



Halloween
PROMISES

AMELIA SHAW

Halloween Promises

Seasonal Paranormal and Fantasy Romances, Volume 1

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HALLOWEEN PROMISES

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Written by Amelia Shaw.

Thank you to Gombar Sanya for the FANTASTIC cover.

This story wasn't on the schedule for this year, but after I saw that epic cover, I HAD to write a Halloween story this year.

And to my beautiful editor and friend- Faedra Rose.

HALLOWEEN PROMISES

SEASONAL PARANORMAL AND FANTASY ROMANCES

BOOK ONE

AMELIA SHAW

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CHAPTER 1

Pansy

Halloween wasn't exactly my favorite time of the year. As a witch—a real witch—with a store that sold the best quality potion ingredients in the state, I was always busy. But in October I was inundated with pretenders. The stampede into my store started the moment pumpkin spice hit the coffee shops.

I had to suck it up though. The reality was that the money I made in October alone covered the rent on my shop for the whole calendar year. So, even if I didn't like the inevitable switch to selling Halloween costumes and fake spells for a month, I wasn't going to close my shop in protest any time soon.

We lived in Salem after all. The Halloween capital of the country.

The bells above my shop's front door jingled again and I swallowed the groan that rose. On the thirtieth of September, I put all my good stuff away, raised the prices, and put out a whole lot of pumpkin and witch props out for the tourists. They came in *droves*. It had been so busy for the past three weeks solid that I'd barely had a day off, but we were almost there. Halloween was only ten days away, then I'd enjoy a well-earned reprieve from the seasonal madness.

I forced a smile to my face as two blonde haired angels hurried towards me where I stood behind my shop counter. "Hello. How can I help you?"

"We're looking for Halloween costumes," one of the girls gushed excitedly.

Of course, you are.

I stepped out from behind my two-hundred-year-old oak desk, a gift from my grandmother, and pointed towards my newly refreshed costume section. "You'll find everything on these two racks, and I have changing rooms out the back."

The one with the straighter hair grabbed my arm. "Have you got anything... scary? But kind of sexy?"

Oh, if I had a dollar for every time someone asked me that!

I stared into her eyes, did a quick assessment of what I thought would work with her features and said, "Try the witch outfit with the orange and black stockings, then pair it with some blood... maybe some gothic vampire accessories. If you can't find what you need, ask me. I might even have something in my secret stash."

Or I'd be able to conjure up something simple for them. I wasn't very powerful when it came to physical magic, but I could pull together some fluff and elastic easily enough.

The girls squealed and ran off to try on the clothes I'd been gathering all year.

I couldn't help but smile at their blatant enthusiasm. It might annoy me to do this, to pretend that magic and witches weren't real... but the happiness that bubbled off of my clients in October surpassed that of my normal clientele. And for that I was grateful.

I shook my head at my own strange thoughts and walked back to my desk, putting together little harmless pouches of sage and rosemary for those that wanted to do their own Halloween night rituals.

"Oh, this is perfect," one of the girls cried, running out to show me like I was her mom. "But you don't have it in blue... by any chance?" she asked hopefully.

I looked at the pretty angel outfit that I had acquired in every color. "Yeah. I do, actually. Let me go grab it for you from out the back. Just give me a minute."

The girl rushed back to the dressing room with a shriek.

I put down my mortar and pestle with a small shake of my head. The back room was where I kept all of my surplus Halloween gear, and where I could easily make something with my magic if I needed to.

I heard the bells on the front door jingle again and called out. "Won't be a minute!"

I looked around the storeroom and quickly realized that I didn't have any more blue angel costumes like the girl wanted. I glanced towards the door to make sure no one was watching, then waved my hand over a coat hanger. A blue angel costume appeared on the hanger. I smiled as the last of the silver glitter applied itself to the skirt. "That's nice." I even colored the outfit pale blue, more like the girl's eyes.

I walked back into the main store and took the costume straight to the girl who was still excitedly going through my trunk of accessories.

"Wow! You've got some awesome stuff," the curly haired blonde said, picking up a pretty and chunky faux pearl necklace.

I'd sold a ridiculous amount of them in the last week. "Keep digging." I

said with a grin, starting to like these two customers despite my best efforts to remain aloof. “There’s more than a few unique necklaces in that trunk.”

The girls dove headfirst into my fake jewelry, like little kids in a swimming pool on a hot summer’s day.

A contagious laugh bubbled up inside of me at their enthusiasm.

“Pansy has the best Halloween gear around here,” a deep and familiar voice said from behind me.

I froze, the laugh dying in my throat. *Crap*. I turned around slowly, steeling myself for the onslaught of heat that would descend upon me. And it did. Hard and fast, leaving me feeling dazed.

