiting me.

Luna kept at me all afternoon with what I should and shouldn't do. If this magic was in me, surely I could coax it

from me without her?

I snapped my fingers again. This time, no light rippled from my fingers. Not even a spark.

You'll burn yourself out. Center yourself. The words Luna had spoken to me countless times when we were downstairs in the shop came to mind.

Inhaling slowly, I tried to complete the breathing exercise she'd taught me. I didn't fully believe this would be enough.

I snapped again, my fingers sore from the motion.

This can't be happening.

I held my fingers up to see if anything was wrong with them. Why wasn't the magic flowing from them?

I had a vision of proving Luna wrong in the morning and showing her how good I was and that I could be independent. But that was fast turning out to be a fantasy.

A clear click sounded from my snap.

No magic rippled out.

I wriggled my fingers, moving them quickly as if that would help to bring the magic to the surface.

What had Luna told me to do?

Rest, you idiot.

I sighed heavily at the sound of Maria in my head. My arm dropped to my side. Perhaps I did need to do as I was told.

On my bed lay a leather-bound book, *Magic for Beginners, Grade 1* by Merry Goodchild. The insult of being given instructions written for a six-year-old meant the book lay untouched.

This wouldn't be happening if my parents had taught me when they should have.

Tears welled in my eyes as I met with yet another wave of grief, fighting to push it down and forget about my past.

Goddammit, this was my life, and I wanted to choose what I did with it.

But big forces took this choice away.

Luna hadn't given me many details about my parents, and I hadn't cared. I wanted to learn the spells that would make me powerful.

What was I thinking? That I would go and show them off to Caleb and Mia?

All I was beginning to learn was that this wouldn't be the case at all. That something bigger was going on here. And once more, I was deliberately being left in the dark.

It's for your own good, Tanjie.

This time, Maria's voice was softer, a hint of sympathy behind the words.

I sighed heavily, the weight of responsibility tightening around my chest, binding me to something I didn't fully understand.

Then help me understand.

It's not safe. The reply was unsatisfactory on so many levels.

Warmth flooded through me as if Maria's energy enveloped me in a sort of embrace. It reminded me how much I really did miss her, but not as much as my parents.

They should be teaching me this, but they couldn't because they were murdered. A tear slipped from my eye. I wiped it away quickly, even though no one could see me.

It's not safe not telling me. The fight in me dissipated.

Just until Saturday.

Why? I could still feel her energy wrapped around me, the warmth soothing, but it wasn't enough.

The dark moon will help you understand.

Should I be scared? If you don't tell me, then I will think the worst. I turned around in the room, my eyes adjusting to the darkness, making out the shadows of the furniture. I

wanted to see her. If I could see Maria in ghost form, then there would surely be a chance I could see my parents, right?

Why don't you show yourself to me?

The silence that followed fueled my frustration. If the lure of learning magic weren't enough, I would be out of here now on the first train back to Sydney.

You follow what we tell you, and you'll be safe. So go and rest. You will find it all easier tomorrow.

Pfft. The only response I could muster as weak as it was. It wasn't exactly easy arguing with a voice in your head.

Was I really imagining all of this? I rubbed my temples.

One thing I was sure of was that I wasn't buying the simplicity approach here. I couldn't even make magic now—a good night's sleep was hardly the solution for me.

Her energy tightened around me, then it left. I sensed she'd withdrawn. I wasn't going to learn anything else tonight. Nor was I going to sleep anytime soon. My head was full of all the things that happened today, mulling over the possibilities and what could happen.

I went to the small window, pushed aside the ancient-looking lace curtain, and peered outside, wishing I could be free to make my own choice in life, not follow a path others had set out without any consultation.

The moon, a slither in the dark sky, reminded me it wasn't long before its dark side was showing. Stars shone as if they were charged with pushing away the darkness of the night, giving a little hope that there was more to be waiting for.

It all centered around the dark moon. That was important for me, but I didn't know why because no one seemed willing to tell me what was happening. I guess it was only a few days to wait, but it still irked me.

What was it that I was going to find out? I was the queen of the witches? Though I didn't think witches had queens. Maybe I was going to be married off? Well, they could *think* that.

Would I learn more about my parents? That was the decider and why I stayed because I might learn why they were murdered. And if I could do magic, I could make those who killed them pay. I would have to stay and learn then, but it wasn't going to be easy. What else was going to help me stay here?

Part of me couldn't wait for the dark moon because I would find out more. But at the same time, I didn't see why I had to wait.

What the hell was out there that would hurt me?

I pressed my hand to the cold glass, looking down to the back street behind the shop. A movement caught my attention. Who could be outside now?

I leaned forward, trying to see what was down there. What might be creeping in the shadows?

A dog moved from the darkness, standing in clear view.

Just a dog, of course.

For some reason, I looked closer as if my subconscious had picked up something I hadn't wanted to acknowledge. My pulse quickened to an erratic rhythm.

It was a huge dog. Huge.

Black fur, gray to white underneath, it stood confident, ears pricked, tail still, strength radiating from the beast. It stood in plain sight, letting me see it and know this was his territory and I was imposing.

And it looked straight at me, knowing I was upstairs, looking down at it.

As if it had been watching me, I held its gaze. Its golden eyes almost glowed in the night. I couldn't draw myself away. It moved its head, gesturing a motion as if to come down to it.

No way. I blinked quickly, convinced I was seeing things.

It moved its head again, its tail moving in a small wave.

Does it want me to come to it?

It does. I was sure of it.

I gasped, my skin prickled, and I pulled away from the window, letting the lace fall back in place.

I'm being stupid. It's just a dog. Owners had overfed it, and it was huge.

I looked back out the window. My eyes locked with the dog's once more. I was drawn to it. I wanted to go to the dog, run my hands through its fur, snuggle it tightly, and let it take away all the stresses burning through me.

How could a dog have such an influence on me?

The way it looked at me was familiar as if someone else had looked at me like this. Someone I had met recently, but I couldn't put the pieces together.

It wasn't a dog, more like a wolf. But we didn't have wolves in Australia. A dingo maybe, and while I'd never seen one in real life, I knew this wasn't any animal native to Australia. No way it could be a wolf. I refused to think that was even a possibility.

The dog moved as if it were getting impatient. Its white teeth bared in the light from a nearby streetlight.

A shiver went down my spine. I couldn't go to the dog. I wasn't thinking right.

I stepped away from the window and tugged on the old blind string to screen myself from that dog. Was it really a dog? It couldn't be anything else.

I'm on edge. I'm not thinking right. I had been essentially drugged by Luna today in order for me to use my magic.

I began to concede defeat. I had to rest, but I couldn't get over how the dog looked at me as if it knew me.

There was a buzzing sound in my backpack. It took me a moment to work out why that was important. Then I realized.

Shit, I hadn't even checked my phone I'd been so wrapped up in myself. What would my friends be thinking? That I had abandoned them? That I wasn't okay? Was I okay? I didn't

want to answer any questions from them. Hell, it wasn't like I had answers that I could give them.

But I didn't want them to fret over me. I went to the nightstand where I'd dumped my backpack. Rummaging inside, I found my phone and pulled it out.

Mia: *You awake?*

I wanted to reply to her to say yes, but what could I say to her? 'Hey, Mia, you'll never guess what, I'm a witch, and I can do magic... well, I can if I learn how.' A dozen missed calls this afternoon probably put Mia in such a state I knew I should let her know I was okay.

But I couldn't. It was as if she was part of a life in my past, and it wasn't going to be part of my future. I needed to sort my head and work out what was really going on here first.

The screen on my phone popped up with a message. If I didn't charge now, the phone would be dead.

I quickly typed a message to say I was okay, hit send, then my phone went blank. Maybe Mia got it, I don't know. I hooked up my phone to charge, setting it on the nightstand. I would smooth things over with my friends tomorrow.

I slumped on the bed, rolled over, and slipped under the covers. Sinking into the bed, I found a comfort I hadn't experienced for so long.

I couldn't help but think about what secrets were out there that this town was hiding.

A dream started, pulling my conscience away from myself and dragging me into the depths of a world I never knew about.

CHAPTER 17



*A*laric

MY WOLF HAD WANTED to see Tanjie.

That had been a mistake.

I'd given in, knowing I wanted to see her more. I figured the shadows of the night would keep me from being seen.

The way the room lit up with bursts of magic amused my wolf and me as we watched from a safe distance. Tanjie was learning her magic, and it was proving difficult for her.

Her determination to keep trying only heightened my desire for her. My wolf became impatient, inching closer to the upstairs window for a better view.

I allowed it.

I figured we were safe down here.

The town was quiet, humans in their homes on a weeknight, the witches too. The night here in Katoomba was for the pack, more so for me because it was my time to prowl. I didn't need to wander tonight to find what I wanted and went straight to her.

My wolf approved. I hushed him quickly, pushing to return to human form, but he stopped me. It wasn't safe to do so. I reminded him that she could never be properly ours. Even though she was a witch, she was also human. Or the more

accurate perspective was that she wasn't pack. She could never be part of us because of her magic.

My wolf didn't care, enjoying watching her magic spark from her fingers. His nose lifted in the air, smelling her sweet scent. The desires flamed for us both, the anticipation growing, and our patience running out.

Tanjie moved to the window, the lace moving out of the way, and a pleasant shiver coursed through my wolf form. She had seen me straight away.

How had she known I was there?

The longer we stared at each other from a distance, I knew she wasn't scared of my wolf. That pleased me and encouraged me to want to act.

I could feel the connection between us—an invisible rope of golden-like chain—but I wasn't sure that she could too.

Before I realized what my wolf was doing, he was signaling her to come down.

I couldn't believe the recklessness of my beast and risk our safety like that. I went to tell him off, but she was still at the window, eyes locked on me.

Did she know what was being asked?

We can't do this. I hissed between our minds, the link between my human and animal form strong.

Wolf disagreed and signaled again.

How much I wished she could come, but then I began to panic. I would need to change, and I would be naked. It would scare her off.

Then, it didn't matter. Tanjie understood the gesture. Fear and confusion filled her eyes, and she stepped back. She sent a signal of her own by pulling down the blind.

She needed more time to get to know me, maybe not in wolf form. The connection remained between us, invisible but there. She hadn't entirely rejected me.

Now that I knew that, I was unsettled.

I couldn't go to her. Not yet, and it was more than her being a witch.

When I went to Tanjie, I didn't want her to reject me. I needed to be sure she would say yes to me, to us. It didn't have to be long-term because we were born from different magic.

The bond forming between us was unnatural and shouldn't exist. It was there, as unexpected as it was, bringing us together against the odds.

The coven would punish her for sure if she did something with me. I had heard the warning Luna had given her to stay away from me in the shop.

I don't know why Luna was so worried. Maybe she had sensed the forming bond between us.

My pack would punish me too.

We could get away with it as long as no one else found out. And I was good at keeping secrets. I'm sure Tanjie would be too. Though not knowing added an irresistible risk that made it harder for me not to go to her now.

There was only one option—hunt the night away and run until I could barely walk. I hurried to the bushland, slipping between the scrub and feeling more relaxed in nature.

The rabbits I hunted barely satisfied me. Instead, I ran in wolf form, burning the desire through physical activity, my muscles contracting and relaxing with the movement. I pushed myself up and down the mountain. My gray vision was sharp and alert. I weaved between the scrub and clawed a few rabbits that got in my way, and soon, my body flooded with endorphins from the exercise, and the heaviness in my mind lifted.

But I didn't stop.

I was used to getting my way and instinctively knew this might not happen with Tanjie. By being with her, I was risking everything I wanted in the pack. But I couldn't back away, no matter how I looked at this situation.

Images formed in my head that made no sense. I had to protect Tanjie from my dad. I had to let her enter the shop, but I didn't know why. The sadness in my dad's eyes as I fought him soon changed to anger hot as lava. He was going to make me pay.

I kept running, hoping the movement would push away the scenes playing out in my mind. Were they a forewarning? Or something else? I didn't know, and neither did my wolf. He was as unsettled by them as I was.

So I ran deeper into the scrub, the scent of eucalyptus sharpening my mind, and soon, the images blurred away, and I was myself again. But it had taken too long to happen.

The first rays from the sun pushed away the night. I ran, paws thumping the dirt of the Blue Mountains bushland. My wolf urged me to be free for longer, but I had let him have too much control.

It was time for me to change back into my human form and get to the construction site on time. I had roamed far into the parkland and hurried back to my car. If I wasn't careful, early morning joggers might see me. I'd been too reckless in my needs, forgetting about the pack's safety. It was hard for me to change my way of being so quickly. I was used to doing things alone, my way, and rebelling against my dad.

I had to do better.

My wolf sprinted, covering miles quickly, back to where I had parked my pimped Kingswood car, a classic from the 1970s. From an era built to last, I worked on it when not busy roaming the night or working construction during the day.

Too much light filtered through the tall trees surrounding the clearing. My car was there, and my heart sank.

Two Land Cruisers were parked, occupants getting out, dressed, and ready to run a marathon.

I had taken too long.

I crept slowly around the edge of the scrub of the clearing, keeping out of sight and moving closer to my car. I couldn't

get to it without being seen. My clothes were inside, where I usually left them.

Hurry up and leave, I grumbled, impatient to change and get cleaned up. If I were late again, that would be another nail in the coffin for me not becoming a beta.

Could I manage a naked streak without being seen?

Two couples and two guys were there, in separate groups, looking distracted. The thing was, would they report me to the police if they did manage to see me?

I couldn't risk it. It wouldn't just bring problems to me but also to my pack. I wanted the beta position.

Dammit. I kept hidden in the bushes, the sky changing to a soft blue quicker than I would have liked, and the day's heat pushed away the night's cool air.

More cars turned up, and I knew I was in serious trouble. What was it with these people doing an early-morning run before work?

I sat in the dried leaves and dirt, observing, alert for the moment I needed.

The people went off running, setting their watches, but before I could go, the others returned, hot and sweaty and in no rush to leave.

The pack members would be starting to arrive at the construction site. No chance of a shower now.

Nose on paws, watching, the last of the cars finally left. I didn't waste my chance and turned back to my human form.

I rushed to my car, opened the passenger door, and grabbed my jeans and T-shirt. I slipped on the clothing, glad no one had seen me. Because of the time, I hurried, putting on my socks and work boots.

Slamming the door closed, I breathed heavily, but the stress remained as I went around to the driver's side and got in. I was going to get it for being late to the site. I'd blown my position for the sake of seeing a woman.

A sweaty odor wafted to my nose, which would be a giveaway of what I had been doing. Sure, I was allowed to run in the bushland, but my reputation was something else entirely, and it wasn't like Dad would believe me that I hadn't been on the prowl.

Deodorant in the glove box helped improve my sweaty scent from running most of the night. It would do for now. I'd be sweaty soon enough from work.

Pumping the gas, I roared the V8 engine to life, enjoying the car's vibrations around me. Slamming into reverse, I nearly missed a vehicle arriving, then I skidded out of the parking lot, letting the back wheels stir up the dust so they wouldn't see my license plate number.

I grabbed my phone from the center console, the usual messages from Raine and Tyr about where I was. Nothing from Dad. That could be either good or bad.

Taking as many backstreets as possible to get there quickly, I arrived at the site soon, but it wasn't quick enough.

I sensed the pack members were there on site already working. My only hope to avoid being questioned was to get in without being seen by Dad.

This side of the building was quiet, and I knew what needed to be done. I hurried over to the road, grabbed the electric nail gun, and pretended I'd been working.

The sound of the gun firing nails into wood satisfied me, and I was progressing with the build. I kept my wits about me, ready to be challenged for being late, but no one approached me.

So far, so good.

I was sure I was going to get away with arriving late. I worked double speed to build up a sweat to fit in and mask my already stinky body from the night of running.

With the planks secure, I needed more, so I went to the front of the site to collect more. My skin prickled at what I saw.

The alpha, Rafe, my dad, stood talking with Tyr. Heads close, conversation hushed. Whatever they were discussing was serious and didn't involve anyone else.

That meant something, and I trusted my instincts that something was up.

I moved closer, choosing a different pile of planks to pick wood from, taking time to overhear what was happening.

“You sure...”

“You could be...”

“... beta...”

“Al won't...”

Were they talking about me and my position as beta? Was Tyr going to support me? Something told me this wasn't the case.

“Get back to work, Alaric,” commanded Rafe.

A soft growl moved in my throat. I needed to stay longer, but I couldn't without causing a scene. I was already on probation to be beta. I had to toe the line, but I wasn't used to doing it.

I picked up the smaller pieces of wood and returned to where I was working. Biding my time, I kept glancing at the two, who talked much longer than I was comfortable with.

Finally, Tyr left, returning to work. Rafe paused to glare at me. I knew that look too well and hurried away before he angrily exploded at me. Maybe I had been found out.

It was eating me up inside, not knowing. I returned to using the nail gun, securing wood together that would become the sides of a house.

Wiping the sweat from my forehead, I paused to see where Tyr was. He was working on the other side of the build. We usually worked together. Something was definitely going on.

Something I didn't like one bit.

With the excuse of looking for nails, I went over to Tyr, who was mixing a fresh batch of concrete ready to start the bricklaying.

“You and Rafe were getting up close and personal,” I said.

Tyr shrugged.

“Why can’t you tell me what it was about?” I couldn’t let this go. I had to find out what was going on.

“You would know if you weren’t out all night chasing skirt,” he huffed back at me.

“Who says that was what I was doing last night?”

“It’s what you always do,” he responded, glaring at me.

“Just because you’re jealous you’re not getting any.”

“Not true.”

“For the record, I wasn’t.”

It’s not a complete lie, though I was stretching the truth a bit. I wasn’t chasing, just looking. Nothing wrong with that. The images of the fight came to mind. Had I been dreaming when running?

“Like anyone believes you.” He shoveled more dirt into the concrete mixer. We did this to save on building costs and keep our profits high.

Tyr’s words hurt in a way I wasn’t expecting. It wasn’t like I had wanted to be a leader in the pack. It was just I never thought it would happen anytime soon. Things were changing around here quickly. For me to be beta, I needed Tyr’s support.

“What, you’re turning on me because... why? You want to be beta?”

“Stranger things have happened.”

“Is that what he promised you? That you would be beta?”

Tyr didn’t respond, adding in more dirt with the shovel.

“What, you know you can’t trust him. He’s playing you.” I couldn’t believe it. It’s what Rafe did occasionally to get members in the pack sorted out and contributing.

Or was he doing this to motivate me?

“Get back to work the both of you, or you will have an extra hour at knockoff,” yelled Rafe from a few feet away as he went around on his morning check of the site.

Rafe was capable of this, totally playing me. I kicked at the loose stones on the ground, returning to where I'd been working.

The fight with another wolf in my head dominated. Snatches of scenes came to mind, but in my human form, I found it hard to discern what was real and what wasn't. I was protecting something. But was this some sort of omen? Was I going to get up without a pack? A lone wolf not capable of anything?

CHAPTER 18



*T*anjie

PAIN in my arm pulled me from sleep, dumping me back into my body. The fading dream sequence in my head caused me to bolt up in bed. The events were so real I half expected to see my arm shredded, blood everywhere.

Not a mark on my skin. I turn my arm around, over, then back, trying to figure out why it would hurt so much.

Why had a wolf been trying to hurt me?

I rubbed my eyes, sore and dry as if filled with sand, and it took a while for me to focus. I could do with more sleep, but that wasn't going to happen.

Not now. I was awake, the pain throbbing in my arm. I rubbed the muscles, and it did nothing against the ache that had settled in deep. Stretching out my legs and arms, I attempted to wake up and settle my mind back in my body.

Was this what I was to expect now that I knew I was a witch?

Weird-ass dreams that felt real even when I was awake.

The room was gray, and light bursts of bright sunlight around the blind's edges suggested it was well and truly morning. Scenes from the dream cycled through my mind as if I were thinking backward. Then I remembered.

I had actually seen something outside the window. What was it? My thoughts were so blurred between reality and fantasy that I wasn't sure.

I slipped out of bed, still wearing the clothes from yesterday, went to the window, and pulled up the blind. I automatically shielded my eyes with my arm, the pain from the light blinding me. It took a moment to adjust to the brightness of the day. Then I peered out the window.

My breath caught in my throat as I looked down through the glass. That's right, I had seen a big dog, but something about it was unnatural.

Now, cars were parked on the sides of the road, a refrigerated truck was unloading meat, and people were walking along the street. A regular Thursday morning, I supposed, here in Katoomba.

If I were back in Sydney, I would be at work already, but here, I'd slept in without meaning to. I had planned to get down to the shop and snoop around for books that might help me learn more valuable spells and information about whether the shop was making a profit.

More importantly, I wanted to know if I could do the basic spells Luna had taught me yesterday. I snapped my fingers, and flames flickered, strong and controlled. I grinned. This time, it had been easy. I let the magic die out and tried another spell, and this time, blue swirls came from my fingers. Even though I hadn't slept much, and it wasn't a good sleep, the connection to my magic was stronger this morning. I wanted to see what else I could do since I had this power in me, and it was time it came out to be used.

My phone on the nightstand buzzed loudly. I went to answer it, and Mia's name was on the screen.

"Thank God you are alive," said Mia.

"Why wouldn't I be?" I asked, putting the phone to my ear.

With my free hand, I cycled through the few spells I had been taught. I'd never wanted to study so much in my life

before. Surely, if my parents had told me this was why I needed to study, I would have.

“Well, like because you were ghosting me.”

“Wasn’t.” I admired the pinkish light wrapping around my fingers.

“You’re not even listening to me.”

I let the magic go.

“I am so.” It was time to do more significant spells if Luna would let me.

“So...”

“So what?”

Mia harrumphed down the phone loudly. “What’s the shop? You said it wasn’t a bookstore, then you hung up on me.”

So much had happened that I couldn’t tell her, my best friend who had been by my side when I lost my parents. Now, I had to keep secrets from her.

“It’s a gift shop. I can’t see how it’s going to make any money.”

“So you’ll be back this weekend?”

“Um... well, Mr. Parker crashed into Maria’s car.”

“What? Who is Mr. Parker, and... are you all right? You must pick up the phone to tell me these things as they happen, not all simultaneously.”

I sensed Mia was beginning to get dramatic, and she would be difficult to say anything to if that was the case.

“I’m fine.”

The ache in my arm started up again. What did this mean? A wolf attacks me in a dream, and now my arm hurts. A sign? Witches believed in shit like this, right? It wasn’t like I trusted Luna enough to tell her this, which was why I needed to get downstairs and read.

“Really?”

“Yeah, I’ll stay here and check out the place while my car is being fixed.” I stopped short of saying more.

Would I be going back in a few weeks? I didn’t want to make promises I wasn’t about to keep.

“Caleb and I can come down and see you.”

No, I didn’t want that. Not now, not yet.

“That would be great. Just give me a week to settle in and sort out a few things.”

“You know we don’t need much. We can sleep on the floor.”

“I know, but Luna is doing my head in. Let me get to my feet, and then you guys can come down.”

I held my breath. Would Mia be offended by this fob-off? I couldn’t handle learning magic and keeping it from my friends.

“As long as you haven’t found a guy, and that’s the real reason.”

“Course not.” Al immediately came to mind.

“I don’t believe you. That would be right... you go away, plan to come back, then fall in love, and we won’t ever see you again.”

“Settle down, Mia, it’s nothing. I’ve had a long trip to get here, my car is being fixed, and I’ve got this shop to sort out.”

“Fine, I’ll take your word this time.”

The bells of the front door downstairs clanged loudly.

“Tanjie, you up?” called out Luna.

“Coming,” I yelled, moving the phone away from my mouth.

“I got to go... the witch is here.” I clamped my jaw closed. I can’t believe I said that.

“That’s a novel name.”

“I meant to say Luna. Gotta go.”

“Pick up the phone next time. Bye.” Mia hung up.

I could tell she was annoyed with me.

“I got the kettle on... come down after your shower,” yelled Luna.

How did she know I hadn’t had a shower, let alone that I wanted one? Was it because she was a witch and had that sixth sense or something? I wasn’t sure.

Would this mean I would have this skill soon? I hoped so.

I grabbed clean clothes and took a quick, hot shower, the heat soothing my arm enough that I didn’t worry so much about it.

Refreshed from the shower and dressed in clean clothes—denim shorts and a tight black top—I carefully descended the narrow, steep staircase. Hand on the whitewashed wall to steady myself, I remembered to duck below the wooden beam.

For a moment, I could see myself having a peaceful life here. Then I stepped into the shop, and a weight of responsibility landed on my shoulders that I didn’t understand.

Luna bustled by the round table, pouring tea from a pot covered in a knitted green beanie. She wore a modern kimono dress, dark colors of blues and mauve blending together, hair down around her shoulders, and a sparkly clip above her ear.

“You spiked the tea again?” I asked, striding to the table.

“No.” Luna put down the pot.

“Good, but I’m not going to drink it.”

“I’ve got some breakfast. Well, I suppose more like brunch now, for you.” Luna pointed to a rose-decorated plate full of muffins.

“Let me guess, healthy?” I sat on a chair, my stomach grumbling.

“Yes, savory muffins, bacon, egg, veggies, also gluten-free, and I made them myself.” She sat opposite me at the table. “Straight out of the oven too.”

“Sounds delightful.” I picked one up, not entirely sure this was what I wanted to be eating.

“Eat up. We’ve got a big day ahead.”

“I’m getting the hang of the magic.” I snapped my fingers, cycling through the basic spells she had shown me yesterday.

“Good, but don’t waste your energy,” she responded firmly.

I don’t know what I was thinking—maybe that I would get praise or something? I stuffed a muffin in my mouth. It was a little dry but warm, and my stomach was grateful for some food.

“So when can we get started,” I asked, refusing to drink the tea. I wouldn’t put it past her to spike it again. Though she was drinking hers, and it was from the same pot.

“When I’ve finished my cup of tea,” she replied.

“I’ll go grab a coffee then.” I stood up, keen to get out of here.

“Your magic will work better without it.” She sipped from her mug decorated with a cartoon bilby.

“I’m sure not all witches are caffeine-free,” I challenged, grabbing another muffin.

“Nope, but you are starting your lessons late in life and need all the help you can get.”

Great, I was a special case. I sat back down, promising myself to get coffee later. I was giving up a lot to be here and wasn’t about to forgo my coffee.

“You know it’s no fault of mine.” I leaned back in the wrought iron chair, picking at the muffin. It was about time information was given to me.

Luna peered at me over the top of her mug, taking a long sip of her tea so she didn’t have to respond.

“If you told me or my parents told me what was going on, then I wouldn’t be in this situation.”

“Like I said, it was for your own safety.”

“For my own safety? You might want to tell me why they would keep from me that I had magic.”

“I will.”

“When? The way I see it, now would be a good time. Wouldn’t I learn better? Or faster if I knew why this was all happening now? And why is the dark moon so important.”

Luna’s face went solemn. She set the mug on an unmatching side plate and folded her fingers in front of her.

“You were the first witch born who showed potential in my lifetime. You carry the promise of keeping our magic alive, ensuring we are around in the future because we have a role here on Earth.”

“Yeah, I sorta know that, but I need more information *now*.”

“The coven decided to hide you.” Luna’s eyes glazed as she spoke, her fingers tangling together in front of her.

“Why? It would make more sense to train me so I was strong when you needed me to be. And why do you need me to be powerful now in the magic? What’s really going on?”

“We had to keep you safe to be sure what was happening. You see, our job is to govern over the other supernaturals. You could be a target if they found out you existed. We’re struggling to keep hold of our power. You were... are our hope to keep us in the top position over the others.”

“Keep going... there has to be more.”

“We were right, you know, to keep you hidden, to prevent your magic from developing until you were eighteen. But well, I guess that’s when things began to go wrong for us and you.”

“Why?” My voice was soft. I didn’t want to know the answer since it would bring up the memories I was trying too hard to suppress.

“They killed your parents.” Grief hit me again. It never seemed any softer when reminded of what happened to my

parents.

“Who?” My voice cracked.

“The wolves.”

My face went white. The dream dominated my mind. Two wolves fought over me while I was desperate to get into the shop.

“What happened? I can tell something happened.” Luna’s face paled, the urgency in her voice prickling my skin.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me, Tanjie,” Luna snapped.

I couldn’t tell her. *It didn’t mean anything, right?*

She moved next to me, hand on my shoulder. “You can’t do this alone. Or you could end up dead like your parents.”

I didn’t want that, but the words remained unspoken.

“If you’re dead, you can’t avenge who murdered your parents. Don’t let the wolves win.”

Luna’s words motivated me into action. They awoke a fight in me I never knew was there. I couldn’t let whoever killed my parents get away with it.

“I saw what I thought was a large dog outside my window last night.”

“This is worse than I thought. Right, let’s get into some serious magic. The shop stays closed today.”

A shiver coursed through me, the chance to wield magic appealing. I followed her to the small open space between the books and crystals.

Right or wrong, I’ll keep the dream to myself. One of the wolves was protecting me. I needed to know what that meant before blurting it out. Something about the wolf that attacked the other, a bond or a connection of sorts between us, made me keep this detail unspoken.

“Ready, Tanjie?” asked Luna, a serious tone to her voice.

“Ready.” I wanted to learn powerful spells. Those who killed my parents, these wolves or whatever they were, had to pay for their actions.

CHAPTER 19



*A*laric

I DIDN'T LIKE what Rafe was up to with Tyr. I needed to put a stop to it.

The beta position will be mine.

Mulling over what to do, anger slowly simmered below the surface as the heat of the afternoon beat down on me. I longed for the sun to dip lower in the sky so the shadows would lengthen and relieve me from the warmth of the hot summer days.

Better still, I will be alpha.

I placed a red brick on the growing wall that was almost waist high. I tapped into the mortar, wiped away the excess, and then repeated the step. The job was mind-numbing, but it gave me space to think. Damn, it was hard keeping myself in check. If I wasn't mulling over the beta position, it was sexy thoughts about Tanjie.

Tyr worked nearby. We hadn't spoken all day, and the energy between us was strained. Ordinarily, there would be banter between us. Not today, not now—he was in direct competition with me for the beta position.

I glared at him for the hundredth time, my wolf pushing to get out and fight him. Not that it would work in my favor if I started a fight, but I couldn't believe Tyr would fall for one of my dad's manipulative moves.

One was about getting me to step up and do what I was told. Tyr knew how I felt about this. We had grown up together and knew each other well. The chance of power had gone to his head way too quickly.

“You know, instead of blaming me, you should have a good look at yourself,” said Tyr abruptly.

“Fuck off. You should keep your nose out of things that aren’t your business,” I snapped back at him.

“But it is my business. Rafe trusts me more than you,” said Tyr.

“You’re a fucking idiot if you’re going to believe whatever it is he’s promised you.” I put the trowel on top of the freshly laid bricks and strode over to Tyr.

“You know he does this, pits us against each other. He is playing you,” I said softly, not wanting the others on site to hear. It was frowned on to bad mouth the alpha like this. We were all meant to follow and be a pack. At least he was finally doing something about the control the witches enforced on us.

“He’s finding out who is the strongest.” Tyr stepped toward me, chest puffed out, shoulders squared.

“Like hell he is.”

“You can’t take being looked over because you’re not good enough.” Tyr pointed his finger at me.

“Look how the chance of getting power has changed you. You wouldn’t cope in the beta position. You’ll fuck it up all the time,” I shot back.

“You would have to be around even to know whether that would be the case.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Tyr was pushing my buttons today.

“You don’t think I’m being given this chance because you’re not around. You’re too busy prowling at night and not taking any responsibility.”

“I didn’t think you were this shallow, Tyr.” I clenched my fists, trying to keep them by my sides and not punch my mate in anger.

“You’re the one who is shallow.”

“I’m around, Tyr, more than you think. I can have a private life.”

“You need to be around if we are going to attack the witches and win.”

This was how my dad got to Tyr. Of course, he made a promise he had no intention of keeping. But then he said it was all to defeat the witches.

“What do you mean if? We are going to do this,” I corrected.

“Yes, but you’re not around to be involved in the discussions. You don’t even know what was said last night.”

Fuck, I swallowed hard. I had been relying on Tyr to tell me, to keep me informed, but I saw now, albeit perhaps a little too late.

“So, you’re saying you won’t catch me up because you want to be beta over me.”

It was all starting to make sense. I had to applaud my dad for this move. What better way to stop me from going out prowling at night than by cutting off who supplied me with my information?

“Tyr,” I said softly. “You’re smarter than this... think about it. If you don’t tell me what’s going on, then Rafe gets to me.”

“No, it’s about who is better for the position.” Tyr shook his head.

“He will never give you the beta position. Hell, I will be lucky to get it. We’re too young.”

“It’s time for the next generation to step up.”

It was clear what conversations I had been missing last night. I needed to be around to stop Tyr from believing this shit. The pack couldn’t go up against the witches like this. We

needed to be fully ignited to change the balance and become the ones in control.

“Hey, you two get back to work,” called out Rafe as he strode toward us.

“I won’t let you ruin my chances of having something I had always dreamed of.”

“Everyone dreams of leading the pack. It’s just not going to happen. Think smart, Al.”

I wasn’t going to win this argument with my mate. I don’t know how I could get him to see reason. He’d lost his head with the false promise of beta.

“Tyr, don’t disappoint me,” growled Rafe.

Tyr turned away quickly, head down, and returned to work, making more concrete.

I stared at Rafe. “I know what you’re doing.”

“If you did, you would be here, working and not off prowling at night.”

I won’t be making that mistake again. As much as I wanted to see Tanjie, I would have to put my desire on ice if I could manage it.

“I wasn’t. I was clearing my head by running.”

“The problem is that even if it were true, your reputation says otherwise, and I would not believe you.”

I clenched my jaw tight, refusing to look away from Rafe. He had me, and he knew it. I was trapped in my own misadventures.

“You promised you would be by my side,” said Rafe quietly, an edge to his voice that sent shivers down my spine.

“I am.”

“Then make sure you are. We’re plotting all the time, the pack members are all contributing, and you can’t have any leadership role if you’re not around. The others need to trust

you as much as they trust me. Look how easy it was for me to turn Tyr against you.”

I hated him for what he was doing. My nails dug into my palm, stopping me from taking a swing at him. He was taunting me, but I wouldn't react.

“You've wanted us to go up against the witches for so long... now is your chance, boy, to show me how much you want this.”

Fuck, he was good at twisting things around. He was right, and just like that, he had me cornered.

“Got it.” It wasn't a question.

Rafe pointed his finger into my shoulder as he spoke. I didn't flinch, standing my ground. I wouldn't fight him, but I wouldn't back down either.

“I got it all right.”

“Get back to work. I expect you to be at the pub tonight, talking with the pack members and getting to know what their strengths and weaknesses are. Otherwise, you'll be on the back bench when the time comes to attack.”

Rafe knew I didn't want that. I wanted to be where the action was.

“So, what is the plan? I know you have one, even if you ask the others for their input.” I risked a lot by stepping in closer to him. It was important what we were saying stayed with us.

“Course I do. But I'm not actioning anything until the ancestral spirits have been consulted. First, we need to plan the bonfire properly. If we want to defeat the witches, we must be prepared.”

We'd never successfully overturned the witches' control. What would I do first when that happened? My mind turned to Tanjie, and conflicting emotions stirred deep. I had to keep how I felt about her to myself.

“You would wait to consult the ancestors before giving the position to your own son?” I asked.

“Most definitely. It’s a position to be earned. You haven’t earned it.”

It had been too much to expect him to trust me. I hadn’t proven myself, but I would. I would learn more about the witches, ensuring we would overthrow them and then be the ones with all the control.

“Make sure you don’t go out tonight... leave the prowling for the celebration when we win,” warned Rafe.

I nodded in acknowledgment. I would do as I was told this time and however long it took to ensure I moved up toward the top position of the pack.

“Unless you want me to go spy on the witches. We should start having them all followed, you know.” The coven was small so we could easily track each member.

“Not yet, it’s too soon. We have to be fully ready before we do something like that. They might get on to us.”

All of the supernatural numbers had declined over the years the more the population of humans grew. Our magical abilities were declining. They wouldn’t if the witches let us turn some of the humans. Though a bite wasn’t the same, it would still help our numbers.

“What if the vampires rise too?” I asked.

“That’s why we need to be thoroughly organized first.”

“This is time for the Dark Moon pack to be in their rightful position as leaders,” said Rafe. “Don’t disappoint me, boy.”

“See you later tonight then,” I said before returning to finish bricklaying.

The other pack members nearby stared at me. I had so much lost ground to make up it made me dizzy. I needed something to give me standing in the pack. To show I was working with everyone and not being the lone-wolf type and that I had changed and was mature enough to lead the pack. I could hear the others returning to their work as I laid the bricks. I had to think of a way to bring something to the pack, especially to Rafe.

What could I do?

Knife-like pains turned in my gut. There was one place where I could go to get information.

Tanjie.

But could I betray her?

How much did she know about the witches? It was clear the way she struggled last night to command her magic that she was untrained. I wanted to keep her untrained. It could be the only way we might have a chance of something happening between us after the dust settled from the attack. One could only hope that this would be all over quickly.

I didn't even know her. I wanted to know her, not ruin or use her like that. But ultimately, she was a witch, and I couldn't forget that her kind never went with my kind.

Either way, I knew Rafe. He would have me closely watched. The bonfire was in two nights, and it was a short time for me to behave myself, gain respect, and be able to influence the pack instead of being in my dad's shadow.

It was time to attack the witches. But it was also my time to take a position in the pack. And I would do anything for that to happen. I only wish I hadn't set eyes on Tanjie. Otherwise, moving forward wouldn't be so complicated.

CHAPTER 20



*J*anjie

SWIRLS OF FIRELIGHT shot from my hand, bursting through the dull light of the shop and hurting my eyes. I fought not to lose control of the magic, my hands trembling with nerves, and shock worked against me.

“Focus,” said Luna firmly. She stood a foot or so away from me, eyes red and tired.

The orange glow settled in front of me, casting a blaze of burned color on the shelves of books where I was nestled. Farther away were bowls of crystals, tarot cards, angel statues, and dream catchers that hung from the ceiling.

This is where I had spent most of the day, casting spell after spell, learning, remembering, and now Luna tested me. Exhaustion beaded on my forehead from the exertion, my entire body supporting myself to manipulate the magic I had summoned.

“Good,” encouraged Luna.

The magic settled, and the trembling in my fingers eased. I was getting the hang of this, but I didn’t allow myself to relax.

My teeth grit tightly, and I willed my magic to remain contained. I stood firm as the power left me but also remained part of me. I held the balance of being in between two states to control the force.

Luna had given me the task of mastering the magic and being able to push it away and bring it back. Motivated since hearing about wolves killing my parents, I wanted to have all the magic I could wield, ready to avenge their deaths.

I had to get this right if I wanted to move on to more powerful spells. I wasn't about to fail now. So far today, every spell had come easy to me until now.

"You need to get this right before we break," said Luna.

As if I needed the reminder. I desperately wanted a coffee. The withdrawal headache was bad enough to have to push through, let alone the growing hunger in my belly. But that was nothing compared to how drained I felt after casting each spell.

I didn't complain or even mention this to Luna. I had to be ready to avenge my parents, and so much time had already been lost.

Who would've known Luna could be such a hard taskmaster? She was, but I didn't care. I was learning the skills I needed to be who I was born to be.

I just wished I could learn faster. I didn't want to stop for a break or food, even though my eyes strained, my head ached, and tiredness was affecting my concentration. Hell, I'd even give up coffee if it meant I could use my magic to the best of my ability.

I faltered, losing control of my magic, ripples extending out through the burnt orange color and then back to me at a much faster speed. The flame-like magic came back toward me too much. I overcorrected, pushing the magic back out. The magic was in my hands, but the next moment, it wasn't. It was worse than that. It split in a dozen directions, sparks whirling outward like fireworks.

"Shit." I desperately tried to bring the sparks back to me.

Come here, you little fuckers.

They continued to flow out. Adding a mystical vibe but one edged with danger to the darkened store's interior.

One of them landed on the front of Luna's shoulder, melting the material of her dress. She yelled in pain.

I rushed to her. I had no plan in mind, but this was my fault, and I had to do something.

Luna pushed me away, sending me stumbling backward. I had no idea she was so strong.

Before I could grumpily say I was just trying to help, blue-light magic moved from her hand into her shoulder, and she sighed.

Sure, she didn't need me, but I needed her.

Luna rushed forward, and I stepped aside. A counter spell left her hands, and thick tendrils of magic went out, then shattered into cold blue sparks, sending those sparks out to neutralize my mistake. The blue sparks searched out, and my red sparks circled them before joining, gaining speed, before they both disappeared with a pop.

A counterspell is what I should be using. Had I learned that? Was there something I could use instead?

I don't know.

There were so many more sparks to put out. Fortunately, most were hovering in the shop instead of landing and causing a fire that would end my newfound life.

I had to do something.

A spark landed on the multi-colored circular rug and burst into tiny flames.

"Fuck." I rushed forward.

I might not remember a spell to help me, but I had thick boots, and they would do better than my magic right now. Stamping on the cinder, I suffocated the fire before it took hold.

No way was I going to take the heat for burning down a shop. Besides, Luna wouldn't let me forget it. I'm sure the coven wouldn't either, and I could even add Mia and Caleb to that list.

Just a tiny black mark.

I surveyed the carpet, not wanting to see the damage close up.

This place would go up in a burst of flames and smoke with one spark. I didn't want to be the one who burned down their inheritance and new future because I couldn't control my magic.

I inhaled deeply. I could smell more smoke.

Luna had countered my red sparks, but had she missed one?

She was still sending out blue light, which wasn't as strong as before. She leaned toward her injured shoulder, making her lopsided.

I had to help her. This was all my fault.

Where had a spark landed?

Spinning around on the spot, I couldn't see any fire or smoke. A fire smoldered somewhere.

Smoke tendrils rose from near the bookshelves in the far corner.

Not the books. Not before I had a chance to read them.

I willed my magic to be cold as ice. In my mind's eye, my magic would spark like Luna's had and extinguish the fire. I would fix my mistake.

Instead, it was more like a lightning bolt, zigzagging deep blue light through the air.

Dammit. I held my breath. It might still work.

The bolt tip hit Luna in the back, and she cried out, arching backward. My magic shot from my fingers out of control, hitting the ceiling and bouncing around the shop.

"Stop your bloody magic, girl," she yelled at me.

"I was helping." I pulled back on my magic as if it were a rope I could rein back into me. The blue light came to me.

I ducked, covering my head with my arms.

Yeah, that hadn't gone as I had hoped it would. I watched the blue shards of light fade, the magic dispersing. My body tensed, ready to react so I wouldn't get hit with the last few pieces flying aimlessly.

Luna struggled to stand, sending out her magic to the fire. She extinguished the flames just as they were about to take hold.

I breathed out heavily, standing tentatively. *That was lucky.*

Excitement pulsed through me. The power of what I could do blew my mind. Why did I need this magic anyway?

“You can learn how to do the shop's inventory now and process damaged books.” Luna picked up the book *How to Heal Your Body in 30 Days* by Luna Greenwood. The bright modern cover burned around the edges, soot thick on the pages.

“Wouldn't have happened if I had been taught.” I folded my arms over my chest.

“Stop saying that and focus on what you can learn now,” Luna snapped back.

“I was.”

Luna ignored me, dropped the book on the floor, and started picking out the other damaged books from the bottom shelf.

“It could've been worse.” I helped her by pulling out two more books, the covers blackened beyond readability. I threw them on the pile, my chest tight. If I could burn books, I could do so much more damage to other things, even people.

“It's bad enough, girl.” She sat back on her knees, hand on her shoulder.

“Can I get you anything? Tea?”

“Magic burns are more painful than a normal burn,” explained Luna, clutching her shoulder, fingers digging into her muscles as she moved. “I need to wait it out.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Just don’t do it again.”

“I promise.”

Though could I? There was too much I didn’t know about my power.

“You have a power in you like none of us. The coven wanted to ensure the wolves or other mystical creatures didn’t take you.”

“There are others?”

“Yeah, vampires, other shifters, trolls, demons, not so dissimilar to the fantasy stories humans tell. The coven keeps them in order, they obey the rules, and they are allowed to stay on Earth. From time to time, they don’t. We’ve been losing our ability. Modern life is taking us away from the source of our magic. Then you came.” She paused to catch her breath as she spoke in pain from her injuries.

“I was hope for the coven? That’s a lot of pressure.”

“Which is why we kept it hidden and put a spell on you to hide your magic even from yourself. This spell came off when you were eighteen, and you were meant to be initiated into the coven and begin your training.”

“But my parents died.”

Luna nodded, tears in her eyes.

“So when’s my initiation? Do I even need one?”

“The coven wants you to have an initiation on the dark moon to bring you to your full power.”

“Why the dark moon?”

“The dark moon will help you connect to your inner wisdom and power. It will recharge you, making you ready to begin your path as a witch and future leader of the coven.”

“Sounds too easy.”

“Look around, it’s not. Now, let’s try this again.” Luna got up from the floor with a groan.

“This time, forget about the words of the spells I gave you. Find them within yourself.”

“How?”

“Everyone is different, so you need to find out how by yourself. Only know that there is a way within you.”

“Okay then.” If that’s what I had to do, then so be it. I would show Luna and myself that I could control my power. At least I had finally gotten some answers. It barely touched the need for more, but it had to be enough for now.

This time, I was going to get the spell right.

I let the magic intensify in my hands. I felt the magic anchor within me.

I drew the energy upward, helping it to awaken my power, slowly, this time. I took a moment to examine the magic, whisper the spells, pronounce each word as Luna taught me, and use my ability to find what needed to be said to determine what I needed.

The magic circled my hands, and instead of pushing it out, I released my control over the energy. The light snaked outward into the air, gracefully moving around the same area as if waiting for further instructions.

I released the magic a little more. It moved out toward Luna, and I saw her freeze with fear. I called the light back to me, and it obeyed. Peace flooded through me as I played with the magic, pushing and pulling it around me.

“Good,” said Luna. “Much better.”

It became easier to move the magic. I had been searching for this purpose in my life, but I wasn’t sure where it would lead me—on a new path full of adventure or maybe one of death. Did I want to meet a wolf in real life? Or a vampire?

Of course, I did. I couldn’t wait as I turned the magic over, causing it to move faster.

The front doors suddenly rattled. The sound caused me to jump, and panic sent my pulse racing, and the magic rushed out of me.

Not wanting a repeat of before, where I physically hurt Luna, I strained to call the magic back to me. It came slowly as the doors rattled again—someone was knocking and wanted to come in.

Luna placed her fingers on her lips to hush me, rubbing her shoulder.

Who was at the doors? Immediately, my imagination went to the image of the wolf I saw last night. I shivered.

The door continued to rattle. I'd been practicing all day, curtains drawn, lights dimmed. From the outside, it should appear as if no one was there.

Whoever it was wanted to come in.

Maybe it was a genuine customer who wanted to come into the store to buy tarot cards, crystals, or whatever it was these people bought. It was overwhelming how much I needed to learn all at once.

“They will go soon,” mouthed Luna.

I wasn't so sure, especially when the door rattled for a third time. Then it went quiet.

They had to have gone now. I moved to go to the door, then froze.

Light burst in the center of the door.