I lifted my chin out of spite and crossed my arms defiantly. “Get out of my shop. Now.”

His eyes were sapphire blue like real jewels. The color that only fairytale heroes in storybooks were blessed with. His smile, which was now directed at me, sent shivers of warmth through me.

My nipples ached in response and anger pooled in my gut. *Damn him*.

Maverick, my high school sweetheart—and the only man I’d ever loved—didn’t move. He just grinned at me with even more charm and warmth than before. Then his piercing blue gaze slid sideways, to the gorgeous young girls who’d emerged from their shopping spree to stare up at him with abject wonder.

“Hello ladies.” Maverick said, stepping sideways so the girls would receive the full wattage of his impressive warlock smile.

The girls stumbled to their feet, all knock-kneed and big, wide eyes.

I groaned as jealousy and anger hit me in equal measures. I wasn’t sure which emotion was more frustrating. I just hated that he affected me *at all*. “Well, I’ll leave you three to it.” I announced, then scurried back to the safety of my desk.

Luckily the girls looked at least twenty-one, otherwise I’d have shoved them out the door with one of my broomsticks.

Maverick was the hottest, sneakiest, most powerful warlock this city had. And we had a past that still broke my heart to think about... the moments we'd stolen together as teenagers still kept me warm through the cold nights.

He'd been my first *everything*. First love. First kiss. First night of passion where I'd slept, wrapped in his arms and had truly believed that we'd never be apart again. But within a day of our only night together, his parents had shipped him off to some hoity-toity warlock school in London for college and when he eventually returned, he'd changed.

He wasn't *my* Maverick anymore. And he never was again.

The girls came rushing up to my desk, their arms full of purchases. "Can you ring these up for us?"

I nodded and forced a smile, before packing up their outfits as quickly as I could, adding in a couple of charmed necklaces from my drawer under the counter. They would stop them from being hexed on Halloween night. It was a pity I couldn't put them on the girls right now, not that I thought Maverick had changed that much, but still. Better safe than sorry.

Maverick swaggered around the coat stand and slung his arm over one of the girls' shoulders. "We're heading to the café around the corner. You coming?"

My cheeks heated with a hot blush when I realized he wasn't talking to me.

"Yes. Definitely. Just paying." The blonde girl physically shoved the jewelry she wanted into the brown bags I was packing, then thrust her credit card at me. "I'll pay for everything. Together. Please."

I did the math quickly in my head, then presented the girl with the total on the card machine.

She didn't balk at the price. Instead, she just tapped her card and grabbed up the bags in her hands. "Thank you!" Then she hurried back to Maverick.

He'd worn a short sleeved black shirt today, which unfortunately for me highlighted the size of his bulging biceps. He'd gotten another tattoo since

last I saw him, a black flame-like thing that curled up his forearm.

I bit my tongue, refusing to comment on it. He seemed to get a kick out of annoying me and I wasn't giving him the satisfaction. Not today.

My heart thumped heavily in my chest and adrenaline zinged along my veins as though a lion had literally entered my shop. I desperately wanted to hide out the back, just so I didn't have to look at him anymore—but I refused to show him just how much he still affected me. It hurt me to admit it, but no matter how hard I tried to forget him, I couldn't. Nothing had changed for me. I still felt the same way about Maverick as I did all those years ago.

I wriggled my fingers at the girls, focusing on them as I said. “Bye ladies. Have a great Halloween.”

“Oh, we will!” They cried in unison, tugging at Maverick. “Thank you for all your help!”

Maverick was still staring at me, waiting for a reaction.

Which one he expected, or wanted, I wasn't sure. So, I smiled at him with as little warmth as I could muster, then turned away to jot down the sales. The pencil felt stiff in my hand.

He was still staring at me.

I could feel it. But I forced my foggy brain to recall everything the girls had bought, resolutely ignoring the charming warlock—much to his chagrin.

When the bells above the door finally rung to signal that they'd left my store, I sunk down onto the stool with a sigh of relief.

Another thing I hated about Halloween...

Maverick was back in town.



CHAPTER 2

Maverick

I pushed open the café's front door and directed the girls to the booth at the back. "Here you go ladies. Best seat in the house."

The two blondes slid into the booth, giggling as they did. They were gorgeous. Angelic. Young. And absolutely falling all over themselves to please me.

Not my type. At all.

My cell phone wasn't ringing, but I pulled it out of my pocket as if it had vibrated and stared down at the screen. "It's my father. Excuse me." I walked away from the booth, just within their ear shot, and answered a 'call' where no-one was on the other end of the line.