“Bastard,” whispered Luna, hands up, golden magic swirling around her fingers. Luna sent a counter spell to stop whoever was coming in, but she was too late.

CHAPTER 21



*J*anjie

THE DOOR SWUNG OPEN, banging into the side of a table, sending the collected items of crystals and glassware shaking uncontrollably. Two women stood shoulder to shoulder, expressions frowning and appearing angry as hell. Thin tendrils of magic faded from their hands.

I recognized them straightaway from the funeral—Willow, with her long, dark dreadlocks, and the younger witch, Pepper. It began to make more sense now. Of course, these women were part of the coven.

“There you are,” spoke Willow, marching inside. Pepper followed, flicking the door closed with her magic so quickly I didn’t even see the light.

I thought Willow was walking to Luna, but she came to me.

“You could’ve knocked, you know,” said Luna.

“We did. And we tried our keys, but you changed the locks and added protective spells. That wasn’t part of the deal of the girl staying here,” said Pepper.

“We wanted to see the girl,” said Willow, her voice sharp. “You can’t stop us.”

I stepped back, not liking the energy vibrating from Willow, and she was so close to me. At Maria’s funeral, she

had been so supportive, now it was as if a storm raged inside her.

“You will tomorrow night,” responded Luna.

“No reason to stop us from seeing her now.”

Luna looked ready to rip them apart with the magic in her hands, but she let it disappear instead.

“I’ve got this under control,” said Luna. “Maria trusted me with this task, remember?”

“We remember, but by the looks of you, it’s not going to plan.”

“Mistakes happen when you forget to train a witch in her magic,” I interrupted. Why did I feel the need to protect Luna? She irritated me as much as these women did.

“Indeed they do,” said Willow, raising an eyebrow. “So, tell me, Tanjie, how are you feeling? Are you ready for your initiation?”

I wanted to answer yes, but my words dried on my tongue.

What did my initiation involve? Was I going to have to run around naked? Were they going to cut my hand and use drops of my blood for a spell?

The questions rolling around in my head like a tidal wave caused me to pale. I swayed. Pepper caught my arm and steadied me.

“Not told her anything then?” said Pepper.

“I would like you to leave the shop and let Tanjie rest. She has had a very long day and is exhausted,” said Luna, squaring her shoulders.

I didn’t want them to go. They may well be my chance to learn about my initiation. I’d been so caught up in my parents’ deaths and discovering I had magic that I hadn’t had an opportunity to question Luna.

“I’m pleased to meet you both,” I said. “I’ve been looking forward to properly meeting the coven’s members.”

“Which should’ve been at the initiation,” said Luna, her voice rising an octave.

“I see you’ve kept her in the dark,” said Willow.

“I didn’t want to overwhelm her.”

“Let me see her properly this time,” said Willow, stepping too close to me for my liking.

I cringed as Willow looked me up and down, trying not to back away. I couldn’t if I wanted to as it seemed Pepper was holding me still.

“For the best. Now, you really should leave, *both* of you.”

Willow made a tutting sound as she stepped back from me. “The power is strong in her.”

“Glad you’re pleased about that.” I couldn’t help but be sarcastic.

“Pepper, grab some food from the Chinese takeaway two doors down. Tanjie is nearly half starved,” said Willow.

“Fine, but don’t talk about anything of interest before I return.”

“Better hurry then.”

Pepper glared at them and then slipped out the door quickly.

“I didn’t think takeaway food was something I should eat?” I asked.

If the café were open, I’d be getting a coffee right now. I didn’t care how late it was or if the caffeine kept me awake. All this talk about my initiation was setting me on edge, and I didn’t think I would get to sleep anytime soon.

“I’ve been keeping her on a clean diet,” said Luna.

“In one day, you’ve begun to starve her.”

“If you wanted to be the one caring for her, then you should’ve volunteered when Maria asked after her parents were killed. You didn’t put up your hand.”

“What, you told her that her parents were killed? You shouldn’t have said that. It will only complicate things. She’ll be too distracted during her initiation now.”

“Give Tanjie more credit than that,” retorted Luna.

“Yeah,” I said. I had done much better just now with my magic than I had all day, and I was tired and ready for bed. It might’ve come close, but I hadn’t burned down the store. “Don’t I have a say in all this?” I added.

“No!” Both women turned and glared at me.

“Like that is it?” I huffed.

“You will know everything soon enough,” said Luna. “You need to concentrate on your magic ability... all this other stuff you can learn later.”

I didn’t want to be learning about my parents’ killers later, or how the coven worked, or about mystical creatures I thought were pure fantasy. I wanted to know now.

Since I was sure I had exhausted my concentration and more magic practice was out of the question today, it was time for a discussion. I just had to convince two very determined women that this was the case.

“Isn’t it better I know that wolves killed my parents? And shouldn’t you be telling me about the wolves and what the hell they are? Until now, I didn’t think wolves were in Australia.”

“Tanjie, you need to learn to keep your mouth shut,” said Luna, shaking her head. Her shoulders slumped as if she’d lost.

“When have you’ve seen a *wolf*?” Willow’s eyes widened.

“Last night.” I glanced at Luna, hoping she realized I hadn’t meant to say so much. How was I supposed to know what to say or not say anyway?

“This isn’t good, Luna. We need to sit and talk.”

“Cup of tea then?” asked Luna tightly.

“Please, my usual,” Willow replied.

In the small kitchen at the back of the shop, I sat opposite Willow at the table while Luna got plates ready for the Chinese and boiled the kettle. Her movements were slow from the injuries, so I went to help, but she brushed me away.

“How about you tell me about these wolves who killed my parents.”

“I’ll tell you a little, then we need to focus on your initiation,” said Willow, leaning back in the chair.

“All of it.”

Willow shook her head.

“You know what I’m going to say, right, Tanjie?” interrupted Luna.

I groaned a little. Apparently, I was going to have to be satisfied with a bit of information.

“Promise,” I said to Willow.

“I promise.” She took the cup of fresh tea that Luna handed her and inhaled the scented steam.

Luna set the cup in front of me, and I hesitated. I wouldn’t put it past them to drug me if it meant they got out of telling me anything.

“The coven is important to all mystical creatures who live on Earth. Our coven manages those living in Australia and ensures they don’t step out of line and cause chaos.”

“How would they cause chaos?” I wrapped my hands around the mug, seeking warmth for comfort.

“You know, the usual.” Willow waved her hand casually, and her eyes widened when I didn’t respond.

“Of course, you don’t know. The coven ensures that vampires or wolves aren’t out turning humans into their kind.”

I hadn’t even known that was possible. “So I assume we keep all of this knowledge from humans.”

“That’s part of it too. Some sneaks out, things get messy, and there are a lot of memory-wiping spells to cast.

Fortunately, that hasn't happened in a long time."

"What has happened..." started Luna as she gingerly sat down between us with her cup of tea, "... is that from time to time, the wolves or vampires, in particular, want to be in charge and challenge us."

"You fight? And how do you keep this from humans?" I asked.

"Like I said, there can be a lot of memory-wiping spells to cast," responded Willow before sipping her tea. "Perfect blend. Thanks, Luna."

The argument between them appeared to have cooled, at least for now.

"Part of their challenge on the coven in the past has focused on our children, especially if they showed any promise. Our skills are fading with each generation, and your parents were both the most powerful of their generation, so... they had you."

"Are you saying they were... forced to have me?" I could barely say the words.

"No," said Willow, but at the same time Luna said yes.

I glanced between them, my mouth agape, trying to ascertain whether this was true. This was unnatural. This happened hundreds of years ago in royalty, where people were forced to marry to have kids of a particular bloodline. This didn't happen today or to my parents.

"We owe her the truth as you have been reminding me," said Luna.

"It's true, the marriage was forced on them by the coven, but they did learn to tolerate each other and had you," said Willow. "Only you."

I thought back to all those times growing up pestering my parents for a sibling, but they laughed it off. There were the arguments behind closed doors, the whispers, and then they slept in different rooms, always under the excuse of Mom wanting to work at night. It made more sense now. Sort of.

“We had to be careful, and so the coven bound your magic when you were a baby, setting it to be released when you were eighteen—”

“I know,” I interrupted, not wanting to hear this again. “But what about the wolves?”

“I’ll get a book for you to read, but for now, we need to discuss your initiation.”

“I’m not doing it if I have to be naked,” the words rushed from my mouth without any thought.

The women laughed, and my cheeks blushed. Fortunately, Pepper returned with two paper bags of oily Chinese food, and my stomach tightened in anticipation.

“About time,” said Willow. “This talk is making me hungry.”

“You started without me,” complained Pepper as she took out the containers of piping hot food and set them on the table.

“You should’ve been quicker, dear,” said Willow as she started dishing the food onto plates. “Bit of everything?”

I nodded, my mouth watering for food.

We shared fried rice, Kung Pao chicken, dim sum, Peking roasted duck, and sweet and sour pork. Luna even dug into the unhealthy treat.

“So what did you talk about?” asked Pepper, taking a bite of her dim sum.

“Just my parents, but I want to know about the wolves.”

“She can’t stay here alone tonight,” said Willow. She waved her chopsticks in a ‘no’ gesture.

“I’ll stay with her,” said Luna.

I was all for that, but on the other hand, I couldn’t stay cooped up in here all the time. Plus, I was used to going out with people my age.

“Aren’t there any witches my age who could stay with me?” I asked, hopeful that maybe Pepper was.

“No, we need experience looking out for you,” said Willow. “Besides, Adam is the closest witch your age but not ability.”

My breath caught. They wouldn’t dare try to get me to have sex and make a baby with Adam?

I nearly threw up in my mouth at the thought. He had nothing on how Al made me feel—damn shame he wasn’t a witch.

I remembered Adam from the accident. Far out—they were all bloody plotting against me.

“Do I ever get a say in what I do?” It was more a question for myself than them.

“Once you’ve proven you can cast your magic, you will have more choices. First, we need to get you through your initiation,” said Willow.

“You can wear clothes, by the way,” said Luna.

That was a relief. But why are knots forming in my stomach?

“Look, it’s not a big deal on the surface, but it is important to ensure you have full access to your magic,” said Pepper.

Full access? If I could do more than I did before they came in, controlling the magic like I had, wasn’t that enough? What else would I need my magic for?

“It takes a lot to keep the other mystics in line,” said Willow.

How she looked at me made me feel like she had read my mind. “You can never have too much magic.”

I liked the sound of that. But at the same time, I was dizzy with the thought. How powerful was I?

CHAPTER 22



*J*anjie

IMAGES of the wolf and not knowing exactly what was going to happen for my initiation kept me awake. All three of them had been elusive with my questions long into the night until I gave up.

At least they can't take my magic away from me.

As far as I knew, they couldn't. Now that I knew about this power, I wanted to keep it.

But the question kept pounding in my head. Why did I need this strong magic?

Was it simply to keep the wolves in check? Though I planned if I ever got the chance, I would annihilate the wolves for what they did to my parents.

I sat up in bed, no longer able to get any rest. It didn't help knowing Luna was sleeping downstairs. I didn't need a babysitter.

I rubbed my eyes. I would meet the rest of the coven during the initiation ceremony. Until then, I was to rest and keep learning how to manage my magic. Boring.

Could I pledge myself to a coven I didn't know much about?

Willow had given me a brief history lesson of the coven, but it didn't satisfy my curiosity. I needed to know more.

I wanted to know who exactly killed my parents and how they covered it up from the authorities. Was the coven that powerful they could do something like that?

Pepper tried to tell me it wasn't important right now. The most pressing thing was my initiation at the dark moon.

For that to happen, I would stand in the middle of a circle and recite words that would pledge me to the coven. I had to show them trust, which was why I had to come to them in the darkness, including me not knowing every little detail. If I did this, then my real training would begin.

If it was that simple, why was I so churned up inside? The thing was, I wasn't into blind trust, especially with those who were keeping something from me and had the power to wield magic. When the time came, would I do it?

I snapped my fingers, and pink flames fluttered between my fingers. I couldn't even imagine being more potent than what I already was.

I wanted to pause everything, not proceed with the initiation, and wait until the next dark moon. I wanted to be confident and have no doubt that this was the path for me and the future I wanted. When I raised the possibility of doing this, I was shut down. The usual it-wasn't-safe response was given to me.

How could I find out what they weren't telling me?

I needed more time to find out. I didn't know the other witches, which made the task more difficult. I felt incredibly alone as if the world would consume me.

I picked up my phone, and my chest tightened to see no new messages.

I typed quickly to the group chat with Mia and Caleb.

Mia-Caleb: *I miss you.*

A response came from Caleb.

Caleb: *Miss you too, go to bed!*

I smiled. This was what I was afraid might happen. My friends will start to get on with their lives back in Sydney—mine here, creating a divide between us. I just didn't think I would start to feel it so soon.

This was all because I was a witch.

All I could think of was that they better not tell me who I should have a child with. That was never going to happen. I didn't care about the future of the witches, the coven, or what chaos would erupt. I wouldn't do what my parents did.

The magical flames around my fingers gave off a gentle heat, warming my face as I watched them flicker, mesmerized. Even though I was tired, my magic was becoming more accessible to manipulate and control. I let the spell fade, the light winking out, leaving me in the gray light of my room.

Magic could well be the only reason I would go ahead with the initiation. Did that make me a bad person? Who knew I was so power-hungry inside?

Restless, I got out of bed, grabbed a knitted throw off the chair, and wrapped it around my shoulders. The best bet for me to find information was to search the books downstairs.

Any information wasn't about to be on the internet, and if it were, it would be in a hidden place on the web. Considering my skills were lacking when it came to technology, I opted to go old-school and look in a book.

A shiver slipped down my spine, and I looked at the window. Learning what I had about wolves today, I wasn't sure I wanted to know whether it was out there.

Was it coming for me? Was that why it was watching me?

I should have been scared, but it wasn't fear that prickled my skin. It was something more substantial, profound, and I had no control over.

I went to the window as if I were doing something forbidden.

I stood to the side, not wanting to be seen, pushed the lace curtain away, and glimpsed out.

My shoulders slumped when I didn't see the wolf. I moved closer to the glass to get a better look.

The wolf was not there.

I wished he was.

These feelings confused me. The wolves had killed my parents, and I couldn't feel drawn to the wolf like this.

Maybe it had me under a spell?

I moved away from the window, the curtain falling back into place, regaining my privacy.

The dream came to mind, reminding me this wolf protected me. Was this why I wanted to see it?

But what did this all mean? It shouldn't be so mixed up like this, and I wished everything had clearer boundaries—black and white and no hints of gray.

What I could do is to keep learning my magic and do my investigation.

I slowly opened the door to my bedroom. Luna was sleeping downstairs in the small room out back on a blow-up mattress. She refused to take my bed.

I didn't want to wake her, not after injuring her twice with my magic. She needed to sleep and heal. Plus, I didn't want her to stop me from snooping around the books.

Socked feet kept my steps muffled as I slid over the wooden floorboards to the top of the stairs. I held on to the railing tight to keep my balance. It was much harder doing this in the dark.

I went down step by step, skipping the second to last step, which creaked, and walked into the storefront, eager to find information to ease my muddled feelings.

I listened for any sound coming from where Luna slept. I exhaled, and all was quiet. This was my chance to find out something about myself and my magic.

At the bookshelf, I ignored the space on the shelves where the books that had been singed by my magic earlier in the day

had been, which were now in the recycle bin. No doubt I'd have the tedious task of learning how to reorder stock and how to enter the tax details in the computer sometime soon.

I flicked on the Himalayan salt lamp on a nearby side table and searched the books on the shelf. These books were way too modern with bright covers, catchy titles, and authors with PhDs or other qualifications. These were the sort of books a non-witch would want to read, especially if they thought they had some kind of power.

These weren't the sort of books I was looking for. I needed reading material for witches.

I pushed the book I had scanned back into the stack, then pulled the knitted blanket tighter around my shoulders. The air had a chill to it tonight.

Snooping around the shop, I began to have my first honest look at the place I was meant to be managing. So far, that hadn't happened, though I had to admit finding out I had magic was much more exciting.

An assortment of crystals lay in wicker baskets on a long table. Dream catchers and sun catchers hung from the ceiling, and a jewelry cabinet with set semi-precious stones was to the side. These were all things I never connected to, even though my parents had tried to change my mind. It looked like they would all be part of my life whether or not I wanted them to be.

Crushed velvet maroon curtains hung on the wall as if to soften the room's aesthetics, giving it a more mystic feel. It worked, though I don't know if I would've decorated the place like this. Did I get to redecorate?

I didn't know if I wanted to do that, but how else would I pass the day? It wasn't as if many customers were coming into the shop.

I ran my hand over one of the curtains, pulling it a little. Something caught my attention, and I doubled back, moving the material.

A cupboard, old and dusty, as if rarely used, stood in an enclave, hidden deliberately but with easy access. I tried the door, but it was locked.

The key must be here somewhere. I carefully ran my hand on the top of the cupboard, then underneath, even the side, but only managed to find years of dust.

Curious to test my magic and see if I could create my own spell, I called my magic to my fingers. Imagining the lock in the cupboard to unclick, I let the soft magic swirl toward the lock.

A metallic click set my pulse racing.

I had done it. I opened the door. My first spell, and here I was opening locked cupboards.

Should I be doing this?

I didn't care when I saw the shelves full of old leather-bound books, spines cracking with age.

Power vibrated around my hand as I reached for a book.

This is what I should be reading, not those books for kids.

I could feel the book as if it had its own pulse, which my body attuned to.

My hands trembled as I opened the book, letting the pages fan out, the musky breeze hitting my nose, sending ripples of anticipation through me.

Eagerly, I scanned the words on the page. Golden light brought each word alive as I read it, then floated upward, absorbing into my skin. Bits of knowledge passed directly to me, and my magic tingled throughout my body.

So I can be more powerful.

I liked it.

It was more than just the words coming from the page to me, but also my connection to the book. I was being fed information, and the questions settled in my head.

A bang outside the shop caused me to jump. I slammed the book closed as if I'd been caught doing something I shouldn't.

I held my breath, expecting Luna to come rushing out from the back room or light to start coming through the door like when the other witches came.

Neither of those two things happened, and my pulse settled.

A scratching sound outside the shop caught my attention. It was soft and curious, and instead of being scared, I wanted to find out what was causing the sound.

Probably a possum or something.

I put the book on the table by the salt lamp, then went to the door. Using my newly made spell, I unlocked the door.

A fleeting thought rushed through my head, and I wondered if I should be doing this.

Whether or not I should, I cracked open the shop's front door and peered out.

My eyes locked with those of an animal.

My breath caught in my throat.

It was the same wolf as last night.

I should shut the door and lock it. The wolves killed my parents.

Instead, I opened the door farther, exposing myself to something I couldn't fight off if it tried to attack me.

I'm seeing things.

When I gazed into the eyes of this wolf, I knew this was real, and I wasn't afraid. Its fur was beautiful and thick, soft, and clean with mottled patterns of gray. I wanted to run my hands through its pelt and feel its power.

The wolf lowered its head, eyes remaining on mine.

Instinctively, I held out my hand.

My breaths became shallow and slow, but my heartbeat raced. I watched the wolf inch closer to my hand.

I shouldn't be doing this.

My hand remained outstretched toward the wolf.

What are you doing here?

Breath from its nose tickled the back of my hand as the wolf came closer.

The wolf sniffed me, taking its time inhaling my scent.

I'm here for you.

I froze, unsure if I had heard right.

Had the wolf just spoken in my head?

I had to be imagining this.

Its wet nose touched my skin before I could take my hand away. Heat seared through me, sending bewildering sensations rippling up my arm straight to my heart.

If he was here for me, it wasn't to attack me. He could've done that already. Why?

Then the wolf licked my hand.

Wet heat tickled my skin. I shivered from its touch, and that drew me closer to him.

A sharp click echoed inside the shop.

Immediately, I pulled my hand away, and whatever was forming between us broke.

The wolf bared its teeth, not to me but to whoever else was in the shop. Then, he quickly bolted away.

I closed the door, wishing him back.

How could a wolf affect me like this?

“Who's there?” called out Luna.

I jumped at the sound of her voice, more so because I had nearly been caught doing something I shouldn't be doing. What would she do if she had seen me?

I was sure she'd attack the wolf, but there would surely be some punishment for me too. I was the one who had opened

the door to the wolf. To the enemy.

I hurried to the couch, grabbed a book from the shelf, and sat down, hoping I appeared like I was reading.

Then I saw the book I'd taken.

Quickly, I threw the knitted blanket over the table, hiding the book.

I'd just settled on the couch, book open, when Luna stepped out of the shadows. Had she seen anything?

My pulse quickened from the scare more so than the encounter with the wolf.

“What are you doing here?” asked Luna. “You gave me such a fright.”

“I couldn't sleep.”

“I have tea for that.”

“Yeah, I'm still not sure that's legal, and you will drug me.” I closed the book and put it aside.

“You didn't have any more dreams about wolves, did you?”

“No.”

My hand tingled pleasantly where the wolf had licked me. It had felt more like a kiss. I shouldn't be feeling this way after finding out what the wolves did to my parents. But I was, and I couldn't control it. More than anything, I wanted to see the wolf again.

“I hope not. You really should drink some of my tea. You must be at your full strength for tomorrow night's dark moon. You heard the others when they came here. You've been overdoing it.”

I had been, but the encounter with the wolf had changed me. I don't know, but I was different somehow—more alert, awake. However, I didn't know that a part of me had been sleeping.

Or was this because of the words I had read and absorbed?

I faked a yawn and stretched. “I think I’m ready to sleep now.”

Luna didn’t move, and I realized she was waiting for me to head upstairs. I didn’t want to leave the book out, but I had no choice.

“You forgot the blanket. It’s chilly tonight. You might need it.” Luna picked up the blanket and froze.

“What is this doing here?” Luna picked up the book.

I shrugged, my mind racing for something I could say that wouldn’t land me in any trouble.

“You’ve been reading this?” Luna’s voice was cold. “It was locked away.”

“The cupboard wasn’t locked,” I lied.

“You shouldn’t be reading this.”

“Why not?” The book had been most helpful.

“You’re not ready. You must go through your initiation first.”

“But I’m still standing here, and nothing bad happened because I read it.”

I preferred Luna to yell at me—not stand there cold and controlled.

“Don’t tell the others you have read it. Promise.”

“Okay, okay, I promise.” I didn’t see what the big deal was.

“Promise,” Luna said sternly.

“What would they do if they found out?”

“Stop your training so you don’t become a witch.”

“Really? From reading a book?” But I knew it wasn’t any book. It had already enhanced my magic.

“You need to pledge to us first, show you are worthy. Don’t mention this to them. You need to show your power first.”

“Fine, I won’t.”

Luna held up the book, fear reflecting in her eyes. “This book is an addiction. You’ll not be accepted if they know you read it. That means no more training.”

“I promise I won’t tell them.” I didn’t want my training to stop.

“Go on, get some rest. It will be time to start the day soon enough.” Luna tilted her head toward the stairs.

I hurried away. Turning back, I saw her holding the book, the magical words lifting from the page as she read it, the light absorbing into her.

At this moment, I knew I wanted the book all to myself and that I had to read it again, no matter what.

CHAPTER 23



*A*laric

WHY COULDN'T I stay away from her? My claws scratched the paved footpath as I bolted away, back to the safety of the scrub.

This was the stupidest thing I had ever done, and I had a long list to compare with.

The scent of the eucalyptus called to me, but I could still smell her musky sweetness and wished I could have properly tasted her. The saltiness lingered on my tongue, and I was jealous my wolf knew her much more intimately than I did.

I would have to change that. But how?

Tanjie was forbidden—the enemy. Yet here I was, running after her as if she was part of the pack, in heat, and I couldn't control myself. This was more than something like a cold shower could fix. I should jump in the nearby lake. The cold water might shock me back to thinking straight.

Somehow, I didn't think that would work. This went deep.

Why did I think if I were in wolf form, it made it okay to see Tanjie?

I couldn't believe I had allowed my wolf to take control like that. Instead of roaming the nearby bushland surrounding the town and hunting rabbits, my wolf had gone to see her. And I hadn't stopped him.

For the second time, I'd gone to see her at night at the shop. The most dangerous place for me was the witches' fortress. What if they had been in there?

The other day, I had gone there during the day, buying some white sage, but that was different. So much had changed in a short time. The pack was going to attack the witches soon, and there was something they were trying to hide about Tanjie.

They would tear me apart for being near her. We all have rules to follow, dammit. I don't want to follow them anymore.

Is that what I secretly believed? If we went up against the witches, not only would the pack be free of their suffocating control, but I would also be able to choose my heart and see if things would progress with Tanjie.

My tongue tingled as my paws now enjoyed the earth's softness as I ran to where I had parked my car. I morphed back into my human form, the summer air warming even before the sun was in the sky.

No way was I going to repeat getting caught like yesterday morning, and I slipped on my jeans, T-shirt, and shoes and got in my car.

My breath fogged on the windshield, it was so hot and heavy. Even in this form, I could taste Tanjie, and it was driving me up the wall.

I was going to have to do something about this and quickly. The pack was going to attack, but first, they had to have the bonfire.

That would be tomorrow night when the moon was at its darkest. A time when secrets would be revealed.

The idea of contacting our ancestors sent my skin prickling, and I turned on the engine of the old Kingswood, revved it just to take delight in hearing the V8 engine, then put it in reverse, going backward way too fast.

We were tight-knit, and the lack of privacy annoyed me, especially in such moments. If I timed things well, I might get Tanjie on my side, get rid of this pent-up energy or whatever it is, then I could get on with destroying her kind.

I swallowed hard. I gripped the steering wheel as I drove too fast from the national park onto the asphalt road that would take me back to my place, an apartment block on the outskirts of town, where all the pack resided.

No matter how I looked at this situation, it wouldn't end well for me, Tanjie, or us.

Yet, I knew I wouldn't stop chasing her until she told me no. I wouldn't like to hear it, but I would respect it. Right? That was my number one rule. But even now, I wasn't so sure.

Just best get this energy out of me first.

If only she had said no tonight and not opened the door or put out her hand, holding it there for me to smell.

All of her actions tonight told me she was saying yes.

I was so consumed with her that I didn't think visiting some of the regular women I would see occasionally would cut it. Dammit, it was as if I felt I was cheating on her, even now thinking of those other women.

A bond like that couldn't form outside of the pack. It wasn't possible.

It was beginning to scare me.

I couldn't go to anyone with this. What would they do? It would put my chance of being beta in jeopardy for a start.

This was something I had to sort out myself. I couldn't trust anyone with this secret.

Maybe I would get some insight at the bonfire.

I didn't think so. This ritual was new to me, something we wolves didn't do very often, so much so I hadn't done this in my lifetime.

I parked my car on the street, locked it, and then sauntered toward the apartment entrance. I was so lost in my thoughts and problems I didn't hear the soft talking until too late.

"Speak of the devil," said Rafe as I walked to the barbecue hut where the pack leaders had been talking, including Tyr.

Had my best mate been ratting me out? The way he turned away from me, I quickly assumed yes. He was stupid to think he was being offered the position of beta.

We no longer had a beta in the pack. Rafe had put off electing one, enjoying having complete control of the pack more than he should. No one challenged the alpha. He was the best fighter. I should be spending my time training instead of roaming after a woman I couldn't have.

“Another night out?”

“I had thinking to do,” I answered Dad gruffly. “Wolf needed a run.”

I acknowledge him, then the others, trying to remain respectful and not rock the boat any more than I managed to do. My gut curdled, and I kept walking.

“Yeah, right, who was it this time? Nancy, Jules, Mella?” He chuckled, raising a beer to the others as if they were sharing a private joke—one, no doubt about me.

None of those names were women I'd been with. I always aimed to be discreet and respectful, but I suppose that's not how others saw it.

“Lay off,” I grumbled. This was too close for my comfort. Rafe had never challenged me for my nightly roaming like this before. I wasn't in the mood for an argument. I had enough of the one going on in my head.

“Come sit down with us, son,” said Rafe, cracking open a fresh beer.

The sound sent me on edge. This wasn't an invitation to turn down. And I didn't want to sit with him or the others.

I stopped, turned, and came back, hating how I had to obey like this. I should be used to it. This was how life was in the pack, but it didn't sit well with me.

He handed me the beer, the can wet and cold in my hand, and I perched myself on the edge of the raised garden bed.

“Bit late to be drinking, isn't it?” I couldn't help myself.

“Lots to discuss tonight, plus we needed you here.”

I clenched my jaw tight. Of course, they did. What was meant to be a quick run ended up taking much longer, and well, seeing her was magical, but now it was all more like a burden.

“I’m here now.” I took a sip of the beer to stop myself from saying any more. The malty flavor washed away the last of Tanjie’s taste, and an emptiness grew inside me.

“Since you weren’t here, we divided up the jobs to get ready for the bonfire tomorrow night,” started Rafe, leaning back on the cold barbecue.

I had to expect this.

“What do you want me to do?”

“You’re to get the firewood.”

Great.

It was a tedious, back-breaking job, and I could see a few snickering. They had been drinking way too much. How did Rafe think they would be fit to work at the construction site today? With clients waiting for us to begin building their homes, we now worked on Saturdays. I supposed they would have an exemption, while the others, like me, would be working double-time to make up for it.

I narrowed my eyes at Tyr. How did he get away with not having to work like me? I wanted to explode with anger, but I couldn’t. I wouldn’t let Rafe get the better of me.

It’s all a setup. I reminded myself Rafe was playing me off against Tyr. If I were going to be beta, this was how it would be. I had to be smarter, something I wasn’t sure I could manage with Tanjie now in town.

Maybe she would go back to the city? I knew that wouldn’t solve my issues. I would follow her until I knew things wouldn’t progress between us.

“Where do you want me to take it?”

“That small clearing near the lake.”

“What about the fire ban?” It was summer, and this wasn’t exactly a good idea for us to be doing, even if we managed to get in contact with our spiritual ancestors.

“Good thing we have pack members in the local fire brigade, and well, let’s say the captain won’t be fit for duty tomorrow night.”

“You’ve got it all sorted then.” Like he always did.

I wanted to end the conversation, put down the beer, get to my apartment, and have that much-needed cold shower. But I forced myself to stay. I had to be a part of this if I wanted a position in the pack.

“When do we attack? Are you going to go in gorilla-warfare style or all-out open war?” I asked, the words not as enjoyable on my tongue as I thought they might’ve been. I blamed the beer. It must be a bad batch.

“What do you think would be the way to defeat the witches?”

I sipped on my beer, taking my time answering. I’d thought about this during the long work hours. It was a no-brainer.

“Divide and conquer, attack them when they’re alone. It will weaken them quickly. And it’s also best not to draw too much attention from the humans, or we might have more than we can handle.”

Our pack numbers were declining, whether it was too much inbreeding, we were away from our natural lands in the Northern Hemisphere, or we were simply evolving, our species dying out, and there was nothing we could do about it. Whatever it was, in our small pack of about thirty members, we had to have a unified front against the witches.

Rafe nodded, agreeing. “You’ve thought about this more than I thought you would. First, before we get too carried away, we need to seek out our ancestors. They will have the best advice for us.”

“They will,” I agreed. This would be a chance to learn the bonfire traditions, and I was eager to learn them along with the

other young ones in the pack.

“Then we will change the balance, this time for good. We will have the power, and the witches can do what we tell them.”

“And we can change humans to be like us... if we want to,” said Tyr, quickly stopping what he was saying.

“We can.” Rafe smiled. “Then our numbers will grow, and we can show our true power to the world.”

I rolled my lips tightly, stopping myself from saying words I’d no doubt regret. Changing humans with teeth or claws would increase our numbers and change our genetics. We would no longer be the pure wolves that we were.

This was what we would have to do to survive. I was hungry to stay on the earth and take the risk for the pack. Tanjie was the risk I wanted to take for myself. I could maybe see her when getting the firewood.

My mind went up a few gears, rolling through the possibilities of how I could get to see Tanjie one last time before the bonfire. After the dark moon, I had a feeling everything would be different, and by then, it would be too late.

I’d not get another chance to see her, and that would send me crazy with all this sexual energy building up inside me. No, I would see her before then. I had to for my sanity.

“To the pack,” I raised my beer. I would stay here as long as I needed to gain what little ground I could with the others so when the time came, I would be the new beta. Or if things went incredibly well in my favor, the new alpha.

CHAPTER 24



Tanjie

“HELLO UP THERE, SLEEPY HEAD,” yelled Luna.

Loud banging downstairs followed, drawing me from my sleep and chasing away my dreams before I could recall them.

It's too early.

My head had only hit the pillow a few minutes ago. *Right?*

I rolled over and put the pillow over my head, trying to muffle the sound. The image of the wolf licking my hand, its moist, abrasive tongue, a delight as it flicked over the back of it. I had spent hours trying to figure out how to see it again.

“Tanjie!”

I sat up at the tone of Luna, the pillow dropping over the side of the bed. Sunlight streamed in around the edges of the blind that didn't fit the window perfectly.

It wasn't early.

“Coming down now... just having a shower.”

I was a novice and in no position to act up. Not if I wanted to learn what I needed to about magic and the coven. I had only been here two nights, and what I learned wasn't enough. That had been made clear enough with my magic hurting Luna. I couldn't afford to allow that to happen again.

“Hurry up, we have practicing to do today, and more members will no doubt come by to check you out now that Willow and Pepper have visited us.”

“Coming now.”

Which wasn't true, but I would be after I had freshened up by having a shower. So many times during the night, I had thought about slipping outside, going out into the night and searching for the wolf. I couldn't stop these thoughts from dominating my mind.

Warm water pelted my skin, waking me up. I wasn't scared of the wolf, and it wasn't why I hadn't gone out to find it.

Learning magic was changing me. The knowledge I was reading or absorbing made me see the world differently. I suppose this was to be expected.

I washed my hair, letting the water dribble down the back of my head, imagining all my thoughts washing away. But they didn't.

While hesitant about the initiation, I found myself wanting to do it. I wanted to say yes to the coven and pledge myself to them. Become the witch I was meant to be. Who knew if I would lead the coven or not? That detail didn't concern me yet, but I wanted to meet my destiny instead of being mediocre.

This rite of mine had been put off long enough, and I didn't want to wait until another dark moon or to be told I wasn't the one.

A quick shower refreshed me, and then I dressed in my usual attire—jeans, a tight top, and a loose shirt over it. I pulled my hair back into a loose ponytail and went downstairs.

The sound of the kettle greeted me, something I didn't think I'd get used to. I would have to smuggle coffee in here or work out how to get out of the shop to go to the café.

There was that rather hot guy, Al, who I wouldn't mind bumping into again. It couldn't be expected that I would stay here, holed up in the shop, running it and learning magic. It

was healthy for me to be out with others close to my age, especially ones who looked as good as Al.

No way did I want to get stuck with Adam. I hoped he wouldn't come into the shop, though I did want to know if George Parker was doing okay after the accident.

"Thought I'd never get you up," said Luna as I entered the kitchen. She put fresh muffins and a bowl of fruit on the table.

"How's Mr. Parker doing?" I asked, picking up a ripe strawberry and popping it in my mouth.

"Huh?"

"You know, the accident. Or was it a way to keep me from returning to Sydney?"

"If it was, aren't you glad? Look what you've found out." Luna set a pot on a corkboard in the center of the table.

She had a point. Even though the accident was staged, I wasn't returning to Sydney. I should tell Mia and Caleb.

What excuse should I tell them? I would have to make something up. Al's image came to mind. My friends would believe it if I said I had found a guy, though a little on the quick side—that was definitely more Caleb's style.

"Did you bake these muffins too?" I turned one over, wishing it was full of sugar.

"Yes, and they're gluten-free. They'll give you the energy you need to get through today after the interrupted sleep you've had."

Had Luna heard me tossing and turning? I much preferred it when I was here in the shop by myself.

"Put your special *herbs* in them?"

"Either way, you need to eat one. I need to start you learning the basics of running the shop, and you must practice."

"Can't the shop wait?"

"We have customers who have orders."

“Really? I thought this was just a rouse?”

“No, this is where the coven meets and buys what they need to be witches. Plus, we do make money with online orders from humans.”

“Not a money pit then?” Which was totally what I thought it would be. I nibbled at the edge of this muffin. Should I trust Luna and her cooking? My stomach grumbled with an I-don’t-care-just-feed-me tone.

“Course not. Whatever gave you that impression?” She plonked down on the seat opposite me and poured herself a mug of tea.

I shrugged, not sure I should be so brutally honest.

“We do better than you think, Tanjie, and I trust you will maintain the profits when you manage the store.”

“Putting on the pressure now, Luna?”

“There are expectations, and you will agree to them as part of your initiation.”

“So my initiation will be here?” I picked off pieces of the muffin and put them in my mouth.

“No, we have a clearing in the scrub where the ceremony will happen.”

“What, here is too public?” It would make sense for the ceremony to happen in the shop if this was where the coven had their meetings.

Luna shook her head. “As part of the ceremony, we need more space, and it’s always better to be close to nature. It will heighten the atmosphere.”

“What will I have to do?”

“Recite a pledge, show your skill in magic, and then see if the ancestral spirits will accept you as part of the coven.” Luna waved her hand casually, but nothing was casual about her words.

“How will I know if they accept me?” I swallowed hard. I should’ve asked what would happen if they didn’t accept me.

“You’ll know.”

I rolled her eyes with the flippant reply. “My intuition is good, but how will I know?”

“It’s different for each new initiate, so I can’t say.”

“What was it for you then? Surely, you must all share what happens.”

“It’s for you alone to experience, and you don’t have to share it with anyone.”

The mouthful of muffin dried. Did that mean it was something harrowing I had to experience? Hadn’t I been through enough in my life with the loss of my parents? I didn’t think I could face anything too tough.

Luna leaned over and put her hand on my arm. The thoughts of doubt immediately settled.

“You’ll be fine, Tanjie. You just need to be yourself and show your magic.”

“So simple, except I don’t have much magic to show... you know, on account of not being taught.” I put the rest of the muffin in my mouth.

“They know that, and it will be taken into account.”

“Who are they, anyway? These what did you call them... ancestral spirits?” I asked. “And why should they impact whether or not I’m part of the coven.”

“Just as the name implies, the spirits are witches who have walked before us here on this land.”

“Does this mean my parents are part of this? They form the ancestral spirits?” My voice was soft, so even I could barely hear it.

“They are.”

Luna squeezed my arm, but it did nothing to reassure me this was good. There was a reason I was becoming more uptight closer to the initiation ceremony.

“Do I get to meet them?”

“It doesn’t work that way,” her voice softer than mine. “Their deaths were recent, they might still be... processing this and not fully integrated.”

I had no idea what that meant, but it sounded painful and unpleasant.

“It’s part of the process of moving into the spirit world,” added Luna. “It’s aimed at helping the newly passed shed their physical side and integrate being in a gaseous state connected strongly to others. It can be... well, a lot to deal with, depending on their life.”

“Or how they died.”

“Yes, but don’t think about that. They don’t have any unfinished business. All they needed to do was to protect you, and they did that.”

Her words were hollow. They did it because they were forced to and the coven needed them to. Not because they wanted to.

“What about Maria? Would I see her too?”

“I don’t think you’ll see her.”

I couldn’t help thinking Luna knew more than what she told me. Something was up about Maria.

“But you said each experience is different. I could see them, right? There’s a chance I could, right?”

“I want to say yes, but I would be lying. While the spirits can be seen as individuals, they are also a collective. They work and communicate together. They look into your spirit to see if you are worthy of joining our coven and if you are the one to lead us into the future.”

That was a hell of a responsibility. And was I ready to meet my parents in spirit form?

“We better get training then.” I snatched my arm from her hand and dragged the chair legs across the floor to stand.

Ready or not, it was going to happen. The best thing I could do was try to be prepared.

“Don’t underestimate this initiation,” said Luna, standing slowly, her hand clutching her shoulder where my magic had hit her the day before.

“This isn’t like the prom night or a debutante ball.”

“A deb what?”

“Oh, they might not have them anymore, but you know, it’s a coming of age. There’s social etiquette to follow. For you, it’s an acceptance of your magic, an acknowledgment of who you are, and to show this to other witches.”

I was sure there was so much more she wasn’t telling me. The entire initiation is different. I still had my stomach in knots.

“So don’t worry.”

“Except I haven’t got much to show off with my magic.”

“Let’s go fix that then.”

“Hey, can I learn to move things?”

“Yes, but let’s not get carried away. It’s better you complete a spell successfully than have them go wrong tomorrow night.”

All of this sounded like studying I had avoided all my life. My head pounded, probably more from the lack of coffee. I had to get one today.

“Come on... we can get in a good two hours before I will have to open the shop. Good thing I set the opening times to later on Fridays.”

Luna guided me to the open space at the shop’s entrance, where I had spent most of the day yesterday practicing my newfound skill.

Luna turned to face me and patted me on the shoulders. “Let’s see what you remember.”

I snapped my fingers, and a burst of red color shot out. Luna jumped backward with a yelp.

“Did I hit you?” This wasn’t a good start.

“No, but center yourself before you start. This is one of the basic steps.”

Pressing my lips together tightly to stop myself from answering back, I withdrew my magic. Luna was right, and I had to stop complaining about never being taught. I didn't fully understand what the initiation ceremony was tomorrow night, but I did know I needed to get my magic the best it could be. Otherwise, I might fail.

I wasn't about to allow that to happen.

CHAPTER 25



*T*anjie

IF I HAD WANTED to go out to find the wolf tonight, it was a no-brainer to work out it wasn't going to happen.

Mainly because I was too tired after another long day of training with my magic and then listening to the boring ins and outs of managing a shop. The amount the shop grossed was impressive. Its humble vibe and appearance had given me the wrong impression.

It got me excited that this was secretly a vibrant business, and that sparked my interest. Plus, I could order so many cool things that would help me as a witch, mainly books and more books. This was like having a personal library.

Who knew I was a good student? At least a witch student. The spells she gave me were easily remembered, and if I kept myself grounded, I was in control of my magic.

Fortunately, there had been no more incidents, and the day ended with Luna in one piece and no more singe marks in the shop. My punishment was entering the damaged books into the tax file document and ordering new ones—not exciting compared to doing magic.

The zero chance of slipping out of the shop into the night to find a wolf wasn't going to happen more so because Luna was staying overnight again—this time on the couch.

I caught her waving tendrils of magic around downstairs. My guess was she'd set magical traps to set off an alarm if I tried to leave the shop.

Luna was smarter than I gave her credit for.

If I had wanted to go check out the secret bookshelf, there was no way that would happen. She'd made no mention of it during the day, and whenever I went to ask, it was as if she knew and changed the subject or taught me a new skill.

That was something for me to investigate another time.

The day ended with me flopping on my bed, almost falling asleep, except I had these nagging thoughts that flipped between the wolf and Al. What did it all mean?

My head pounded from the growing tension. Al was hot and sexy, which worked a desire in me that begged for attention. I had secretly hoped I could get out of the shop to get a coffee, somehow bump into Al, and get to know my first real local. I had also hoped he'd come to the shop, and every time the door opened, I had looked up only to be disappointed.

I suppose it would give me something to amuse myself with after the initiation. By then, I hoped I would have more freedom and didn't want to contemplate what I would do if that didn't happen.

What I really wanted to do now was to go outside, find the wolf, and solve its mystery. I might be stubborn and slow to learn, but I knew it wasn't worth going downstairs. I had to wait.

The initiation was more important. It was my chance to be a witch, learn magic, and see my parents.

I turned over in bed, bouncing slightly on the mattress from my movement, and froze as I looked at the window. Was the wolf downstairs? Watching? Waiting for me?

Go and find out. The bad idea rattled in my head.

An ache settled in while I laid on the bed.

What was it about that wolf I wanted to know more about? Did I think it could tell me about my parents and who killed

them?

A sickening twist in my belly caused me to double over, and I brought my knees to my chest, hugging them in tightly to my body.

Was this the wolf who killed my parents?

It couldn't be. It was too gentle. And it could've attacked me if he had wanted to. No, there was something else going on.

Sleep now, you're doing well.

A peace eased through me at the sound of Maria's voice.

I thought you'd left me, I thought back.

Like always, there wasn't an answer. I'd been so busy learning magic these last two days that even if she had spoken to me, I doubt I would've heard.

Maria's energy in my mind embraced me, pulled my thoughts together, helping me feel as if they were all ordered, and all that mattered was I went to sleep because tomorrow was going to be a big day.

First, the night had me tangled in its darkness, and I had to find a way out.

I ran, but it was different.

I was on all fours. Disorientated, I kept moving, weaving back and forth around the bushes and tree trunks as I went deeper into the valley.

My senses sharp, the earthy scent of the ground under my paws, the smell of eucalyptus, animal droppings, rabbits, hopping mice, koalas, and wombats, the flipping of wings in the bushes as I disturbed the wrens, and the movement of the leaves in the breeze—all these smells and sounds caused new neurons to fire in my brain as I tried to process what I was.

I slowed, panting, looked down, and saw paws. Turning, I saw gray fur. I was a wolf. No, I was in a wolf... I wasn't sure.

Shock recoiled me out of the wolf form, tumbling back toward myself.

But the night hadn't finished with me yet.

I landed in front of the shop, facing the same wolf I had seen last night. Teeth bared, a low growl grumbling as it blocked the doorway from me.

No, you don't.

I planned to run forward, then slip to the side, get around the wolf, and go through the door. This time, I wanted to make it through the door.

Instead, the wolf lunged at me. Its head coming straight for me, sharp teeth ready to sink into my flesh.

I could do nothing except scream.

Then the night released me.

I bolted upright in bed, hands covering my head, expecting the wolf to jump on me, its teeth sinking into my muscles and claws digging into my skin.

When nothing happened, I slowly lowered my arms, scared the wolf stood watching me close by, ready to pounce.

My awareness settled, the nightmare faded, and my room slowly came into focus—the potbelly stove with embers glowing through the grill, the chair to the side with the knitted blanket on it, and other items that were becoming more familiar in such a short time.

No wolf.

I exhaled heavily. The dream was so real my pulse remained fast as I sat on my bed, covers over my legs.

What did this mean?

Never before had my dreams been so vivid.

Dream interpretation was a thing, and I'm sure Luna would have a thing or two to say, but I didn't feel I could tell her without repercussions. I had to be initiated first, then when I learned more about what it meant to be a witch, part of a coven, and what this threat of the wolves really meant, I would be in a better position to be discerning.

A tightness constricted around my chest. I missed my friends, and it was likely I could never tell them any of this. At this rate, loneliness would eat me up inside, leaving me a crusty, empty shell devoid of any emotion.

For now, it was my wits and me.

And me.

Maria's voice returned to my mind.

You're not much of a comfort, I responded.

Hurt rippled back at me. It was true, though. She was only in my mind from time to time and not always when I really needed help.

How come I can hear you? I asked. I need answers.

It's part of your skill set.

I wasn't sure I liked having such an ability. But what really was this ability? I shifted on the bed, sitting back on the pillows.

Maria's form shimmered a ghostly white near the end of my bed. A cold seeped into my bones, and I pulled the covers higher over me.

Are you a ghost?

Maria nodded. *Sort of.*

Why haven't you shown yourself to me before?

You had to know you were a witch first. She floated in the air, keeping a distance from me.

I've known for a few days now, why did you take so long?

I didn't want to interfere with your training.