"Yeah? Hm. Okay. Damn, really? Fine. Fine." I said in a falsely

exasperated voice. I ‘hung’ up the phone, then turned to the girls. “Ladies, I have to go.”

“Oh no...” They pouted, obviously anxious to be wooed and bedded, like most of the humans around here.

“It’s okay. Another time.” I said, unable to help myself from being polite. I hadn’t meant to hurt them, I only wanted to see if Pansy still felt the same way about me. *And she did.* “I’ll see you again, I’m sure.”

“Will you be around for Halloween?” One of the girls asked—I never caught their names—getting to her feet within the booth just so she could step closer to me.

I nodded. “Yep. I’m here for the carnival, then I’m heading back to London.”

Most people would have said ‘heading back home’ if they were returning to the place they’d lived for ten years. But London wasn’t home. It was an obligation. Work. There was only one place I called home... and that place was a woman. And she owned the magic shop around the corner.

“We’ll see you then. Maybe.” One of the girls swooned.

I winked at her, then turned on my heel and left the café. I was back in my hometown of Salem for a few precious weeks, then I’d be shipped back to the Warlock World Headquarters to finish out yet another year in corporate hell.

“Hey Mav!” Someone called out.

I looked up.

It was Tony, walking towards me with an authentic smile of greeting on his face.

God, I missed that. “Tony!” I called back with almost as much warmth, opening my arms and embracing one of my oldest friends. “It’s been too long.”

Tony patted me on the back, a classic male sign to stop the affection, and we both stepped away. “You here for Halloween?” he asked.

I nodded ruefully. “You know they only let me out once a year.”

“Yeah, but why choose *here* for your vacation? You could be in Hawaii. Hell, Australia even. October’s beautiful in sunny Queensland, I’ve heard.”

I shrugged, making my answer simple. “This is home.” The town I’d grown up in, and the place where Pansy lived. I couldn’t really go anywhere else for the short vacation time they allowed me, truthfully.

Tony cackled with laughter, then turned and held out his arm, a cute little blonde sliding into his side. “You remember Hailey, don’t you?”

Hailey grinned up at me. The same girl from last year. The young witch who barely had her wand.

I nodded politely. “Nice to see you again, Hailey.”

The girl gave me the same assessing look I received from almost everyone in the magical community, then she stared up at Tony with an impatient look. “Are we going to get some lunch? I’m starving.”

Tony dropped his lips on hers, then pulled back. “You go ahead and order for us, okay babe? I want a minute with Mav.” Then he tapped the young witch on the bum with a playful slap.

She jumped in surprise, but also giggled, then sashayed off.

I couldn’t even imagine doing that to Pansy. That witch would have me on my ass so fast I’d be bruised for a week.

With Hailey out of earshot, I turned my gaze back to my friend. He was looking at me in the strangest way. “What’s up Tony?”

“What are you *really* here for, Mav?”

I didn’t expect the direct question and couldn’t help but glance away from his probing stare. “This is my home, Tony. London and headquarters weren’t exactly my choice.”

Tony tilted his head to the side and continued to stare at me. “Then why are you still there? It’s been... what? Six years at headquarters. Surely that’s enough.”

My parents had told me that ten years was the minimum sentence I

needed to serve, and even after then, I was expected to stay. It was good for my parents' image, after all.

I shrugged, choosing not to answer his rhetorical question. Tony wouldn't understand. His parents weren't like mine. They wanted him to be *happy*. He'd never understand the pressure I was under being the High Warlock's son, so I changed the subject. "So, Hailey, huh? Not really the kind of girl I pictured you with."

It was Tony's turn to shrug. "She's a bit young, but she's a good chick. Check in with me at Christmas and I'll let you know if she's still around."

I laughed and held out my hand to the warlock. "See you at the parade, then."

He shook my hand, "Good to see you man." He tugged me in for another quick manly hug, then headed off after his girl.

A cloud of loneliness descended upon me the moment Tony was out of my orbit. I tried my best to push away the melancholy. It was one of the many problems I had with working at headquarters. The corporate 'stab the person in front of you in the back' atmosphere stole a little piece of my soul every day that I was forced to work there. The idea of staying there another four years... minimum? Drove me to some pretty scary and insane thoughts.

"Maverick!" Another old friend called out, dragging me back to reality.

I jogged across the road to chat with him and my mood immediately lifted. These yearly trips were the only thing that kept me sane and the idea of going on some ridiculous Hawaiian holiday alone made me cringe.

"Albert." I called out as I got close to my mate who was an absolute whizz with potions. "How are things?"