Tell me the truth. I fired up blue magical flames in my fingers, constructing a spell that would break a ghost into thousands of pieces.

Maria's eyes widened, and her form shrunk.

I had to be sure you would come here, stay, and that you would go ahead with your initiation.

Could it be true? A lot of things were happening in a short period. Now she was here before me—this was a chance to get information. I let the flames reabsorb back into my fingers.

Are you saying I can communicate with the dead? I asked.

A chuckle echoed in my head, and her form disappeared.

Must have been a tick of the light?

You're clever, and yes, I'm a ghost. I have to stay.

Don't stay on account of me.

A long pause made me think she had gone. A cold breath went over my face.

I can't leave, not yet.

What did I know about ghosts? Not much. Wasn't there something about unfinished business? Then I got it.

You can't because of me. Not until... I paused. What exactly was it that I had to do?

Find yourself as a witch.

Doing that. I was only going to accept the truth. No more lies.

My job was to ensure you completed your initiation.

So why didn't you? Why aren't you here?

I failed.

A sadness weighed heavily in my mind, spreading down to my chest.

Just do what you're told for the initiation, and everything will be all right.

And if I don't?

It's not just your future that will be affected, but also the coven, other magical beasts, and even humans. You just need to get through this night, the ceremony tomorrow night, and then things will become easier. I promise.

Can't say I was really into hollow promises or keeping the peace.

When I do my initiation, what happens then? You move on? Join my parents?

Something like that.

Then I remembered the night I had found her. There had been a dog crossing the street. It was huge, and I figured I was drunk and seeing things.

A wolf? But you had no claw or teeth marks.

Scared the last of the life out of me.

What is it with the wolves?

They are becoming our enemy.

The scenes of my dream sharpened in my head. Did I trust Maria to tell her what I'd seen?

So why are you here? Did you come to interpret my dream? I asked.

The dream had to mean something to me, like my subconscious was telling me something or even someone else who would help me make more sense of this world of magical beasts, which included myself.

I hadn't thought of that. I wasn't human—my sense of self was completely different. I was a magical beast like vampires, zombies, and werewolves.

Was that what these wolves were? But wasn't it the full moon when they changed?

Did you put the dream in my head?

No.

And you're not like the other magical beasts. You're a witch. You're more sophisticated.

Good to know, I suppose.

All you need to worry about now is your initiation. It will help you feel more in tune with yourself and your magic. Think of it as your new self. Then, more things will begin to make sense.

They better.

It was the most Maria had said to me since passing.

I waited a moment for more from her, but there was nothing. Like always, she came and went so quickly on her own accord.

Could I really trust what she was saying?

I wasn't one to wait, even if the initiation was tonight.

But since when did I have the ability to communicate with others telepathically? If only I could do this with my parents. Surely, they would tell me what was going on here and what I needed to do.

It started when Maria died. Had she not properly passed? Was I her unfinished business, and she had to linger here as a ghost until I had completed my initiation?

I didn't think I could base my theories on things I'd watched on television, but these theories were ringing true for me.

What was clear in the dreams I'd been having was that the wolves had something to do with the shop and me.

What secrets could the shop be hiding? I suppose I should be grateful I had found one and had absorbed enough of the magical words that boosted my magic.

I was sure there was more, and the wolves wanted it. I was the one to stop them.

How the fuck was I going to do that?

My pulse increased. What would happen if I didn't stop the wolves?

CHAPTER 26



*T*anjie

“I DON’T WANT to wear it.” I stared at the dress Willow held. A cotton blend, tight around the bustline, with ribboned crisscross decoration in a corset style, long sleeves that ended in a teardrop, all white, trimmed with lace.

“You have to.”

I had memorized more spells with Luna before Willow and Pepper had returned to the shop at sunset, wanting to help prepare me for the initiation. Now we stood in the shop’s entrance, standing off over a dress.

No way was I going to wear that dress.

She shook the dress. “Try it on.”

“What, you have a uniform for ceremonies?”

“This is it.”

“You’ll all be wearing the same dress?”

“Similar style. You’re a novice, remember.” Willow pushed the dress toward me, forcing me to take it. I still didn’t want to put it on.

“I don’t see why I can’t wear jeans and a top?” The dress wasn’t anything close to what I would wear. It did have a bit of a witchy vibe going on with the style, but it still wasn’t my style.

“Want to go naked then?”

I snatched it from her. No way was I going starkers. Plus, Maria had made it clear I had to follow what they told me and not waste my time arguing.

With a dramatic huff, I went upstairs for privacy. Training all day meant a few more spells were memorized, and hopefully, I was that bit closer to impressing the ancestors and the coven so I would be considered worthy enough to take my role. But if I were the one to protect against the wolves, how could they say no?

I didn't dare ask them the question. I had no idea how they would react if I did. Plus, I wasn't convinced this was my role. Since my conclusion had been based on dreams, I thought it best to keep it to myself.

After tonight, I would be back in the shop sleeping alone, and then I'd search for information. I just had to get through the next few hours of being watched, and then I would be free. At least, I hoped that would be the case.

Changing into the dress, I glimpsed at myself in the long mirror in the corner of the room. My long brown hair down, below my shoulders, and the dress's neckline and low-cut front gave me an impressive bustline. The dress's length went to just above the floor, and the fullness hung around my legs, maintaining my body shape. I never thought I could look good in white like this.

Too bad no one of importance will see me.

“Hurry up, Tanjie. At this rate, you'll miss your own ceremony,” called out Luna.

I slipped on my ballet flats, which seemed the most practical to wear, and then went back downstairs, lifting the dress to avoid stepping on it.

“Your parents would be proud,” said Luna, her hands in a prayer pose under her chin, eyes moist. She had changed while I was upstairs and now wore a black dress similar to mine, along with the other women.

Emotion clogged in my throat. All of this would've happened already if they were here.

But would it have happened? I had argued with them so much about what I referred to as their hippie ways, rejecting what they were trying to tell me.

“Perfect, thank goodness. We don't have time to change it.” Willow walked around me, checking out the fit to be sure.

“We should walk there now,” said Luna.

“Yes, let's go, the hour approaches.”

“I'll shut up the shop.” Luna stepped toward the front door when it unexpectedly flew open. Luna jumped out of the way as Adam rushed in.

I was relieved to see he wasn't wearing a dress, more like long, loose pants and a boatneck shirt in black. His face was white and eyes wide.

“It's the wolves,” he stammered, his breaths coming hard.

My pulse increased. Would I get to see the wolf again? I wanted to.

“There's trouble... a scuffle between the Dark Moon pack and the neighboring Wild Fire pack,” said Adam, bending over, hands on knees trying to catch his breath.

“That doesn't concern us,” said Willow.

“What is the Wild Fire pack doing here?” asked Luna. “That's most unusual.”

“It is, and it's causing a big problem. Humans are noticing they are out of control.”

“Wolf idiots,” grumbled Willow.

“We have to go stop them,” continued Adam.

“Pepper and Luna, you go back with Adam. I'll stay here with Willow.”

“We need you, Willow. They will listen to you,” said Adam, shaking his head. “I've never seen them like this. They are very angry with each other.”

“Fighting over some sort of bone... I wonder what,” mumbled Luna.

“Which is why we need to act. And we need all the witches there. It will take too long for the others to make it. With all of us, it won’t take long.”

“You sure?” asked Willow. “We can’t afford any mistakes tonight of all nights, and we need to keep Tanjie safe.”

“She will be safe here, right, Luna?” Adam glanced at me, his eyes determined. He wanted me, but I didn’t want him.

I could protect myself. But then the dreams came to mind, and how I hadn’t fared well against the wolves. I wrapped my arms protectively around my chest.

“She will be,” said Luna. “We should go.”

“I don’t like this at all,” said Pepper. “The timing. Adam, are you sure this isn’t a setup?”

“I’m sure.”

“There’s no way they can know what we are going to do tonight. This is pack business, but we will go and check it out. Better to be safe, and we have time to do this now. We can’t stop the ceremony once it’s started,” said Willow.

“I agree,” said Luna.

“Tanjie, don’t you dare open the door to anyone. Do you promise?” Luna stepped in front of me, her hands on my shoulders, expression serious.

“I promise.”

“Stay here. I would never forgive myself if anything happened to you,” added Luna.

“Show us the way, Adam,” said Willow, leaving.

Luna turned back, mouthing the word *stay* before closing and locking the door.

I shivered, standing in the center of the shop, unsure of what had just happened.

This was the opportunity I had wanted—to be able to search through the shop. But I didn't know how long they would be.

I will just have to keep an ear out for any sounds.

I wasn't about to waste this moment with any fear of ifs. I just had to be careful.

I went straight for the secret bookshelf I had found, pushing away the material, the door ajar. My heart sank to see the cupboard was empty. The books had to be here somewhere.

Clearly, Luna didn't want me reading any of the books. This only meant I wanted to get my hands on them even more.

I tapped on the floor, wondering if a secret compartment was under the floorboards. Not detecting any hollow sounds and getting bored quickly, I went back to checking behind the hanging material.

Systematically moving around the shop, I peered behind bookcases and curtains, running my hands over the surfaces. I found nothing.

There's got to be a spell for this.

Distracted, I pushed the material back and froze. I'd made a full circle around the shop and ended back at the window.

No sign of a wolf.

Instead, Alaric stared back at me, the streetlight highlighting his features. He grinned at me and waved.

My heart rattled with excitement. I gave a small wave back, and heat flushed to my cheeks.

He tilted his head to the door.

Should I let him in?

Hell yeah. He wasn't a wolf. Nothing wrong with my eyesight. He was human, dressed rather smart tonight, I must say—ripped jeans and loose black shirt, open enough at the top to get a glimpse of his chest, hair waxed into a neat, ruffled look, clean-shaven, and ready for lips to be kissed.

I let the curtain fall quickly to hide my face. I'd let my thoughts get away too quickly.

Fanning myself with my hands, I went to the front door. Luna locked it, but now my magical abilities were developing well, I used a little, concealing the light, to open the old bolt. Hand on the handle, I turned and pulled it toward me.

“Can I come in?”

“You do know we're not open, right?”

“Yeah, but you're the boss lady, and maybe I want to buy something.” He raised his eyebrow suggestively. “Or maybe I want to browse.”

You can browse me if you like.

I opened the door wider and stepped to the side.

“Only because you asked so nicely.”

I got a whiff of his spicy aftershave, and it sent my head spinning with delight. My body ached to feel his with mine as he walked past me into the shop.

This is ridiculous. He was only a man. I was letting myself get carried away way too easily.

If my friends were here, they would be encouraging me to act.

This could be my chance to get to know a local better and discover local insights about what was fast becoming my home.

I peered out into the street—it was empty. No witches were in sight who would come down and tell me off for letting Al in the shop, especially Luna, who had told me to keep away from him.

Her words were the motivation that would lead me straight into his arms. I closed the door and leaned back into it as I saw him standing in the shop, my breath catching as I took in his sexy, hot appearance. I wanted his arms around me, his hands on my body, his lips on mine.

“You look stunning tonight. Are you going out?” he asked. His eyes paused on my neckline.

“I thought you were wanting to peruse for something?”

“Maybe I’ve already found it.”

Too soon. Too soon. I maintained his gaze, his eyes easy to get lost in. I didn’t care how soon this was or what this was. I wanted him now.

He radiated a danger that only drew me to him even more. No doubt about it, I wanted him, now. Being cooped up here for the last few days made me even edgier to do something for myself.

“You’re a man who knows what he wants then.” I moved closer to him, leaving the safety of the door and my escape from the shop.

“Made easy when there’s something worth wanting.” He stepped toward me.

Don’t do this.

Maria’s voice back in my head was spoiling a damn good moment. I didn’t know what was ahead of me as a witch, so there was nothing wrong with some last-minute adult fun.

You’ll regret it.

What was standing in front of me had nothing to do with regret. He would be completely worth some fun.

Go away, Maria. This is my private time.

Then I imagined my magic moving in my head, building up a wall to stop Maria from communicating with me. I didn’t have long before the witches would return, dragging me to my initiation.

Alone here with Al would be the perfect time for me to get to know him. He seemed as willing as I was to explore.

“And what could that be?” I asked, putting on my best seductive expression.

“Hmm... well, maybe this book.” He strode over to the other side of the shop to the reading nook and picked up a novel from the coffee table.

Disappointment shot through the desire that had been building within me. What was he playing at?

“I don’t know if that’s really your type of book.”

“And you would know what it is?”

I walked slowly to him, my pulse erratic, my breath shallow. *Keep it together.*

“I think you want something more... modern, up to date, with a bit of an unexpected challenge.”

His eyes widened, and his lips parted with an approving grin.

“Tell me more,” he said, putting the book back down.

“It’s not your usual sort of book either, but once you’ve read a bit, you won’t want to put it down.”

“Something I’d like to keep my hands on?”

“Most definitely.” I stopped about a foot away from him. My heart was pounding loud and fast. I was sure he could hear it.

“And where is this *book*?” The way he emphasized *book* set my desires flaming hot.

“Right in front of you.” My voice was barely a whisper.

Al turned to face me. “Where should I start? Should I read the blurb first?”

“Always read the blurb first... you want to get warmed up to the story that is coming.”

“What if I’m already warmed up?” He inched closer to me.

“Then you better get reading before you get too cold.” I swayed my hips, tempting him.

“Tell me, is it a quick read?”

“It’s a mind-blowing, satisfying read.”

He reached out, hands grazing the sides of my body, and bolts of delight coursed through me. With hands resting on my hips, he tugged me closer, tipping me off balance, and I fell into his arms, his lips crushing on mine, hungrily exploring.

I moaned into the kiss, giving myself over to him, my hands locking around his neck, enjoying the strength of his body.

Our tongues met with a need for more. His hands moved up my body, brushing under my breasts, my nipples hardening, letting him know I wanted him.

My fingers traced down his shoulders, and I leaned backward, letting him take my weight, keeping my balance so he could touch me wherever he wanted. The trust between us, natural and automatic, only heightened the desire burning through me.

He cupped my breast, squeezing hard enough. I gasped as intense pleasure shot through me. Then he massaged my soft tissue, my nipples becoming erect as an ache for more grew within me.

I rested my palms on his chest and felt his heart hammering as fast as mine. Fingers slipped below the material, his skin hot, delightfully toned, moving down his chest, gripping the edge of his shirt to pull upward.

His exposed skin begged me to touch him. Before I could trace the muscles on his chest, he pulled away, leaving me stunned and missing his touch.

Quickly, he took off his shirt, and then once more, his mouth was on mine, his heat bursting over my tongue, and we continued to tease the other, the urgency for pleasure growing between us.

He hastily snatched up handfuls of my dress, drawing the material up my legs, higher until above my waist. His hands grabbed my buttocks, pulling upward, stretching my pussy tight, more of my juices dampening my panties.

Our bodies crushed against each other, and his hard cock pushed into my lower abdomen. A soft moan escaped his lips

between our kissing, the heat growing intensely.

He held me tight with one hand in the lower nook of my back. His other hand glided over the top of my hip, pushing my panties down, fingers slipping between my legs, dipping into my juices.

“Hmm... I’m ready for the next chapter,” he whispered in my ear before his lips nibbled down my neck and over my collarbone, tracing my dress’s neckline.

“Are you now?” I teased, knowing he was ready himself.

I unbuttoned his jeans, pushing them down with his jocks, feeling his hot cock spring out and into my hands as if it couldn’t wait for attention.

“You know I am,” he murmured as I took his length in my hand tightly before teasing his head with my fingers.

“Turn the page and get reading,” I encouraged him.

“I much prefer to take my time and savor each page before moving on.”

His lips moved slowly over mine in a soft, tantalizing kiss. My knees threatened to buckle, and I released his cock and grabbed his waist to keep my balance. His hand slipped over my pussy and through the thick juices.

I didn’t want to speed things up. I had wanted this from the moment I saw him, and I wanted to enjoy this more. But no way did I want to be interrupted, and I was fast losing track of time.

“Don’t have so much time for such an indulgence right now, best you enjoy...”

He kissed me with a renewed urgency.

“Then I better hurry and get to the end of the book.”

“Don’t hurry too much.” I didn’t want this to end immediately, certainly not before I had reached my peak.

“Oh, don’t worry, I will make sure it’s a mind-blowing finish.” His hands moved, letting the dress fall.

“Here, let me help you.” I stepped back, reached behind, and unzipped the dress. With a wriggle of my shoulders, the dress fell, leaving me standing in my panties.

The cold air in the shop tickled my hot skin, and my nipples hardened further. Then I stepped away from the pile of material, slipped out of my shoes, and with hands on the top elastic of my panties, I stretched it as if I were going to take them off.

“Perfect.” He grinned at me, stepping forward.

I put out a hand to stop him, and he looked crushed.

“When reaching the end of a book, it’s important to be comfortable, to be properly open and ready for the final words to whisk you away to another level.” I raised my eyebrow and looked at his exposed cock above his jeans.

“That’s if you want that mind-blowing ending that’s been promised,” I added.

He didn’t need any more encouragement and swiftly removed his jeans and undies and kicked sneakers off in such a hurry I almost giggled.

I shimmied my hips, sending my lace panties tumbling to my ankles. His eyes looked over my body, and his cock pulsed.

He scooped me up in his arms, my legs wrapped around his waist, his cock at my entrance, and I held my breath, wanting him to sink deep inside me. My muscles tightened with anticipation, wanting his cock to convulse within them.

I tilted my hips and pushed my heels into his back to bring me down, slipping him into me. A deep groan came from my mouth as I nearly tipped over the edge into a blissful orgasm.

My muscles contracted tightly, not wanting him to pull out of me. He held me tight, my arms around his neck. I looked into his eyes, the depth and mystery fueling the passion pushing through me. He rocked his hips, sending a wave of pleasure flooding between my legs as I gasped from the building tension of his movement.

I could feel myself approaching my bliss, and I held on to him, trying to slow it down. I didn't care about any consequences right now. I just wanted the full pleasure of him for our first time together—hot, fast, and satisfying.

He pulled his cock out of me, and I sighed with disappointment. He shifted my weight, my legs slipping from his waist back onto the floor.

“Didn't want to get to the last page just yet.” He kissed me, his strong arms taking my weight easily and gracefully lowering me to the floor.

I looked up at him as he kneeled by me, enjoying his naked body, his hard cock, and I reached for him, my arms around his neck, my lips on his.

“The last page is a long one, so best get reading,” I said, pulling him down on me.

He shifted his weight to rest on his elbows and not crush me. His hand ran down my thigh, teasing me.

“I don't want to read just yet,” he said.

“You don't want to risk the book being closed before you've finished the last page?”

“Definitely can't have that happening.” He leaned down, lips on mine, and he deepened the kiss while his fingers tickled my inner thigh.

I lifted my leg, and he helped, moving it onto his shoulder. Our eyes locked, daring the other to lose control first. I don't know who won or lost, but then he was in me, moving with purpose, pushing deep into me as my leg rested on his shoulder.

My muscles heightened as they contracted rhythmically around his cock, sensed him thicken, and the motion pushed me toward my peak. My chest arched forward, he pushed deeper into me, and then we spun out of control with pleasure pulsing between us, shooting us together high into the sky.

He lay on top of me in the afterglow, my breasts crushed pleasantly into his chest, and we kissed, still feeling as if in the

stars and nowhere near Earth.

“Mind-blowing read?” I asked, our noses nuzzling between kisses.

He chuckled and kissed me gently. “One that is worth doing again in the future.”

“Only if it will be a slower read.”

“Most definitely.”

I barely knew Al, but just had sex with him and was agreeing to more. In his arms, naked, blissfully entwined with him, I didn't care, but there was a glimmer of a warning prickling through my body.

I had a feeling we had just promised something more than either of us could fully give.

What was it I really had promised Alaric?

CHAPTER 27



*J*anjie

WHERE ARE THEY?

Pacing around the shop, I held the book open with my left hand, using my right to keep it from flipping closed. Words blurred, but reading was the only distraction I could think of.

Did I need to go out looking for them?

With a kiss, I pushed Alaric out the door much quicker than I would've liked. Hell, the entire encounter with him was faster than I would've liked, and I'd question whether it even happened if my body wasn't still buzzing with the afterglow.

I didn't want any more dramas. What happened was between us and no one else's business.

Luna had already warned me to keep away from him, and well, if she wanted that to happen, she should've kept her mouth shut. It only resulted in me wanting Al even more. He had been worth having. I couldn't wait until the next time, and the chance to take our time was a temptation.

Maybe I should ring Mia? If I gave her this piece of information, she might not be so keen to come and visit. That's what I hoped, anyway. But the first encounter with Alaric left me vibrating with pleasure, and along with the looming ceremony, I wasn't sure I'd be overly coherent.

Best to leave it, lest I open my mouth and start talking about me being a witch. I turned on my heel, continuing to pace back the way I had come. The book grew heavy on my arm.

Surely, the witches should've been back by now.

What if something had happened to them before my ceremony?

I went to the window, moved the curtain, and peered down the street. No one was walking along the street. This town sure shut up at night, and everyone kept indoors to themselves.

Rolling my lips, Alaric's taste lingered. I'd done nothing like this before—this was as close to a one-night stand. How would I feel tomorrow? Or would I feel so different after the ceremony? How I felt now would pale in comparison.

More than anything right now, I wished the witches were in sight.

But they weren't.

I didn't know them, but I would hate for anything untoward to happen to them.

The curtain fell back in place, and I continued to pace the shop floor, book in hand, without turning pages.

Who would train me then?

I rested my hand on my belly as if to settle it. The twisting only tightened the knots already formed.

What sort of a witch would I be if I wasn't trained?

A bad one? A useless one? One that wasn't really a witch?

But the way the witches had talked to me, it didn't seem like there was anyone else. The magical beings on Earth were dwindling as humans dominated more and more.

Maybe that's what I should be reading, more about the history of witches, not this pop culture book aimed to manifest what you want in your life. I snapped it shut. No point trying to read it. It wasn't the distraction I needed.

I slipped the book back on the shelf. A noise at the door caused me to jump.

Was it them? Had they finally made it back? I was about to give them a telling-off for stressing me out by being away so long.

The door rattled, and I stood frozen in the spot.

What if the wolves had come to get me? My hand moved to my throat, not wanting to think about the wolves that killed my parents.

Please let it be my wolf. I was starting to think of the wolf who defended me in my dream as my protector. If it were him on the other side of the door, I wouldn't have anything to worry about.

Magic light beamed around the lock.

It had to be them, but I wasn't going to check.

Had I put Luna's spells back in place correctly?

I wasn't so sure, but I had messed around with them.

Luna would know for sure I had done so and would question me. With any luck, there wouldn't be enough time before the ceremony. I crossed my fingers. Who knew I was naturally so superstitious?

If only I had paid more attention when unlocking the door to let Alaric in. That's what lust does to you. I couldn't wait to let him in. It had been totally worth it.

Whoever was coming in through that door, it was best to have some space between us, and if it weren't the witches, I would have time to react.

I walked backward, positioning myself at the side of the front counter. The getaway to the back door was a more direct route now.

My pulse fast, I rested my hand on the counter to keep my balance. I called my magic from within. I wanted to be ready to defend myself. No way was I ready for a magical attack.

The door rattled as if stuck, then burst open, and magical light flooded outward, blinding me. I let go of my magic, shielding myself from going blind.

“Damn you, Tanjie, you can’t let go of your magic like that,” grumbled Luna.

I opened my eyes to see Luna ducking to avoid the wayward sparks of my magic flying through the air as if they were drunk fireflies.

Willow and Pepper stood on the other side of the door, blocking the exit, their arms moving quickly to send out counter-magic at my sparks.

“Sorry, I wasn’t sure who was coming in,” I said. “You were gone for such a long time.”

I almost ran up to Luna and hugged her. She was alive, standing, and grumbling about my magic. That meant she was more than all right.