I got swept into conversation after conversation along the street, enjoying the warmth of the Fall sunshine and the familiarity of being back home. I had two weeks here, and in that short amount of time I had to either find a way out of this job that was slowly killing me or convince the witch I'd loved as a teenager to give me a second chance.

I wasn't sure which one had a higher likelihood of success, but it was All Hallows' Eve soon... Surely a touch of magical help wasn't too much to hope for?



CHAPTER 3

Pansy

My skin tingled with a warning premonition moments before the door of my shop opened and an old witch walked in. Mildred MacCready. Things were about to turn sour real fast. I had no interest in speaking to her. She was the main reason I'd lost Maverick all those years ago, and I'd never forgive her.

She hit the little bell on my desk with her wrinkled old hand, "Pansy, dear. A little service, if you can possibly spare me the time?"

I closed my eyes for the briefest second. I really needed to get on with creating a ward over my shop that kept out anyone who wished me harm. But that was a task for another day, another month. I stepped out of the storeroom and walked up behind my desk. "My apologies Mildred. I was restocking.

How can I help you today?”

Maverick’s mother stared back at me with those cold, slate gray eyes. They held no sparkle or warmth. “I’m out of a few things and need them replenished as soon as possible.”

She handed me a note with a list as long as my arm. I stared down at the paper and ran my gaze over the entirety of the ingredients. I had almost everything she needed except, “Frog wart? I don’t carry that I’m sorry.”

Mildred *tutted* in that disapproving way she always had. “And you call yourself a potions shop? Frog’s wart is one of the most common ingredients in advanced potions work, but you probably wouldn’t know that, would you dear?”

I bit my tongue so that I couldn’t correct her. That would not be received well. But she was wrong. Frog wart was needed for just two potions. I knew every potion book inside and out. I might not be able to cast a lot of spells, and my scrying, and physical magic was for shit. But potions? ... I *knew* potions.

I forced a smile on my face. “I’m sure I can procure it for you. When do you need it by?” I raised an eyebrow, hoping she’d give me a decent deadline and not her usual ‘now.’

“By Monday would be fine,” she said, sticking her nose in the air. “If you think you can manage that?”

Oh... what I wouldn’t give to be able to just say ‘no’ to her. But she was married to the High Warlock, and a witch in her position had far too much sway over our community. Real magical beings kept my food bills paid the rest of the year, so I couldn’t afford to offend the High Witch and risk being shunned or closed down.

And speaking of bills. “Of course! Let me just ring this up and you can settle your account today.”

The wife of the High Warlock didn’t like to pay for anything and rarely did. She owed money to everyone in town. But no one held her accountable.

They were too afraid.

She flicked her hand at me dismissively and glanced away, “Oh, I’ll send my husband by when he’s free. You know I don’t deal in anything as dirty as money, dear.”

Of course, you don’t. That’s for peasants, like me. I took my time, making several notes on her list, including the expense of every item. Then I lifted my gaze and handed it back to her. “Oh? Then maybe Janey can help you?”

I didn’t blink when she glared back at me. I didn’t work for free, and even if there were certain patrons I gifted herbs and potions to, the High Witch wasn’t one of them.

She thrust the list at me again. “I’ll send Maverick around this afternoon. He’ll sort everything out for you.”

I clamped my jaw shut so tight my teeth nearly cracked. I didn’t want to see Maverick—and she *knew* it. They’d gone to great pains to separate us as besotted teenagers, and we’d never been able to find our groove again. In fact, his parents had done everything they possibly could to make sure that we were never so much as in the same room again together after that. So, what had changed?

I opened my mouth to tell her not to bother and that I’d just add the new items to her account. She didn’t need to send Maverick in. I didn’t want him to come into my shop just to pay a bill. How embarrassing and awkward. But that wasn’t what came out. Instead, I said, “Great. Let him know I close at six.”

She blinked.

I blinked.

And no one said anything. Not a thing.

Fuck.

The bells above my door jingled suddenly, interrupting the moment, and three teenage girls rushed in. “We need costumes for Halloween!” they

chorused.

I nodded at Mildred; my stomach still knotted up. “I’ll let you know when your order is in.” Then I walked away from the witch most likely to make my life a living Hell.

“Hi there. I have a selection of costumes available. There are vampires, witches, warlocks, angels...” I explained to the girls who were already browsing the wigs and accessories.

The front door opened and closed again as Mildred left in a huff.

I could finally breathe again. I’d never been so grateful for a group of trick or treaters! “I actually have a few new things out the back.” I told the girl with dark brown eyes. “I was keeping them for just the right people.”

The one with a purple stripe in her hair raised an eyebrow at me. “Any one-of-a-kind pieces by chance?”

I grinned at her. A girl after my own heart. If you were going to dress up, why look like everyone else? “Absolutely. Just give me ten minutes.”