“Damn wolves,” said Willow, bustling in through the door, brushing dirt from her dress. “They picked a hell of a time to have a fight. Why the Wild Fire pack wanted to come on the Moon Pack territory is a mystery to me.”

“Is this normal?” I asked. Was this my future? Keeping wolves in line like they were. It seemed rather exciting, somewhat dangerous, and something I was willing to sign up for. As long as I didn’t have to hurt the wolf I kept seeing in my dreams and in real life, assuming he was real.

“Fighting between packs is against one of our lores,” said Adam as he shut the door behind him. Magic flowed from his hand as he locked it with spells and then the bolt.

As much as Adam didn’t start my heart like Alaric did, I was glad he was safe and back here in the shop.

“They’ll regret it. I’ve summoned them to a meeting next week,” said Luna.

“And what, they’ll come?” I asked.

“They’re bound to,” said Willow, limping forward.

“You’re hurt?” I went to support her, but she waved me away.

“Nothing that won’t heal. It can wait for later.”

“You’re all okay?” I turned to look at the others. They looked a bit bedraggled, their hair messy, dirt patches on their clothes, but no signs of blood.

“Nothing that won’t heal.” Pepper snapped her fingers, her hair moved back into place, and the dirt on the edge of her dress lifted. “Or that magic can’t fix.”

“I so want to be able to do that.”

Pepper smiled at me. “I’ll show you some cool tricks.”

“After the ceremony,” huffed Luna, pushing between us.

“We need to head out to the clearing... the others will be waiting for us,” added Willow.

Adam stopped, holding his hand out, indicating for me to go ahead of him. I hurried after the women, sensing his eyes on me, checking me out as I moved.

No way was I going to agree to something like what my parents had. I would raise hell to find another option.

Out the back door, we headed down a path leading to the back of the scrub. Willow and Luna had cleaned up, thanks to the help of their magic.

Once in the cover of the trees, the others snapped their fingers, and light coming from their fingers guided the way.

I went to do the same, but Luna stopped me. “Save your energy, you must prove to the others you’re ready. Remember what we’ve been working on.”

Thank goodness she didn’t tell me she didn’t trust me to use my magic, not after releasing it in the shop just now.

“Ground yourself,” whispered Luna. She put her hand between my shoulders and pushed me in front of her.

Following Willow’s magic light and Luna and Pepper directly behind me, I kept to the path, the stones crunching

softly underfoot as I walked. The light used was small, delicate, and just enough to show us where to go. I could tell they had easily mastered their magic. This was what I had to do. If I had my own light, it would be more like a beacon.

Perhaps I should've practiced some more instead of letting Alaric into the shop, though he was no regret. I felt more alive and rejuvenated since arriving. The encounter with him had done something to me. Something good.

As we walked deeper into the bushland, the darkness enveloped us, pushing away the rest of the town, the country, and even the world, making it feel like we were the only ones left alive.

A calmness settled over me, and I practiced the breathing Luna had taught me. This could be my chance to see my parents again, and I didn't want to mess it up. More so, I was going to be a witch who had power, but my mind still struggled to comprehend.

The path opened into a small clearing. Tall ghost eucalyptus trees with thick trunks showed their wisdom of centuries to witness what went on here, surrounding us, protecting us from non-magical beings.

In the center of the opening stood an old tree trunk with a flat top that was used as an altar. A white candle burned on the trunk, and the flicking light revealed a bowl and jug. Deep red roses were laid around the edge, thorned stems crossing.

My pulse increased. This was it. My chance to embrace who I was. I was curious to find out what was going to happen.

Instead of turning off their magical lights, the others dimmed them, cupped them in their hands, and held them at belly height. They moved silently around to form a circle I'd been included in.

I counted about twenty people standing in either a dress like mine or the loose outfits the males wore. Most were much older than me. Was this a consequence of the failing magic?

The ceremony was about to start, and my stomach was a mess of nerves, excitement, and something else, all because of Alaric. So far, my little secret was safe, and now I am about to become a witch for good. My power surged through me stronger than ever before.

I am to show what I can do.

Willow and Luna moved to the circle's center and stood on either side of the trunk, facing me.

In silence, five witches stepped forward, sending their magic crisscrossing to each other, highlighting a pentagram star within the circle. The magical light dimmed, the connection between them remaining, and a power vibrated within the star formed.

“Who is the one to pledge tonight on the dark moon when all secrets are revealed and personal power is amplified?” asked Willow, looking straight at me.

My mouth dried, and the words were hard to form.

“I am.”

“Step forward,” said Luna. The light she held at her belly cast shadows over her face, making her appear ghostly.

I stepped forward.

Willow and Luna motioned for me to continue coming closer.

Magic flooded through me when I stepped into the pentagram, and I struggled to keep it from overwhelming me or for it to combine with mine in such a way that I would lose all sense of myself. I paused, readjusted, then continued to step forward until I stood in front of the trunk, looking at Willow and Luna.

Willow made a humming noise, gradually becoming louder, then stopped, the last vibrations of the perfect notes hanging in the air. Then she spoke, her normally dark eyes reflected a haunting light as she stared at me.

“We are here in black

The dark of the night
You the light
Of our future
And our hope.
“We call you to use
Your magic
To show us your willingness
To learn
To lead us
To keep the power
for the chosen few
known as witches
to help maintain the order
as is our pledge on Earth.”

My magic surfaced as the words were spoken. Standing in the star made it hard to keep it under control, but I managed. I couldn't fail this.

“Are you ready to start your initiation, Tanjie Shaw, whose blood is from ancient witches, daughter of the future?”

“Yes.” My skin prickled as magic surged through me.

“Then let's begin.”

“I call on the ancestors, spirits of the past to come and guide us.” Luna held out her hands, head lifted to the dark sky where only stars sparkled tonight.

Nothing happened, then I felt a subtle shift of energy.

Something had arrived in the inner circle and moved around me. I wanted to turn to see it, but I was frozen, held tight as whatever it was inspected me. It didn't feel like one person but many.

I reached back out to it, wanting to know what it was. It was made of many different energies, spirits melded into one,

all with a voice that was considered and made a collective—the ancestral spirit.

I let the image of Mom and Dad form in my mind.

Are you there? I asked.

My fists clutched by my sides as I held on to my magic, trying not to let it go. It would do too much damage here with such power. And I didn't want to hurt anyone else.

We are here, but not as you know us.

For a second, I felt them, their love, their warmth, and I suppressed a sob.

Then they were gone.

The spirit was a collective again—not one spirit voiced more than another.

What do you want from me? I asked. My insides began to tremble the longer I was held like this.

Why did you do it?

Do what?

You smell of the enemy.

I don't know what you mean. I am loyal to the witches. I am here to pledge to the coven, to lead over other magical creatures on Earth, and to keep our secret and uphold order.

The sensation I had done something terribly wrong coursed through me, squeezing at my lungs and heart.

No. I haven't done anything wrong.

You have.

What a shame, it added. You were strong and the one we needed. Maybe there's a chance... but it's too hard to say... you confuse us now with your actions. We must contemplate this anomaly you present to us.

They withdrew, leaving me gasping, wanting to call them back, but a lump in my throat stopped the words.

“So what say you?” asked Luna. “Will Tanjie be able to lead us?”

“*No. Not this month,*” a soft voice answered.

Gasps echoed around the circle, and the pentagram starlight wavered. I felt as if I was on a boat that had been cast away and rejected by everyone.

“Hold the magic,” said Willow firmly.

Then Luna gasped, her head snapped backward, face up to the dark sky, and her body convulsed with her arms outstretched. It was as if she were possessed. Then suddenly, she breathed out heavily, her head righted, her arms relaxed.

Luna looked at me with disappointment which broke my heart.

“The ceremony can’t be completed.”

“What?” It wasn’t only me who exclaimed in shock.

“Tanjie, you’re not pure. You can’t lead us.”

I never professed I was pure, but this was ridiculous. “You can’t do this to me.”

“It is done.” She swept her hand over the trunk table, the bowl and jug spilling its contents into the dirt.

“You can’t be a witch.”

‘Are you sure, Luna?’ asked Willow.

“The ancestral spirit has spoken. For tonight, at least, there will be no initiation.”

“What do you mean pure?” I asked, a horrible feeling rising from within.

“You had sex.”

“What? Because I had sex? I’m no virgin.”

“No, because you had sex with a wolf.”

This made no sense to me. I wasn’t perverted or anything like that.

“I can tell you I’ve ever only had sex with a human, no wolf. No part of a wolf was involved. This is absurd.” But was it?

“He might not have been in wolf form, but you had sex with a wolf shifter. Tonight, of all nights when the moon is dark, a time when your untrained power could be influenced the most. You’re tainted with his energy. We can’t complete the ceremony.”

“If you had told me more about what was going on, then I would have known.” This can’t be true. This can’t be happening. I turned to see the others. Pepper looked away, and Adam looked at me as if I was diseased.

“You had to pledge to us first,” said Luna. “On a dark moon, the one closest to after turning eighteen. Yes, we are late, but tonight your magic was untouched, virgin... or it was until you joined with the wolf.”

“What, you reject me now, and I go back to Sydney and pretend this never happened?” At least Mia and Caleb would like that. But would I?

“No. It’s complicated. Nothing like this has happened before,” said Luna. “We need to have a meeting, now.”

“Good idea, and I’ll present my case.”

“You’re not coven, so you’re not invited.” The words were like a slap in the face.

“What if I just go back to the shop while you meet here and debate my fate?”

“Yes, and don’t let that wolf in, even in human form. Or anyone, not until you’re taught how to tell what they really are.”

“What a shame, we can’t learn your special gift with magic either,” said Willow, shaking her head.

“Was this what I was going to learn?” The ancestral spirit had communicated with me, that had to mean something. But I don’t know enough to work it out.

“Yes. Go now, get back to the shop, and stay there until I come for you.” Luna pointed back to the path.

I didn’t want to go. If they were going to discuss my future, I wanted to be present.

“Will you go there, or do you need an escort?”

“I’m not a disobedient child.” I huffed. “I will go.”

I started down the path, using all the self-control I could muster. When out of sight, I ran. But I didn’t keep on the path. No way was I going back to the shop. No way.

CHAPTER 28



*A*laric

THE TIME HAD COME for the bonfire. Most of the pack gathered around the pile of wood that had taken me the best part of the day to build. Where was Rafe?

It didn't bode well when the alpha wasn't here. No one came near me, but that wasn't unusual. I had been wayward and best not to be associated with. Fuck, I had my work cut out to try and turn things around in the pack.

At least I had done it. The bonfire was built by my hard work. It had taken hours, but it would all be worth it. Better still, I had my long-awaited moment with Tanjie.

I should be relaxed now, chilled. I had tasted her, and it was good, but I wasn't.

I had to see her again. Her image burned in my mind as I stood staring at the pile of wood. Wasn't it time to set it alight?

No sign of Tyr either, and my inner wolf stirred my senses to hyper. Something was up. Something I wasn't involved in, and I didn't like it.

Not after Rafe had promised the beta position to Tyr, even if it were on false premises. Tyr wasn't here, and I was, and it had to put me farther on the back foot, which wasn't going to help my status on any level in the pack.

I went to Tala. We had a thing a while back, a mutual parting of ways.

“What’s going on?”

“You don’t know?”

Her comment was a barb in my heart. The pack connection wasn’t strong with me. I couldn’t sense Rafe like I had before. Had I been outed already? But for what?

The only thing I could think of was that it had to do with Tanjie. Had someone seen me go into the shop? It wouldn’t matter. We wolves would go in from time to time. We needed supplies, and the shop was convenient.

“I’m exhausted from building the pyre.” I tilted my head to the varying lengths of logs.

“Thought nothing wore you out.” Tala grinned at me.

“I’m getting old.”

“Yeah, right.” Tala smirked.

“Has something gone wrong?”

I struggled to join in with her laughter. Things were serious. I couldn’t feel the pack. Even with Tala next to me, my wolf barely connected with hers.

“Nothing too serious. The damn Wild Fire pack decided to come into our territory.”

“Why? The boundaries are clear?” This didn’t make any sense. They had to have a reason. Otherwise, there would be an all-out war between the packs. Then the witches would be on to us, and that wasn’t ideal for our current plans.

Tala shrugged. “Does it matter? Rafe will sort them out, and they’ll never come back. We have way better fighters.”

“We do, but it does matter.”

There had to be more going on, and it wasn’t a time to be flippant. What was pushing me out of the pack? Was it Rafe?

I couldn’t be there for any fight. I was finishing the pyre. Though, technically, I might well have finished and had been

hunting Tanjie. Had he found out?

“Glad you give a shit, though that’s not always like you. And why aren’t you fighting with them?”

“Why aren’t you fighting, Tala? I know you like a good fight,” I added. Was there even going to be a bonfire tonight? It felt like something I couldn’t explain had changed. I didn’t like being in the dark like this and not knowing.

“Was told to come here... they had it under control.” She huffed, turning away, the anger clear on her face.

Where was my call to come? I didn’t even get one? Had I missed it?

My chest tightened. I had to find and help them. That was the only option to get me out of this mess and save face.

I turned, took a few strides, and then heard something ahead in the scrub. I froze, muscles tensing, ready to fight. The fire brigade had been bribed, right?

Or was this the Wild Fire pack coming to get us?

My wolf pushed to get out, but I kept him contained. Not yet.

Rafe strode out from the cover of the bushes, head high, shoulders squared, blood on his face. Tyr limped into sight behind him, followed by a few others he trusted—all seasoned fighters and injured.

“Where were you?” demanded Rafe, striding up to me.

Fuck, this was it. I had to get him to believe my biggest lie yet.

“Here, getting ready for the bonfire.” I held his gaze unwavering. Willing to believe what I was saying.

“You were called.”

“I didn’t hear the message. If not built right, the bonfire wouldn’t light, and I had to do it all myself. I was too focused.”

Rafe growled, pausing.

It wasn't a good sign I wasn't connected to the pack, but it was the best lie I could come up with.

"You wouldn't need me anyway. You've got your best fighters with you."

"We could've done with your skills," piped up Tyr.

Rafe turned and glared back at Tyr, silencing him from speaking further.

"Doubt it," I added quickly, trying to dispel the building tension.

Rafe rubbed his shoulder. "Could've sorted them out quicker if the witches hadn't turned up."

"What? Why? And there's a peace agreement between the packs."

"Not anymore. They got wind of what we are planning on doing."

The way he looked at me turned my stomach. I was in so much trouble I didn't think I could get out of it.

"Someone told them we're going to have a bonfire and challenge the witches," said Rafe.

He was blaming me. Fuck, and my alibi was a witch.

"It wasn't me, so don't even think it," I said.

"No? Would be just the thing you would do." Rafe stepped forward, inches away from me, as we faced off. I could smell him and the hints of magic energy from the fight. I could tell the witches had gone in hard to separate the packs.

"Why?" I lowered my voice so only he could hear. "I want to be beta. Rattin wouldn't help my cause."

The look in his eyes curled my guts. I believed right then and there that he hated me and wished I wasn't his son. It had been a sign of our weakening pack that he only had me. I should've been a celebration, but I was nothing but a disappointment to him.

"You would do it to be alpha."

“No one in the pack would allow me to stay as alpha. They would challenge me, and there would be fight after fight until I lost. No, that would be a stupid motivation to tell the Wild Fire pack.”

“You don’t deny you want to be alpha.” He inched closer, tempting me to fight him.

“I was born to be alpha, but not yet.”

I couldn’t deny it. It was my birthright, but at the same time, it was a position I had to earn.

My words caused him to pause. Could I really be getting him to see reason?

“I will find out who the rat was in our pack and would put our plans at risk to attack the witches.”

“You can have until we attack the witches.”

“That’s not long.”

“Even shorter than you think.”

“Why?”

“Both packs are to sit down with the witches and sort out the disagreement. All the plans have gone out the window. We need to bring forward the attack.”

“You can see how this couldn’t have been me... it has put our pack in jeopardy.”

“It will help if you bring whoever betrayed us to me.”

“Do you have any idea who it was?”

“No. Otherwise, I’d pull them apart right now.” He would, and he wouldn’t be the only one here thinking like this.

“I’ll bring them to you.” Nothing like a bit of a challenge.

“It’s between us. You don’t tell anyone what you’re doing,” he warned. “Someone in the pack wants to bring us down, and I won’t have it.”

“I’ll tell no one.”

I meant it. While I loved a challenge, this was going to be tough.

“Good, let’s get this bonfire started and hope that the ancestral spirits will have something to help us out of this mess,” said Rafe.

Rafe motioned for me to follow him, and we headed toward the pyre. My pulse exploded. He wanted to blame me for the betrayal without any evidence. I had been so close to being out of the pack when I hadn’t done anything wrong, at least nothing they knew about.

Standing next to Rafe now would improve my position in the pack. He was right. We had to be united in our stance. He needed someone to have his back, and I was it. Would he ever trust me enough?

For now, he was.

That’s all I was going to get.

The other leaders in the pack stood near us, closer to the pyre than the others. It annoyed me that Tyr was one of them. He had no right to be here.

Could he have been the one who betrayed us? I had no evidence, but mate or not, I was going to start with him.

Rafe raised his hands, and the pack members stilled. Everyone watched him.

“We’re here tonight, in the dark of the moon, to expose secrets and learn what we need from our ancestors, which will help us defeat the witches.”

Rafe bent down to light the bonfire. I had placed fueled material in the center to help and had placed kindling and smaller branches inside to help the flames take hold.

There was no breeze, and the air was cool, which made a good night for the bonfire.

Rafe scraped the match on the side of the box, flicking it to the material. Flames burst to life, sending Rafe scuttling backward to avoid being burned.

The heat was intense from the first flames as they burned through the fuel and then started on the kindling. I watched, mesmerized by the color, how the flames moved, and how much they licked at the wood, wanting to destroy it.

The crackling sounds from the burning wood were soothing to my soul. It didn't take long for the flames to settle, to get hold of the thicker logs and begin to burn them.

Rafe turned and faced us, his face flushed from the heat.

“I call those who were part of the Moon Pack, who reside in the spirit plane, to come forward to help us.”

Rafe paused, his hands moved upward, and he tilted his head back to the sky.

“Come forth. We need your guidance and support to survive.”

Sparks darted out from the fire as logs collapsed in on the center.

“Warm yourself with the flames, under the power of the dark moon, come to us.”

The flames continued to flicker, eating at the wood, sparks flying up in the air with the tendrils of smoke.

To me, it seemed like an ordinary bonfire. Was this something like a hoax? I wouldn't put it past Rafe, but this was taking things too far. He was going to fail and risk his position in the pack.

His hands dropped to his sides, and he turned to look at the fire.

“As the wolf runs in me, he still runs in you. Come to us.” He threw a handful of dirt into the fire.

“The earth calls you. Answer with your knowledge. Show us through the flames. What do we need to do to successfully defeat the witches?”

Rafe stepped forward, held out his hand, and passed it through the closest flame.

I inhaled sharply. He didn't flinch with pain and passed his hand through the fire again.

“With the blood we share, answer our call.”

Rafe held his arm in the flames. Could this be something I would do in the future if I became alpha?

“Let our wolves call each other to bring you back to us. Our ancestral spirits, we call on your wisdom. What do we need to know?”

The color of the flame flickering over Rafe's hand changed to a deeper red hue for a moment.

“Help us to keep the tradition of the pack alive,” added Rafe. “What do we need to do?”

The flame's color deepened again to a red hue, this time maintaining the altered tone.

“What say you?”

A sudden gust caught up around us, stirring the top layer of soil, whipping in a fast circular motion, gathering speed, and pulling in the flames.

Something had arrived. But what?

I halfway closed my eyes against the grit in the air, trying to see what was causing this disruption to the energies.

Rafe remained standing, hand in the flames as if it had no painful effect on him.

Then the flames took shape, and a wolf image formed, flickering in the redness.

I couldn't believe it. Rafe had done it. He had called the ancestral spirits.

“Speak to me.”

The flames changed form again, this time to human, arms reaching out and touching Rafe on the head.

I expected him to catch on fire, to start screaming with agony, but that didn't happen.

We hear you and answer your call.

Did I hear that correctly?

I wasn't so sure.

I'd never had a voice like that in my head. It sounded like pack, but at the same time, it wasn't pack. And with my sensitivity to being cut off from the pack, did I trust what I heard?

No notable change in Rafe, I turned to my left. Pack members stood, eyes wide, some mouths agape. If they had heard the same words, they didn't say anything.

"What say you?" asked Rafe.

His voice turned my attention back to him.

Who you seek is no friend.

The voice was in my head again. But this time, it was different. A pain ached in my head and nearly brought me to my knees.

Who?

I managed to answer back to whoever was talking to me.

The one who deceived you.

Yeah, would've thought that obvious.

What was with the riddles? And the pain worsened the longer this went on. My hands went to the sides of my head, pressing in as if that would help.

It's not who you think it is. You need to be careful.

I exhaled sharply, not sure I could take any more of this voice in my head. I couldn't even tell if the other pack members were experiencing something like I was or if this was just special treatment for myself.

Get to the fucking point.

They will want to take from you what you value the most. But you must work out who it is or pay the price.

Give me more than that.

I went down on one knee, fighting the growing pain in my head.

So many possibilities for the future. This is the way the message must be said. You are to find him, the one who betrayed the pack. That is your journey. He will take her away from you if you don't.

It's a he, then.

A he, not a friend, part of the pack. You know them, but you don't really know them.

I wanted to scream to get them out of my head, but I needed more.

Just tell me who it is.

It's part of the earth, an element, a source of life. You can't live without it. You will find your strength more if you work it out yourself. Hurry... hurry... hurry.

Then I was released and moaned with relief and exhaustion, falling to my knees. It was over. The ancestral spirit who gave me the message fled from my mind.

I stumbled to my feet. Not wanting to show weakness, I looked around to see what the other members were doing. The pack members weren't affected, watching in a trance-like state, eyes glazed as if they were present but not present, their spirits helping to form the bridge between life and death.

I had to learn who else had a message. I couldn't be the only one. This wasn't what was asked, anyway. Rafe had done the asking.

Had I asked unknowingly?

Had my questions lingered in the air, and I didn't know? This was a weird experience to say the least. It was unhinging and wasn't going to be something I'd rush to be part of again.

Glancing around, no one else was reacting like I was. Then my eyes caught with my mate, Tyr. My pulse changed. He was unaffected, eyes sharp. What did that mean?

Something about the message, but it blurred as a yelp caused me to face the dying flames. What had felt like seconds was longer as most of the wood had burned to embers. What an odd time warp we'd been in. Except Tyr.

I struggled to get my bearings.

Another yelp and I located who was yelling out in pain.

Rafe stood, his hand in the flames, pain clear on his face, but he refused to move. This was the sacrifice, the way to drive the connection to the ancestral ghost. I rushed to him.

His teeth grit tightly, and he trembled but barely moved as if his entire body was locked into this position.

My hands on his shoulders, I went to pull him from the flames, but he didn't move. Using all my strength, I slammed into his side, sending him tumbling to the ground. I reached out, grabbing him just in time before he fell into the embers and ash.

Struggling with his weight, I eased him to the ground.

"Rafe, it's over. The message was delivered."

His eyes fluttered, and he cradled his burned arm to his chest.

"Rafe, you need to stand up and tell the pack what you heard," I hissed at him, kneeling beside him, trying to pull him into a sitting position.

I sensed the others were coming out of their trances. They needed to see their alpha on his feet and be a leader.

"Rafe, get up, or I'll punch you," I growled out at him.

My tone managed to reach him and pull his awareness back to the present.

Rafe moved to get up, and I assisted him to his feet. Then he shrugged my hold on him, and I let go. I might still be learning about how things were done in the pack, but I didn't have to be told of the importance right now of him standing by himself.