I had a trunk of my own personal costumes and stuff I’d picked up along the way on my travels out the back. I only brought it out for special customers. And these girls who’d saved me from Mildred and her snobbery were officially my favorite people of the day. So, I ran off for the trunk and spent the rest of the day surrounded by excitable, Halloween-loving customers.

At five minutes to six, I glanced at the clock for the twentieth time, and frowned. The shop was empty finally, yet Maverick still hadn’t come to pay his mother’s bill. Not that I wanted to see him of course. Once today was enough for my poor heart. But I wouldn’t have put it past his mother to make him do it, just to fuck with our heads and make a point.

I grabbed a bottle of water and took a sip, my throat sore from talking all day long. I had some honey drops behind the counter for this exact reason, so I grabbed one and popped it in my mouth, moaning at the sweet, soothing taste. God, I was hungry. I’d missed lunch again today.

The door opened for the hundredth time.

“Sorry. We’re closed.” I called out. A ripple of heat washed over me, in response and I shivered at the sensation. *Damn*. It’s him. I steeled myself for the confrontation I was about to have. Only one person in the world set my body alight the way he did.

“Hi Pansy.”

I forced myself to smile so he didn’t realize how badly he affected me after all these years. I walked away from the vampire blood cabinet I’d been restocking with fake crap and stepped toward the cash register again. “Hey Maverick. You’re here to settle your mom’s account?” I tried to sound relaxed and professional, but *Heaven help me*, my heart was pounding like a runaway train in my chest. There was no one else around now. No customers to distract me or offer a buffer between us. Nobody was going to come and save me from this interaction.

He nodded awkwardly. “We haven’t been alone since the night I left, have we?” he said into the silence, basically reading my mind.

I wanted to ask him if he’d increased his magic skills to include mind reading, but that would have meant admitting that I’d been thinking the exact thing. And I wasn’t ready for that. Instead, I ignored his comment and pulled out his mom’s account. “Did you want to settle the whole amount, or just her order from today?”

I hated taking money from Maverick, it burned in my gut like acid. But there wasn’t a way around this. Mildred owed me. More than a little.

“I’ll pay for everything.” Maverick said, pulling a black credit card out of his wallet and placing it on the desk in front of him. He reverently ran his palm over the wood of my desk. “Wow... is this your grandma’s?” he asked.

My throat thickened with emotion. I couldn’t believe he remembered. “Ah... yeah. Mom gave it to me when I opened the shop.” I licked my lips self-consciously and cleared my throat. “So, did you want to know the total, or...?”

“Just tap it.”

I shrugged. “Okay, your call.” I tapped his card, but the amount due required a pin. The total was way higher than Maverick would have realized. I handed him the machine.

He typed in a few numbers, not balking at the amount as he handed it back to me.

I tore the receipt off and slid it into the cash register. “Thanks for that.”

He inclined his head, seeming a little shy suddenly. “No. Thank you, Pansy. I know my mother likes to throw her weight around, but you shouldn’t have to carry her debt like that. I appreciate your patience with her.”

I shrugged, feeling heat flare in my cheeks. “It’s no problem.” Even if the liberties she took vexed me, I wasn’t going to admit that to him.

He didn’t turn around and leave as I’d expected him to. Instead, he started looking around my store like he was shopping.

I rolled my eyes at his exaggerated slow stroll. “I’ve got to close up, Maverick. Is there anything in particular that you need?”

He glanced back at me as he continued to wander around, those blue eyes sparkling like twin sapphires. “Well... I do need a costume for All Hallows’ Eve.”

I couldn’t help but smile at his playful tone. “What... like being one of the most powerful warlocks in town isn’t enough for you?”

He didn’t even break a smile. “I never wanted to be a warlock.”

He was being serious. *Weird*. “Um... okay. Well, I do have some costumes still for sale, but surely you could conjure up something far better for yourself?”

“This way?” he asked, gesturing towards the change rooms.

I nodded and let him go. “I’m just going to do final closing stuff. If you need help, call out.”

He wandered off.

I couldn’t help my gaze from getting stuck on his broad shoulders.

He was just as fit and well-built as he'd always been. *Bigger* even.

I sighed and locked up the cash register, reconciling the credit accounts for the day. I wasn't taking his money when he came back—no matter what he wanted to buy.

"Mav?" I called out when I was done. No response. I frowned but didn't go look for him. He knew where the door was. So, I packed my bag, checked for my keys, and pulled my cell off the charger. I tapped my foot and waited a little longer, and he still didn't come out of hiding. Now, it was time to heave a heavy sigh. "Mav... come on. I'm starving. I really need to get home."