"The ancestors have spoken," called out Rafe.

Murmurs of excitement whispered between pack members. I saw Tyr standing over to the side, close to the scrub as if he were about to run away. I wanted to go to him and question him, but my priority was with Rafe. My head was still a blur of what I was told, and I struggled to work out what was real and what wasn't.

“They have told us there is a witch who will unite them, strengthen the coven. She is coming. If we want our freedom, we must kill her. This is the sign we were waiting for. Now is as good as any time to defeat the witches.” He punched his healthy arm in the air, and I followed with a yell of excitement, along with the other pack members.

My mind raced. This was a good message, but it didn't sit well with me.

“Let's get some healing herbs on your arm,” I said.

“No way, it will heal. We are wolves, and the scar will be a reminder of this night and mark the start of the changes in our lives.”

His eyes reflected a powerful and half-crazed vibe that I stepped back from, unsure what to do. Rafe went forward, greeting the pack members, who slammed him on the back in a celebratory gesture or shook his hand. The pack was united and happy.

But I knew that we weren't. I went to look for Tyr.

Fuck, he was nowhere in sight. At the risk of angering my father more, I went after him. I had to know if he was the one or not.

As I hurried away through the scrub, another thought dominated my mind and sent my gut roiling.

Who was this witch with such power that would unite them?

CHAPTER 29



*T*anjie

BALLET SHOES WEREN'T the best for walking in the scrub. Every small stone or stick I stepped on could be felt underfoot, and each step hurt.

Bit of pain for a small gain.

The white dress didn't help either. As tempting as it was to rip off the bottom, I didn't, but it hindered my progress through the scrub as I doubled back around to the clearing, wanting to spy on the witches who had just rejected me.

Because I had sex with a wolf.

I refused to believe it.

No way was Al a wolf. Right?

My pulse was erratic, and I stumbled, whacking my knee painfully on a rock. I nearly called out.

So, what if he was? Did he know I was a witch?

I pushed up from the ground, brushing off the dirt as much as I could from the white material, and continued picking my way through the scrub, hoping I was close to the clearing. If I could hear what they were discussing, I might learn something useful for a change and not be left so much in the dark.

Every angle I looked at suggested he would've known I was a witch or at least training to be one.

Right? So, did that make him the betrayer? To me, to his pack, or... to everything. I didn't know—it was all too much to process.

How could something so wonderful, fun, and sexy between us be so wrong?

It couldn't be true.

But his kind killed my parents? I still planned to avenge them and kill whoever was responsible.

Al was too young. But I'm sure whoever was responsible was someone he was related to.

They were right. I should've never opened the door.

I told you.

Not now, Maria.

The last thing I needed right now was an I-told-you-so lecture. Not when it had been so innocent, fun, and hot, and why should such an act turn the wheel once more on my future? It had been my choice. One I stood by, though it was getting harder. Would I even see him again? What would I do?

Stop thinking about him. All is not lost... you need to be ready. They will work through this, and you'll get your initiation, but it will just be later instead of sooner. It's not the end of the world.

It sure felt like the end of the world. Of one I had only discovered and one I wanted with Al. I can't believe we promised to see each other again. I found myself still wanting to see him.

Could I trust him?

Maria's voice filtered into my thoughts when I least expected or wanted her advice. Why couldn't I make my own choices?

Tanjie, they will find a way. You are the one to help the coven. Stay strong... don't do anything stupid.

Her voice faded.

Why did she go like that?

I didn't need creepy right now.

Picking my way through the leaf litter on the ground, I edged closer to the clearing. Had I gone too far?

Using my magic could expose me, and I knew the coven wouldn't take kindly to that. All I could do was rely on my intuition.

Maybe I should've counted my steps.

I stumbled again, partially twisting my ankle. My arms went out to right my balance, and at least this time, I didn't fall.

Now, my ankle pulsed, and I was beginning to think I should go back.

A rustle in the leaves got my attention. I looked closely. Nothing was there.

Maybe a native rat or other rodent?

Or a sign. This could be the site of the clearing a few feet to my right. I turned, tentatively putting weight on my injured ankle, leaning forward to hear any sound of the witches.

I could smell magic in the air. That was encouraging. It had to mean I was close.

All I needed to do was stay out of sight and be able to hear them. Would I be able to get close enough?

Inaudible voices filtered through the crisp night air to me.

Damn, I would need to get closer.

Then something changed in the air. My belly tightened, the intuitive warning too late. The magic I had smelled was something else—a spell that was a trap.

A power zapped through me with such force it sent me flying backward in the air a few feet. My back crashed into a tree trunk, and my arms and legs went forward from the force as if they were made of stuffing, then I slumped to the ground.

Air rushed out of my lungs, and I sat stunned, looking out, unable to move as if I'd been transformed into a doll.

Get up.

Maria's voice, sharp in my mind, shocked me into action.

I pushed up from the ground—bark, dry leaves, and small twigs stuck into my palms. On my feet, I turned and ran.

So much for hearing what they were saying.

What was that?

A boundary spell so no one can enter.

Great. It wasn't easy getting out of the area wearing flat shoes with no grip and a long dress.

Run.

I hitched the dress up so I could run faster—the sprints at school had always been my favorite. Hilarious that there was no first ribbon in this race. I valued my life enough that I knew to put distance between us.

The witches couldn't find out I had set off the spell. My body ached all over from the impact, and I wasn't even sure I should be running. But I did, as fast as I ever had.

I had no idea where I was going, only that it was away from the witches, the ones who had taken me in, told me I was special, then discarded me. I kept weaving around bushes and trees.

How could they do this to me?

I had half a mind to go back and tell them if anyone had failed right now, it was them failing to support me.

A branch of leaves skimmed my face, slowing me down as I brushed it away, hoping no spiders had fallen on me. It wasn't like I had night vision like a wolf. That would be handy right now. I might be a witch, but I couldn't see in the dark. I didn't have the head space to do a spell, plus it was too risky. I didn't know if they were chasing me.

Keep running.

Maria's voice was firm, but it was fading again.

Was there something wrong with the connection between us? Was this because I was rejected from my initiation?

Fuck, I didn't want to lose the magic I had just found.

I would fight to keep it. I would do anything to hold onto it.

My lungs burned as if on fire with each breath in and out. My leg muscles started to seize up. I couldn't keep going like this.

I stopped running, let my dress fall, bent over slightly, hands on my knees, and coughed, trying to catch my breath.

They hadn't found me, so I must have got away with it.

Still breathing hard, I saw my white dress looking worse for wear. That would be a dead giveaway if I hadn't done what I'd been told.

I didn't care, but at the same time, I didn't want them not to train me. I had to get the full power of my magic.

A growl behind me sent an icy chill through me.

Was my wolf here?

It was almost funny, days into learning I was a witch, and instead of thinking it was a dog, I now thought of a wolf. I wanted to see my wolf again, and the joy of that happening melted through the iciness in my body.

I turned, and the growl intensified.

My skin prickled, even though my body was hot from running. This couldn't be my wolf. Not with how I was reacting to the sound.

But where was it?

I circled further and then saw a movement in the leaves.

'Hey, is it you again?' I said, hoping against the odds it was.

A wolf moved from behind the cover of a bush.

It wasn't my wolf. This one had a black pelt and eyes full of hatred. Teeth bared, its top lip snarled at me.

"My mistake. I'll just be on my way." I went to move away, inching toward the shop, when he lurched forward.

I yelped back, then froze on the spot. What was I going to do?

What should I do?

It was a better question. If this wolf had killed my parents, I knew what I would do. But it wasn't like I could answer it.

"Why aren't you going to let me go?"

The wolf stepped forward. He was close enough now that if I went to run, he would easily pounce on me.

I'd escaped one trap and found myself in another. This one had sharp teeth and claws, and I wanted to kill it straightaway.

Thank goodness I had my magic. I willed it to my fingers. As long as no one saw me, it wouldn't be an issue. Could I be so controlled with how I wielded my magic? I was out of breath, rejected, angry, and completely ungrounded.

"I'm not going to hurt you if you let me go."

He growled at me.

"I'll take that as you plan to hurt me."

My voice was as calm as it could be, all things considered. That's what you should do when talking with an animal—have a calm voice—but I didn't think it was going to work.

What could this wolf want with me?

The wolf wanted something—the way it looked at me, the hate in its eyes was undeniable. It didn't want something. There was no doubt it wanted me.

No way I was going to let that happen.

I lifted my arms, bringing my hands together to join the growing magic from my left and right sides. This was going to have to be the most powerful spell I'd ever cast if I wanted to

live. And I did want to live. I wasn't going anywhere until I'd avenged my parents' deaths.

"Are you the one who killed my parents?" I glared back at it, letting my power grow.

My nerves settled, even though my pulse remained hard and fast, terror pulsing through me as I faced off against an enemy I never knew existed. It didn't matter if I could fight it or not, I had to.

No one else was going to help me out of this mess.

Aim for the head.

Maria's voice helped me to focus. I lowered my eyes to the target, ignoring the details of the wolf, the sharp teeth, and the hate in its eyes that chilled me.

A sound like a stick crunching caused me to turn my head. My focus was broken. Who was there? Another wolf to fight?

Then I saw my wolf.

My stomach tightened, and I almost doubled over in pain. Was he here to fight me too?

Look out.

I threw my magic into the air, sensing that the first wolf was rushing toward me. There was no time to take aim or to finish the spell, and the magic hurtled in a snake-like motion in the air, and most of it hit the wolf.

The wolf's front paws landed on my chest, pushing me backward. My strength was nothing compared to his.

My head cracked hard on the ground. My arms somehow went up in time to stop the wolf's jaws from latching onto my neck.

I screamed as his teeth buried deep into my arms. Pain took hold of my body, preventing me from connecting with my magic.

My legs kicked up but didn't connect to the wolf above me as it moved its head to the side, drawing its teeth through my flesh.

I cried out again.

Why wouldn't my magic come to me?

I kept trying, fighting against the pain, but no spells formed.

Growling to the side caught my attention. My wolf, the one I thought I could trust, was here. He was going to finish me off for sure.

All I could do was brace myself. I closed my eyes, desperate to connect with my power like I'd been taught.

Then, something hit the wolf above me. He whimpered, caught off-guard, let go of my arms, and I cried out with relief.

I sat up quickly, blood streaming down my arms, the white sleeves of my dress tattered and bloodied.

I scampered backward on my backside in the dirt, trying to get away before I was attacked again. But then I saw what was really happening.

My wolf was fighting the other hard and fast. It wasn't a normal fight. There was a deeper energy between them, an intention to kill the other.

Could I help my wolf?

I had to. Why did I keep thinking of it as my wolf?

I owed it nothing, not really, though right now, it was saving my life.

Get out of here.

Maria's voice was stern in my head. Of course, I should listen to her.

But I didn't.

Scrambling to get up, I stood, wobbly on my feet, the loss of blood making me lightheaded.

I can do this.

This was my chance to show my real power, not to anyone else but myself. I knew if I could do this, then I would be

unstoppable with how I could use my magic. It would mean I could avenge my parents' deaths but also protect the coven.

This was my destiny, and I was going to embrace it.

Focus. It was my voice in my head.

No way could I use my magic without risking hurting my wolf. What else could I do?

Magic was the only power I had that could stop this fight. I had to try something.

The pattern of the spell came to mind—a two-fold spell—the knowledge from the book where I had absorbed the words.

This time, I connected to my magic, the part of me that made me who I was, the part I hadn't explored. And now I was going to do that.

The two wolves fought hard and fast, yet I began to learn their moves, their attacking and defending patterns becoming predictable. I released the first part of the spell—the magic flowed from my hands, bright and strong, tinged with purple.

Time slowed. The movements of each of the wolves slowed, becoming more graceful and not such a frenzied motion.

The first part of the spell had worked.

Now was the hard part.

Would my aim be accurate?

I had no comparison for doing anything close to this before.

My eyes were on the head of the wolf who had attacked me, sizing up the distance for maximum impact.

I released the second part of the spell. Hot red magic shot through the air. Was I really creating this much power?

It didn't matter if I could or not. I had missed my target.

The magic hit the shoulder of the wolf.

I fell to my knees, exhausted from releasing so much magic at once and from the pain in my arms.

The wolf fell over, skidding away, but it got up as if nothing had happened.

My wolf rushed him, trying to gain the upper hand. But the fight was still very much even.

I couldn't help my wolf, the one who was trying to save me. And now I didn't have the energy to leave.

Then, the first part of the spell wore off, and the fight sped up to normal speed.

And something else happened.

The wolf who attacked me stumbled. It began to lose.

Had the spell done something to him? Or was he injured?

It was hard to tell. I still didn't have the energy to do anything but watch.

But I had to try.

I recreated the pattern of the second part of the spell. It wasn't as strong this time. My hands shook so much I couldn't take aim.

The wolves were wearing out, naturally slowing down. I saw my chance and released the magic at the attacking wolf.

This time, I hit the target, and the magic blasted directly to his head.

The wolf was pushed backward, slamming hard into the trunk of a eucalyptus tree. It lay there at the trunk, unmoving. The spell's fire consumed its body, leaving dust to return the life back to the earth.

I did it.

Correction, we had done it together.

I wanted to go to him.

Leaves rustled. Could another wolf be coming? Did they want me?

Willow and Luna rushed from the scrub, magic sparking.

Then my wolf was gone, him taking a small part of me.

They fired their magic at my wolf.

I wanted them to stop, but my mouth couldn't form the words, and all I managed to do was scream out the last of my energy, hoping my wolf would escape, before collapsing on the ground.

CHAPTER 30



*T*anjie

“IS SHE COMING AROUND?”

My ears hurt from the sound of another’s voice. A familiar voice, but the fuzziness in my head stopped me from working out who. That annoyed me.

What had happened?

Scenes flooded my mind in a fragmented mess. An ache stiffened my entire body, and it was hard to put the pieces in order to make sense.

My eyes fluttered each time a different scene came into focus, and the order arranged itself chronologically.

Then I wished I didn’t remember what had happened.

Where was my wolf?

Did he get away?

I attempted to open my eyes, but my lids were heavy and remained shut. Pain in my arms flooded through me, bringing together all the fragmented memory pieces in my mind. I groaned, wishing away the ache.

“She is, Pepper. Go get Willow.” This time, I recalled the voice. It was Luna.

Footsteps sounded heavy in my ears, and I cringed.

“Take it slow, Tanjie. You had quite the experience,” said Luna.

I have other words for what I experienced. Well, maybe not the words yet, but yeah, I suppose that was one way of saying what I had just gone through. An experience. One I hoped never to face again.

I opened my eyes, and this time, my pupils adjusted and focused. I was in my room. Cute, I thought it was my room after only a few nights.

How did I get here?

Not caring for the answer, the order of events of what had happened were now clear in my mind. I had been injured.

I moved and grimaced against the throbbing pain as I lifted my arms. They were heavily bandaged.

“You did well to fight that wolf,” said Luna.

“Is he... did I...” I couldn’t say the words as I let my arms fall back on the bed, the damaged muscles unable to hold them up.

Will this be the rest of my life? Doing what I had just done, killing other creatures for the sake of the coven for my own life.

More concerning was the idea my wounds could affect my ability to cast spells and use my magic.

Tears welled in my eyes, and I closed them, refusing to let them spill down my cheeks. I would not be so weak.

Not in front of Luna.

“You need to take it easy,” said Luna, resting her hand on my leg, her touch far away from my injured arms. Yet it still sent a flicker of pain through my body.

“I need to go. You’ve rejected me.” I pushed my head back into the pillow and opened my eyes to see the tin-pressed ceiling with raw wooden beams. This was meant to have been my home.

I guess I was getting my initial wish of not staying here.

“Wait... there’s been a lot of talking... especially after you... well, I’ll be blunt... killed a wolf. You proved you were on our side.”

So I had killed it. It was his life or mine, yet the act didn’t sit well with me. It appeared to have won me a much-needed favor with the Blue Wren coven.

“Was that what I needed to do because I slept with a wolf, who was a human when...”

I couldn’t bring myself to say it. What happened between Al and me was between us because, well, it was special. Something was exchanged between us on a level I didn’t fully understand yet, and I didn’t want to have to explain it to anyone else.

“You know what, you catch on quickly. You should give yourself more credit.”

“Yeah, right.”

I went to move. I had to leave here. I wasn’t in the coven, and I wasn’t one of them. I wasn’t a witch, and they had made it clear I wasn’t going to be either.

Pain gripped my body, and I froze, gritting my teeth. Stars sparked around the edge of my vision as I tried to remain sitting. I gave in and lay back down on the bed.

“You need to rest and heal.”

“I need stronger meds,” I responded, tears from the pain close to sliding down my cheeks. I blinked them back, just.

“I’ll give you what we have. It’s the equivalent... it’s just worn off.”

“Don’t let it wear off again.” I closed my eyes against a wave of pain. I might’ve rejected her herbal drugs before, but now I wanted the strongest she had. In fact, I doubted they would be strong enough.

“What about my arms...” I couldn’t finish the question. I didn’t want to know the answer if it wasn’t in my favor.

They were shredded by the wolf's teeth. I would need surgery for sure. That's where I should be. In the hospital, in the operating room, having my muscles stitched together again.

"Pepper is an excellent healer."

"What, I don't need stitches?"

"No, well, you don't need the normal stitches. You've got magical stitches in your arms, which is much better."

"Will I heal quicker?"

"Yes, but you will have to rest for a few days."

"I can't do anything for a few days."

"Nothing. Your friends will be here tomorrow."

"What!"

"I rang them. Their presence will help you heal."

They can't be here. What if they found out I was a witch? Never mind, I didn't like how interfering Luna had been by contacting them. How did she hack into my phone? Of course, I knew the answer—her magic.

"The cover story is that you fell hiking and hurt your arms."

"Piss poor story."

I looked at my arms that were heavily bandaged. Would I really heal with magic? This wasn't close to what I was used to. I had to go see a doctor.

"She's awake then?" Willow came up from the stairs. Her dress from the ceremony was dusty and torn.

"I'm awake," I responded, glaring at her. "And I'll be leaving. It's clear you don't think I'm good enough."

"No, that's not the case," answered Willow, stepping toward the bed.

Pepper hurried in behind Willow, also still wearing her ceremony dress. "Don't tire out my patient."

“The ceremony was a bust. It’s best I leave,” I said. I would’ve sat upright in bed, but the pain from the last big movement was clear in my head, and I didn’t want to move an inch.

“See, you’re both stressing her out already. She won’t heal,” warned Pepper, shaking her head.

“Things changed,” said Willow, sitting on the end of the bed. “We saw what you did to the wolf from the Wild Fire pack. He wanted you dead, but you killed him.”

And nearly myself at the same time. But the words remained with me and unspoken.

“What, did you think I was going to kiss him or something?” I glared at Willow.

I didn’t like the label they’d given me. Just because something happened between Al and me, and he hadn’t told me he was really a wolf, it didn’t mean I was going to get in bed with all the wolves.

“Course not,” answered Luna quickly, giving a stormy glance at Willow.

“We needed to be sure of your alliance.”

“I told you he wasn’t a wolf when we...” I let the words fade.

It wasn’t their business what I had done.

Had it been a hookup?

It might well have started out like that, but words were spoken to meet up again, and then he had come to protect me. There was more between us, but that was our secret.

Who knew? Maybe things would sizzle out between us, especially with all this pressure between the witches and wolves.

“Don’t listen to them,” interrupted Pepper, coming forward. “All of us had grown up being taught how to sniff out a wolf and other supernaturals. They’ve forgotten what it is like to be untrained in your magic.”

Her words were reassuring. How was I supposed to know when I had never been taught?

“You need to rest now,” added Pepper.

No way was I resting until this was all sorted. I went to sit up again, but Pepper was by me, gently pushing me back. I didn't have the strength to fight her.

“You're all stressing her out too much. Tanjie, they are sure of your alliance now, and that is all that matters.” Her expression seemed to plead with me to let it go.

No way was I about to. I didn't care how much pain I was in. I always fought to have my own path in life, and I would do that right now.

“Pepper, if you want her to rest, get the tea and make it extra strength,” said Luna softly.

“Don't go making it worse for her.” Pepper pointed to both women before leaving the room.

“Because I killed a wolf, you now trust me?” I asked, fire burning through my veins.

“Not just any wolf,” answered Willow.

My pulse increased as I stared at her.

“Why? Did he kill my parents?”

If he had, then that would end things nicely. I didn't think I would be so lucky that my current mess would end up tied in a neat bow, at least not yet.

“I don't know. But he shouldn't be here in this territory of the Moon Pack.”

“What does that mean?”

“Packs have territories, and they don't normally cross borders.”

“If they do, there are consequences like death, which is what happened a few hours ago when you killed the wolf,” added Luna.

“How is that even possible? And why did he want to kill me?”

“Because you’re a witch and also because of your potential, which is why you have to be more careful.”

Yeah, got it. Mental note—don’t go having sex with a wolf. I didn’t even want to think what I would do if I saw Al again. My logical thoughts were bursting through the pain, forming questions I had to have answers to.

“But how would the wolf know that? You’ve kept me a secret, and I haven’t undergone my initiation, which I never will now, so all this conversation is a waste of my time.”

“Exactly,” said Willow. “But he somehow knew.”

“How?” My gut twisted tight, and I guessed what they were about to say.

“Perhaps it was your indiscretion.”

It couldn’t be. Not the way my wolf was protecting me. Something else was going on. But how could I say that to them without giving away what had really happened before they got there?

“No, it’s not possible.” It was a weak answer.

“Let this be a lesson for you, Tanjie. You must obey our instructions. It’s not just your life or your magic that is at risk, but also everyone else’s.”

“But didn’t you say that the wolf I killed...” I paused as I said the words, bile rising to my mouth. I swallowed hard before continuing, “... was from a different pack?”

“He was,” said Willow.

“And weren’t they fighting, which is why you left me in the store earlier?”

I had to say I did take pleasure in seeing Willow’s expression change to a deep frown. I had just blown her theory out of the water that this was my fault.

“So there’s more happening, isn’t there?” I added. “More, which you don’t know about, but you need to find out.”

“And we will,” huffed Willow as if she’d been caught out telling a lie.

“So, it’s not all about me then.”

“You still need to do as we say.”

“Why? Maybe I’ll go back with my friends. They’ll take me away from here if I ask them to.”

“It will take longer for you to heal without us, dear, so please don’t do that,” said Luna, leaning in closer to me.

I suppose my injuries would be hard to explain. Once more, I was staying. But then I couldn’t go without seeing Al again, more so to give him a piece of my mind for not telling me what he really was. Who did he think he was taking advantage of me like that? But more so, I wanted to thank my wolf for coming to help me.

“Tanjie, the coven has agreed to hold your ceremony next month.”

“You should’ve completed it tonight,” I answered bitterly. “Then I wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Be that as it may, there are a lot of factors at play here.”

“Convenient,” I muttered under my breath.

“You will go through a cleansing to remove the wolf energy from your own and continue learning with Luna.”

Did I want that? Could they even do that?

I was getting tired. The conversation was wearing me out.

“You must not see Al again.”

“Fine,” I lied. I would see whoever I wanted.

“You must listen. We want everything to align for the next dark moon so you can receive your full powers. Goodness knows, with the wolf packs fighting and now the attack on you, you’re going to need strong magic,” said Willow.

“Do I have to complete the ceremony? Isn’t my magic strong enough now?”

“Yes, because you have the potential to be stronger. It will be worth it.”

I hoped so because so far, it had landed me with damaged arms and ignited my desire to leave here again.

“Plus, the ceremony must be completed to find your unique skill. Everyone has one.”

I didn’t care about a special skill. I was so far behind in learning the magic I needed, it didn’t seem important to me.

“And my arms, will the damage stop the magic?”

“No, not with Pepper looking after you,” said Willow. “That’s her special skill, healing. We need to find yours, which is why you’ll complete the ceremony next dark moon.”

“So I’m part of the coven.” The feeling of elation I was now in a coven and considered a witch was lacking.

“Welcome, Tanjie, to the Blue Wren coven,” said Willow, her voice lacked emotion.

“You can do better than that, Willow,” reprimanded Luna.

“I’m distracted, and we need to work out who is going to spy on the wolf packs and find out what is really going on.”

Luna sighed heavily. “I guess it was inevitable that peace would end after so many years.”

“At least we have Tanjie now. That’s if she can follow our instructions.”

I narrowed my eyes at Willow. “Maybe there needs to be more clarity around the instructions.”

“Here’s the tea,” said Pepper, holding a steaming mug. She paused. “You’ve stressed Tanjie too much. I can feel it in the air.”

“We’re just leaving now,” said Willow, standing up from the bed.

The movement caused me to grimace as a fresh wave of pain washed through me. If it wouldn’t hurt so much, I’d reach out for the tea and gulp it down.

“Please rest, dear,” said Luna. “Your friends will be here later in the morning to help you recover.”

A weak smile spread across my lips as Luna walked around the end of my bed to the door. She was trying to help, but I’d prefer it if I had a choice of who was coming to see me.

Their footsteps were heavy as they went downstairs. The second to last step creaked loudly, and I sighed. They were gone.

“I hurried as fast as I could.” Pepper held out the tea for me, moving to help support my head so I could drink.

I sipped as much as I could before I had to have a break. “This better be strong.”

“It is, and it will help you to sleep.”

I didn’t need anything to help me sleep. Talking with Luna and Willow had exhausted me, along with the agony pulsing through my body.

“Is it such a bad thing that another pack is here?”

“It is.” Pepper snapped her finger, brought up a map of the area, and the colored light faded in the dimly lit room.

“This is where we are... here is the shop. All of this territory is the Dark Moon pack.”

A red line circled around, marking the boundary. It was a large area.

“On this east side is the Wild Fire pack.”

“Plenty of room for both packs?”

“There should be.”

“So it’s not about territory then.” This means the wolf had come for me, and it wasn’t an accident.

“No. Here, drink a bit more. You’re nearly finished.”

I took another big gulp—the bitter tea turned my stomach.

“Pepper, what does this cleansing require?” My head was already fuzzy. Whatever was in it was beginning to work.

“Bit like a smoking ceremony but with magic.”

“Can you sense the wolf energy in me?”

“I can.”

“And it’s bad?”

“Yes. Because we are in charge, we can’t favor them.”

“How will having the wolf energy with mine favor them?”
My body was heavy, weighed down into the bed. I could drink more of that tea if it meant I would end up feeling this good.

“Your energies are entwined, which means you might not be able to make the hard decisions.”

“But I did.”

“Yes, somehow you did. And that’s why you’re in the coven now.”

“So why go through a cleansing?”

“Hush. It’s time you rested.” She put her hand on my forehead. I felt her slip away as I rushed toward unconsciousness.

Then I saw my wolf’s eyes. I remembered. The way my wolf had looked at me reminded me of the connection we had. It was as if he wanted me to know something of importance. The connection between us was as strong as before. No witch was going to keep us away from each other.

CHAPTER 31



*A*laric

NO WAY COULD I go back to the pack. Not when I was injured. There would be too many questions, but there would be too many questions if I weren't with them right now.

I went with the less of the two evils.

Safe, hidden in the bushes well away from the shop and the witches, I licked the wound on my shoulder.

Hurry up and heal.

It wasn't bad. I had worse. But it was a giveaway I hadn't been with the pack. I was in enough trouble already. I didn't need to compound it. Yet, that was what I had done.

Why had I gone to see Tanjie?

After the members of the Wild Fire pack had come, there had been a fight the witches had put out. The unrest in the pack was suffocating.

Rafe was going to kill the alpha of the Wild Fire pack and the witches right then and there. I had talked him down with the help of the other leaders in the pack.

Then I felt it.

Tanjie needed me.

With the discussion heated and animated, I slipped away. I had to go to her. I had to be sure she was all right.

One thing was sure, since sleeping with her, the need to see her was stronger. A bond had formed between us, forbidden as it was, and I didn't think it was ever going to be easy to break.

My tongue grazed once more over the lesion. The metallic taste set me on edge. More fighting was to come, and I had to be ready.

Luckily, I had listened to my instinct—my wolf's urge to go to her. What the hell was that bastard from the Wild Fire pack doing there?

It riled me to my limit, and I wanted to rip his throat out.

Mind, she hadn't needed my help in the end. It cut me deeper than my wound to know I had failed her.

Rafe was right. I'd been ignoring my duties in the pack. I hadn't been going to the full training sessions. Would it be too late for me to start now?

With so much happening all at once, a dread in my belly twisted, and I couldn't help thinking I'd left it all too late.

The skin healed, knitting back together as I coaxed it with my tongue. It would leave a small scar I needed to remind me of my weakness in the fight.

I would be ready the next time I saw a Wild Fire pack member.

My wolf was as impatient as I was to get back to the pack. It was too dangerous for me to stay out here alone.

The wound nearly healed, I ran to where I'd left my clothes, changed back into human form, and dressed back into my ripped jeans and shirt. I couldn't waste any more time. The cut would finish healing by the time I got back to the clubhouse.

The clubhouse was a small granny-flat setup at the back of Rafe's place for when we weren't meeting at the pub. Fortunately, we had enough pack members with rather helpful jobs, which helped to keep our cover.

I headed home, getting into my car and driving way too fast. A speeding ticket would be worth it.

Parked down the road so as not to announce I so openly had arrived, I hurried to the shed at the back of the house I'd grown up in. Was this all something I could lose now?

I slipped into the clubhouse. The open-style rectangular room was full of all the members of our pack. It stunk like wolf, hormones, sweat, and anger.

What had I missed?

I held my breath, scanning the room, my eyes meeting Tyr. It wasn't like I could trust him to find out what had transpired while I was away protecting a witch.

Tanjie had been so powerful. It had been mesmerizing to watch her fight the wolf. Something niggled in my mind about this. I couldn't work out what, but it didn't matter. I had other things to focus on.

Right now, I needed to put my pack first.

I edged closer to Rafe, glaring at Tyr, who was closer than I would like to the alpha.

My skin prickled, and my wolf was on edge. Something was up, and it involved me.

"Look who finally arrived," said Tyr.

My wolf lurched at him, and it took all my self-control to contain him and stay in my human form. Losing control wouldn't bode in my favor.

"Where have you been?" demanded Rafe.

He was riled up, eyes full of emotion, a healing scar across his face from the fight.

"I was checking out the town, making sure it was safe," I answered.

"Like hell you were," said Rafe as he stepped toward me aggressively.

I squared my shoulders and tensed my muscles. I was ready for whatever was about to transpire.

“You wanted me to find out who the snitch was in the pack so that’s what I was doing.” I lowered my voice and looked at him directly. The lie came easier than I expected it would.

I just have to get through this, then things will be back on track.

This line I kept telling myself was fast becoming the worst mantra. Ever since seeing Tanjie, I couldn’t keep my mind on track.

“You were seen with the witches.”

I glared at Tyr, who looked way too smug for my liking. The traitor. A cold chill went through me. It had to be him who had ratted the pack out. It had to be.

Why else would he have known where I was? He had been with the wolf from the other pack. It was the only explanation that made sense.

What annoyed me the most was how did I miss it?

Had he followed me?

I had to get my head sorted and stop obsessing about Tanjie or whatever the hell I was doing. I was about to lose everything I was gunning for over a woman—a witch woman, to be precise.

I looked back at Rafe and knew there was no way he was going to believe me. I still had to try.

“Like I said, I was checking the town, and good thing I did. I tracked another wolf, one from the Wild Fire pack.”

“That’s not what I’ve heard.”

“It’s what happened. I fought him. He wouldn’t say why he was there.” It was a dangerous lie, one my life depended on, along with my position in the pack.

If I was still allowed to stay in the pack.

“You were protecting her,” interrupted Tyr.

His words confirmed my guilt. The fucking bastard, I would expose him if that was the last thing I'd do, which could well be the case, the way things were going right now for me.

Rafe put up his hand, silencing Tyr, his eyes remaining locked with mine.

“You know, Alaric, you do have a smell of a witch about you.”

Fuck, the bond that was forming between Tanjie and me. I should've thought to mask the smell.

“It's not true.”

“How do you explain the scent of a witch about you? Of all things, a wolf shifter bonded with a witch. You're an embarrassment to the pack.”

“It's my disguise, my trick to get close to her so I could kill her.”

Oh fuck, I was in over my head. I could never kill Tanjie. What was I saying? I had to stop talking and get out of there.

“Then why didn't you kill her?”

“Like I said, the Wild Fire pack member got in the way.” I held my nerve.

“Unlikely.”

Something else gnawed at my insides. Did I have valuable information that I should be telling them about Tanjie?

An untrained witch had arrived?

I couldn't do it. The conflict in me tore me apart. My wolf wouldn't let me.

“It's true.” Then I knew what I was going to have to do, which was going to change everything.

Just this little bit of information to save my skin, I'll make it up to her. I promised myself and my wolf.

There had to be consequences for me having sex with a witch, even if she wasn't trained. This was it—my dues to pay for my indiscretion.

“She was too powerful,” I lowered my voice, adding a tone of shame.

Rafe scoffed. “Yeah, right, unlikely. She’s not trained.”

How did he know that?

My belly tightened. I couldn’t say more than that. If anything were to happen to Tanjie, I wouldn’t forgive myself.

“But isn’t this what is foretold?”

“Bullshit. You could’ve taken her down, but you didn’t.”

“No, the Wild Fire wolf got in the way. She was too strong.” I stepped forward, anger burning through me. What lies had Tyr been saying?

Rafe paused. I remained tense, expecting him to swing a punch at me any moment now.

“I’ve got your back,” I said softly, so only he heard. “I am close to finding out who is the betrayer.”

I’d say right now it was Tyr, but I needed to get out of this mess first. No way would Rafe believe me if I said it. I had to play it smart.

“Like hell you were.”

“If I was fucking around, why would I turn up here? I’m not that stupid.” I stopped short of saying it was all lies. What I was saying wasn’t quite the truth either.

Was I about to be exposed? Kicked out of the pack?

I needed to stay in the pack. I could protect Tanjie better this way. The need to protect her was strong. No wonder I stunk of witch energy.

How could I have bonded with her?

I didn’t bond with any woman. Only had some sexy fun and left. Apparently, not this time.

“You have one more chance. One. More. You fuck it up, and you’re out of the pack.”

I held my breath. There had to be more.

Rafe stepped away and went to Tyr. He placed his hand on Tyr's shoulder, then turned to the pack.

“Everyone, I've made my choice. We need a strong front as we face off against the witches.”

My pulse was erratic.

No, he can't do this. Tyr is the one who betrayed us.

But I had failed my pack, too, because I had no evidence to prove it.

“Tyr is the new beta.”

The pack cheered. I couldn't do it. This was all bittersweet. I hadn't been kicked out, but I had been overlooked, and Rafe had sent a clear message to the pack about what he thought of me, his son—he didn't trust me, and I was at the bottom of the pack.

I guess there's only one way to go now, and that is up. But it was going to take all my wits and smarts. I couldn't make a single mistake. I had to up my game.

Not just for me.

But for Tanjie.

Whatever was going to happen, I was going to be the one to protect her.

CHAPTER 32



*T*anjie

VOICES WHISPERING DREW me from my sleep. Once the pain in my arms washed over me, I readjusted and focused on the words.

“The ceremony might not matter, anyway.”

I recognized the voice. It was Luna, and she was agitated.

“We have to do it. We have to find out her skill.”

That was Willow speaking. They were just down the stairs. No doubt, she was waiting for me to wake.

I lay still, eyes closed, listening.

“No, we don’t, Willow. She is as strong as she will be... no ceremony will change that.”

“She might be stronger if she hadn’t slept with a wolf.”

“What is done is done. Let it go. There are bigger problems. We might all be dead by the next dark moon. We have to train her. If anything, we should’ve dragged her here after her parents’ deaths and started before she was eighteen.”

“I agree on that point.”

“Agree on all my points. We are in this together, and we can’t let our differences divide us.”

“So what if we don’t know her skill? We can progress without knowing.”

“I hope so because that looks very much like what we will have to do.”

“More importantly, we need her to heal. If her arms have too much scar tissue...”

“I know it will change her flow of magic.”

“We won’t know for at least two more days.”

“Pepper won’t let that happen.”

“No, and she’s working too hard when Tanjie’s sleeping to heal her arms. We should be watching her more closely. Clearly, the wolves know of her powers now and are hunting her.”

“We can’t be too careful. She’s our future, and we must take more measures...”

So my magic might end up altered? What they said added to my anxiety that I would lose my power only after connecting to it. I already felt lost not being able to use it.

Even though my body was in pain, and I didn’t want to move, some of my muscles protested from being in the same position for too long. I inched to the side to relieve the discomfort. Somehow, I knocked the pillow, which sent a cup tumbling to the floor.

The crash silenced the conversation between Willow and Luna.

Fuck, I had lost my chance to find out more. It was shattered on the floor with the cup. Along with my privacy as both women rushed up the stairs.

“Are you all right?” asked Luna.

“What happened? Is there an intruder?” asked Willow, who glanced at me and then rushed to the window to look outside.

“I’m fine... well, the pain is returning, and I slipped.”

“Here, let me help you,” said Luna as she picked up the pillow. She wore her usual flowing floral maxi dress, her scent fresh soap and lavender.

“I think it’s about time you sat up,” said Luna.

I wasn’t so sure, but it was my arms that were the issue, not my body. I wasn’t one to be lounging in bed for long, even when I was unwell.

“Let’s try it.” I braced myself against the pain I knew was coming.

I let Luna move me up to sitting so she could place the pillow behind me. Then she helped me to shimmy backward. All this time, Willow checked out the room. First with her eyes, then her magic to ensure no one was around. Pink light swirled around the room, then back to her without changing color.

“No one else is here or has been,” Willow said with relief.

“Is this all right for you?” asked Luna, hitting the pillow to fluff it up. She’d stacked it with another.

I leaned back into the softness, my head dizzy from the change of position after being on my back and the pain medication. But after a few slow, deep breaths, I adjusted.

“Much better... thank you.”

Luna started cleaning up the broken cup with her magic, placing the pieces back together and refashioning the vessel.

“Did you have a good night’s sleep?” Luna asked, placing the cup back on the bedside table.

I really wanted to do magic like that. Would I be able to?

I couldn’t see past my injuries right now, and while they told me I would recover, I worried about damage to my muscles and how the scar tissue might change the flow of my magic.

“I suppose so.” It was hard to say, really, after the strong tea Pepper had made for me. At least it was dream-free, or perhaps more accurately, nightmare-free.

Willow eyed me closely, and I shifted uncomfortably in the bed, then immediately regretted the movement. I breathed in sharply.

When would the pain end?

More than that, I wanted to keep using my magic. Not doing so left an emptiness inside me that grew the longer I didn't connect with my power.

"Don't use your magic," warned Luna. "Please, give it another two days at least. Then you should be all right. The herbs we are giving you are strong, and the healing magic from Pepper is intense. The best thing you can do is rest."

"I've just the thing to help with that," said Pepper, coming up the stairs.

"More tea?" I didn't want the tea to wear off like it had during the night.

"Not yet, but soon."

Dark shadows under Pepper's eyes told me the strain she was under trying to heal me. I wanted to tell her to stop, to send me to the hospital, but she was the best bet for me to be able to use my magic.

Her clearly being a healer made me wonder what my skill was. I really wanted to know.

"What is your skill, Luna?"

Her eyes widened, and for a moment, she was taken aback by my sudden question.

"Oh, you mean my magical skill. Well, it's foresight. I have visions of what's to come."

That did sound rather cool, but nothing like I'd ever experienced. That wasn't my skill.

"And yours, Willow?"

"Contacting spirits."

Nope, not mine either. But that made sense now of her role in the ceremony. What could my skill be?

All I had managed to do so far was to send out sparks that hurt Luna, and I didn't count killing a wolf as a skill, more sheer luck than anything else. My mind foggy from the side

effects of the drugs in the tea made it hard to think. Otherwise, I was sure I could figure out what my skill was.

“Your friends are here,” said Pepper.

Her words brought me back to the present. My friends were here, and I was in no state to see them.

I was about to say don't let them in, but then Mia and Caleb burst up from the stairs, bustling past Pepper, almost knocking her over.

“What have you done to yourself?” asked Mia. “Fuck, you look a mess.”

“We should never have let you out of our sights,” said Caleb.

They hurried to my bed and embraced me. Pain flooded my body, and I cried out.

“Oh, does that hurt? Sorry,” said Mia.

They quickly pulled away, and I wished them back. It felt good to be with my friends again.

“No more hiking for you, do you promise?” Caleb looked sternly at me, and I knew he wasn't kidding.

“Promise.” The first lie with my friends made this all very bittersweet for me.

“Hmm... I'm not sure I believe you.”

I laughed, then abruptly stopped as pain gripped my body.

“Oh, Tanjie, I'm sorry,” said Caleb.

It felt good to laugh. I needed to laugh.

“I'll prepare more tea, then you must let her rest,” said Pepper.

“But we've only been here a few minutes,” complained Mia.

“I'll take my time,” said Pepper.

“So, you better tell me everything that's happened,” said Caleb, sitting at the end of the bed.

I winched from the movement of his weight on the mattress as more waves of pain moved through me. I was glad to see my friends, but my pain level meant I was easily exhausted.

“Sorry,” said Caleb, straightening his back, not wanting to move an inch.

“This room needs light and fresh air,” huffed Mia. She went over and pulled up the blind, then opened the window.

Immediately, fresh air, albeit warm with the heat of the day, flowed into the room. How long had I slept? Most of the day must have passed already.

Mia went around the top floor’s open space, opening what windows she could. I didn’t think either Luna or Willow would like that, but I didn’t stop her. I felt safe with Mia and Caleb by my side.

“Where are you staying?” I asked.

“A bed and breakfast a few blocks away,” said Caleb. “The Black Crow.”

I raised an eyebrow at the name, which sounded very witchy to me.

So the coven would watch my friends closely. I suppose I should’ve expected something like that.

“I wish you were staying here,” I said.

“Me too, but Luna was insistent you need to rest, and after seeing you, I have to agree,” said Mia.

“Don’t take her side.” I rolled my eyes and sighed.

“You’re already being a difficult patient, I can see that,” said Caleb. “Good thing we are here to put an end to that.”

“Hardly...”

Caleb put up his hand, and I stopped what I was going to say. No point in protesting to him. He wasn’t going to listen.

“So what’s it like here?” asked Mia, coming back to the bed and dragging the cane chair closer to my side.

“We don’t have much time,” said Caleb. “Spill the beans. Have you met someone?”

“Hey, slow down,” I complained with mock seriousness.

“You have. I know you have,” continued Caleb.

“You’re just desperate for gossip,” I answered with a smile. They knew just what to do to lighten my mood.

“Then you better tell us about him before Pepper gets back.”

What could I tell them? Yeah, I met someone who turns out to be a wolf, and we can never see each other again. Too bad it was mind-blowing sex, and I want more, and on top of that, I’m curious to get to know him.

“Well, there’s a boy...” I started.

What if the room had been bugged? Not with the normal sort of spy bugging but with magic. I was sure that would totally be something Willow would do.

“Told you,” said Mia smugly.

“Dammit.” Caleb handed over ten bucks.

“You bet on this?”

“Yep.”

“And I thought you were my friends.”

“We’re here in your time of need, so, of course, we’re your friends,” said Caleb, placing his hand on his heart.

“Mind you, the way you’ve been tight-lipped since getting here made me wonder if you’d ditched us.”

“It’s because of this boy,” said Caleb.

“And it’s over between us. Nothing more than a fling... well, a mistake, really.” I had to put up an act. If the other witches were listening, I couldn’t tell the truth. At least not here in this room. With Mia and Caleb staying elsewhere, I wasn’t sure of my chances of getting time to speak with them outside of here.

“I don’t believe it,” said Caleb.

“You just want gossip.”

“I drove for hours, so yeah, I want details, missy,” he said with a wink.

“You know, maybe tomorrow you could help me outside. I think some sunshine would do wonders for me getting better.”

“That is a great idea,” said Mia.

“I know of a cute café a few doors down where we can have coffee, my shout.”

“You’re on,” said Caleb.

Then I could maybe tell them some more details. They were my friends, and I didn’t want to keep my new life completely from them. Otherwise, I might lose them. And I couldn’t let that happen.

“Time’s up, I’m sorry to say,” said Pepper as she stepped toward us, a mug of tea in her hand.

“So soon.” Caleb pouted.

“You can come back once she’s rested. I’ll ring you when she’s awake,” said Pepper.

“Thanks. I want to see them again.”

“Yes you do,” started Mia. “We barely got anything from you.”

Mia got up and came over to me. I froze.

“Don’t worry, I won’t hug you.” She kissed the top of my head.

I giggled at her gesture. “Never thought you’d do something like that.”

“And I never thought you’d nearly kill yourself or whatever you managed to do to yourself when hiking,” said Mia.

Caleb stiffly got up from the bed, trying not to make any sort of movement for me. Then, he also kissed me on the top of my head.

“Details,” he whispered. “Or else.”

I watched them leave. They each waved before disappearing down the staircase. I wished them back, but they didn't come.

"Here, drink the tea before the pain gets too bad," said Pepper softly and helped me to drink.

I wasn't going to argue with that. The pain I woke to during the night was still clear in my mind.

"It's good to see you happier," said Pepper as I sipped the tea. "Your friends are helping."

"It's good to see them."

I finished the tea and rested against the pillows, remaining upright in bed.

"Do you want to lay down?"

"No. But I need to go to the toilet."

"Here, let me help."

I wished I could do that myself, but no way. I was determined to get out of bed and not use a bedpan. Pepper helped me to the bathroom and then back again. By then, the tea was starting to take effect.

"When you wake, I'll have food for you... you must eat."

I don't even know if I responded as I laid back on the pillows. Pepper tucked me in. Even though it was summer, I felt chilled.

"It's the shock of moving. Rest now, it's the best you can do." She sat near me and waited for me to fall asleep. Then she would heal my arms.

I wanted to use my magic right now to be reassured I still had my power.

More than that, I wanted to get on my feet and look for my wolf.

Would he want me, knowing I had killed one of his kind?

Darkness from the drug crept in from the edges of my mind and began to dominate.

Would I ever get to see my wolf again?

The End ~ for now.

Continue the story with Tanjie:

Book Two: *New Moon Fate*

Enjoyed this series?

Check out [Protector Wolf Shifter Series](#) by Lilliana Rose

Keep up with Lilliana Rose's new releases by joining her
newsletter.

<https://landing.mailerlite.com/webforms/landing/g917p6>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Huge shout out to Nicki and Kaylene for completing the edits at the eleventh hour. I really appreciate your honest feedback, and support to get this book into the world.

Of course, thanks to my dogs, Kimba and Sprinkles, who are always at my feet being the quiet support I need. I miss you Kimba, but know you're with Astro running around up there and having fun.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lilliana Rose writes romance in the subgenres of contemporary and paranormal romance. She enjoys helping characters overcome problems or issues, and the misunderstandings that often plague relationships, to help them fall in love. Whether its city heels being replaced with country work boots, or some magic beyond this world, each story shows how love can prevail. She has poetry, middle grade, picture books, novellas, and novels published under various pen names.

Check out more of her work at www.lillianarose.com.

Keep up to date with Lilliana on social media

[Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Pinterest](#), [Goodreads](#), [Instagram](#)