When he didn't answer, still, I realized I'd have to go looking for him. I put everything I needed in my purple patchwork handbag and started walking towards the back of the shop. "If you're in the change rooms trying on one of the vampire outfits, I'm going to..."

"You're going to... *what?*" Came his deep, sexy voice from behind me.

I turned around, ready to blast him with my annoyance, but instead I stopped. And stared.

He was down on one knee, holding out a ring box that was open, exposing the most incredible ring I'd ever seen.

I couldn't stop staring. It was not a traditional diamond engagement ring. Instead, it was a rainbow of color with rich red rubies, breath-taking emeralds and deep blue sapphires. It had to be for me... *but why?* My heart pounded and my knees shook as I took a small step towards the warlock I'd loved for a decade. "Maverick..." I whispered. "What are you doing?"

"Pansy, will you give me a second chance?"

Tears instantly filled my eyes, and I blinked them away with effort. "Um, ah...What's the ring for?" I asked sheepishly.

He smiled that heart-wrenching, sapphire eyed sparkling smile that had always slayed me. "It's a promise ring. If you accept it, you'll have my heart for as long as you want it."

My hands flew up to cover my mouth. I had to be dreaming, there was no way this was real. “I... when, why...?” I stuttered in shock.

I had so many questions, but that feeling of premonition from earlier was tingling down my neck with extra *zing*. Maverick had opened a door to a future I’d only ever dreamed about, and everything inside of me was screaming at me to walk straight through it.



CHAPTER 4

Maverick

I hadn't expected to propose *anything* tonight. In fact, I hadn't even decided how I was going to ask Pansy for a single date—let alone a lifetime with me. But when I'd walked into her shop tonight, my heart had told me to jump all in. To leap towards the future I wanted, and hope to all that was holy that she would give me the chance that had been ripped away from us.

While she'd been busy closing up, I'd used my magic to construct a ring that I knew she'd love. It was colorful, priceless, and one of a kind. Just like her. I'd made it of the highest quality stones so that it would be strong enough to contain a promise spell.

Pansy stared down at the ring, struggling to put together a complete

sentence. Which, if I was honest, was one of the first times I'd ever seen her speechless.

She obviously needed more information and I desperately wanted to make her understand. "I've never gotten over you Pansy and I've always wondered about what could have been. Would you give me a second chance? Please? Or am I too late?"

She swallowed hard, her throat working as she dropped her hands away from her mouth. "Ah..."

My hope, which had been a strong bright flame, now began to dim. I got up, off my knee, and rose to my feet. I still had the ring in the box.

Pansy's eyes were big and full of apprehension.

"Pansy?" I asked, reaching out to her with my free hand.

She reached for me too, sliding her fingers into mine.

Tingles of heat coursed over my skin. *God...* I hadn't touched her in too long. And maybe that was what she needed, to remember how good it was between us. I snapped the ring box shut, slid it into my pocket and moved that hand around her waist.

She didn't try and pull away, but simply stared up at me with those big, beautiful green eyes as though she couldn't believe this was really happening.

I didn't ask if I could kiss her. I had to show her how much I still needed her. I stared down into her eyes and when hope flickered in her gaze, I dropped my lips onto hers.

That first taste was better than I remembered. Her lips were soft and lush and welcoming. I pulled her body closer, fitting her against me like she was the other half of my puzzle, slotting into place.

I moaned at the perfection of the feeling. I couldn't help it.

She gasped against my lips in return, then opened her mouth to me.

I slid my tongue in to taste her.

She grabbed onto me like I was her anchor in the storm of life. Her fingers clutched at my shirt, and she lifted her chin to make a stronger

connection.

My hands slid down her body moving from her waist to the fleshy globes of her ass. I squeezed her cheeks, hauling her against myself. My cock was already hard, throbbing with need of her. *Not what I'd planned for this evening.* But then again, none of this was going to plan.

Pansy broke our kiss unexpectedly and lifted her head, still clinging to my shirt. "What's happening Maverick? I'm dreaming, aren't I? I have to be."

I lifted my hands to cup her face. If she thought she was dreaming then she hadn't given up on us either. "Do you still want me, Pansy? Even as I am now?"

She closed her eyes, pursing her lips in anxiety before whispering. "I don't know."

A wave of cold washed over me, but I refused to let her go.

Her fingers still clung to my shirt, and she wasn't pushing me away.

"Are you afraid of what I've become?" I asked her gently. "Over there in London, away from you. Away from everything?"

She nodded, her head down and her eyes still closed.

"Okay..." I whispered. I was moving too fast. She needed reassurance that I was still the boy she'd loved when we were young. So, how could I do that when I didn't totally believe it myself? I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her forehead, trying to think of a way forward with this one. I had to tread carefully, or I risked losing her forever. "Then how about a Halloween promise?"

She lifted her head and stared up at me, a small sparkle of hope piqued in her gaze. "What sort of promise?" she asked cautiously.

"Give me ten days to prove to you that I'm still the boy you once cared about. Give me that chance, and on Halloween night you can choose whether you'll take me back or let me go... forever." The words shocked me, burning in my throat, but I'd come this far. I wasn't turning back even though the idea of her giving up on me scared the shit out of me. I forged ahead. "I've never

moved on Pansy. I miss you... and the way we made each other feel, so much.”

A sob rose and fell in her throat. “I’ve missed you too, Maverick.”

I gripped her body even tighter against me. “Does that mean you’ll give me, give us, another chance?”

She nibbled her lip. “But what about your job? Your parents?”

I didn’t have the answers to those questions. But if Pansy loved me, I’d move Heaven and Earth to be with her again. I kissed her beautiful lips. “Let’s worry about the semantics later, sweetheart. I just want ten days to date you, woo you, love you. Don’t you want to know if we’re meant to be together?”

She stared at me for a long time, then finally nodded. “I do. We never really broke up, we just... stopped being.”

The pain in her voice cut me deep, so I pulled back, giving both of us some space. “I didn’t mean to come here and propose this to you. But when I got here, I just couldn’t imagine walking away from you again.”

“You mean like you did, ten years ago?” she asked quietly.

The tears in her eyes made me want to punch myself in the face. “I didn’t walk away, Pansy. I would never. I was... transported to London. I didn’t take a plane. My mom packed my bags, and my dad just snapped his fingers. And before I could even ask where I was going, I was in some bullshit college surrounded by strangers.”

Her jaw dropped. “Seriously? You didn’t—”

I let her move away as she straightened her mused clothes.

“Nope.” I thrust my hands into my pockets and clenched my teeth together. “And it was there that I was told I’d been signed up for a decade of servitude to the Warlock Headquarters once I finished college.”

Pansy wrapped her arms around her body as though she were cold.

I’d told her too much; I was overwhelming her. I pulled myself back to the task. The ring box was burning a hole in my pocket, so I grabbed it out

again.

This time, I took the ring out and held it in my hand. “Pansy, this ring is my promise to you that I will do everything in my power to show you who I really am. I want you. I’ve never stopped needing you. And if you’ll forgive me for the last ten years, I’ll marry you, worship you—whatever your heart desires.” Again, the words that tumbled from my lips shocked me. I hadn’t been thinking of marriage. What had gotten into me tonight?

Her eyes widened in surprise.

I couldn’t help but laugh at her expression, grateful for the shift in mood. “Did you put some sort of spell on me?” I asked with a grin.

Her lips tweaked up at the corners. “And what sort of spell would that be, Mav?”

A laugh bubbled up inside me once more. “The truth is just spilling out and I can’t stop it. I didn’t mean to mention marriage. Please don’t let me scare you off. All I know is that I need you, Pansy. I want you.” I’d somehow popped the cork on my innermost thoughts and now I couldn’t stop all of these feelings and words from just splashing out of me like a damn fountain.

She smiled, softly, seductively.

My heart beat with full strength for the first time in years. *Damn she’s beautiful.*

“You’re telling me the truth?” she asked slowly. “You’ve really missed me... wanted me, all these years? Even with all the other girls you’ve paraded around here and in London?”

I rolled my eyes. “Other girls? I’ve never loved anyone the way I loved you, Pansy.” *Ugh! Stop fucking telling her so much!*

She giggled in response, clearly amused by this side of me.

“What about you?” I asked. “When I was in college it felt like every time I came home you had a new boyfriend.”

She shrugged, her eyes lighting up with a mischievous sparkle. “Yeah, well... not all of them were boyfriends.”

“Ah... pardon me?” I asked, eyes wide.

She properly cackled out a real witchy laugh this time. “Your mom kept telling everyone that you were embarrassing them by seducing half the witches at college. So, when I was single and you were coming home, I had my guy friends pretend to date me.”

I closed the gap between us and pulled her into my arms, “You were trying to make me jealous?”

She cupped my face with her hands and kissed me, softly, lingering for so long I started to ache for breath. When she pulled away, she said, “I wasn’t trying to make you jealous, because I didn’t think you still cared about me. I was just protecting myself. That’s all.”

I kissed the tip of her nose. “I’ve always cared, I just... I don’t have a good excuse for my behavior, Pansy. I’m sorry. I truly am.” A groan mingled with a sigh, escaped me, coming out as a sad and defeated sound.

She pressed her head to my chest like she used to, tucking herself into my arms like she was part of my body. “Well, you’re back now.”

I wrapped my arms around her and rested my chin on the top of her head. Yes. But for how long? Would Pansy leave her shop, her hometown, for me? Or would I need to fight my parents and the Warlock World Association for the right to choose how I lived my life?

I closed my eyes and pushed the worries from my mind. I’d succeeded tonight. Pansy had agreed to my proposition. And speaking of... “You need to wear my ring for this promise to work you know,” I said matter-of-factly.

She giggled and looked up at me. “Seriously?”

I pulled back, grabbed the ring out of my pocket where I’d stowed it, and picked up her left hand. “Ring finger?”

She shook her head emphatically. “That’ll invite too many questions.”

I slid the ring onto her middle finger, the gold band encircling her flesh then clinging tight.

She gasped as it sung to her, a soft *hum* of happiness. “Why is it...

warm?”

“That’s my promise to you.” I said, not explaining to her how much power this spell had taken. I didn’t want her to freak out. “I cast a spell over the ring with my intentions and feelings embedded within the gold.”

“So... if you don’t want me anymore it’ll go cold?”

I grinned at her, trying to soothe her doubts. “You’re a skeptic, aren’t you?”

She didn’t punch me, she just stared down at the ring. “I never thought I deserved you, Maverick. Why you’d come back and ask for me now? ... I still don’t understand.”

I tilted her head up with my fingers, lifting her chin, and stared down at her. “Pansy, you’re the only woman in the world I want to wake up next to. Nothing else matters. Not power, not magic, not even my family. I know I failed you last time, but I was young, and stupid, and let my parents force me into something I didn’t want. Please, just give me a second chance to prove to you how much I’ve changed.”

Her eyes shined with a love I would have given up a kingdom for. Then she nodded.

We sealed our deal with a kiss.

The lingering concerns about what was possible remained with me. *How much had I really changed? And what would I give up to be with Pansy?* If I was honest, I wasn’t even sure myself.



CHAPTER 5

Pansy

I glanced down at the ring on my left hand for the hundredth time. It was too beautiful for words. Huge and sparkling and warm against my skin. It was a heat that reminded me of Maverick's promise. *His desire for us to be together.*

"Oh, that's so pretty!" A girl in front of me cried, reaching out to touch my ring. "Is it costume jewelry?"

I pulled my hand away protectively and tried to smile through the panic that hit me when she tried to touch—what had quickly become—my most valuable possession. "Um... It's a family heirloom, actually. Can I help you with something?"

It was just another day in my shop, and I was busier than ever. I was

grateful for it though. Otherwise, I'd be at home hopelessly counting the minutes until my date with Maverick, tonight.

"Hello ladies," a sexy and familiar voice sang through the shop.

I glanced up, grinning, unable to stop myself. "Hello Maverick."

"You know him?" the human girl in front of me whispered urgently.

Maverick swaggered up sporting a pair of blue jeans far too tight for my sanity, and his hair was slicked back like he used to wear it in high school.

"Yeah, I do," I managed to say before he walked around my desk, wrapped an arm around my waist, and kissed me, *hard*.

"Good afternoon."

My cheeks blushed with heat. "What are you doing here?" I asked, pushing him back. "I've got work to do, Mr."

He grinned, unfazed by my fake annoyance. "I was just walking past and thought I'd say 'hi'. See you later then, yeah?"

I nodded.

He winked at me. "One more kiss for the road?"

I put both hands on his chest and gave him a playful shove. "Go. Before someone we both know sees you."

He glanced around the room, leaned in, and kissed me again. Then whispered against my lips, "I don't care if they do. See you tonight." Then he swaggered away.

I must have been staring after him because my customer tapped on the desk. "Hello? Is he your boyfriend?"

She looked green with envy.

I focused on the pile of Halloween items she wanted to buy. "No... but we're having dinner tonight. Is this everything?"

The girl nodded but didn't speak to me after that.

I didn't mind. Being jealous over another woman's guy was a normal reaction when you were alone. And I was too happy to care anyway. I'd waited an entire decade to kiss Maverick again, and I wasn't letting anyone

steal my buzz. “Here you go,” I said, handing her one of my branded bags. “Enjoy your Halloween.”

She headed off, and the next girl walked up with a question about my costumes.

I helped her make her selection and kept moving. Only a few hours more and I’d be going on my first date in forever! When six o’clock finally arrived, I closed the shop, and locked the front door. A hush fell over the space around me, and I grinned to myself. Work was finally done, and it was time to get ready for my date.

I lived upstairs, in a neat little apartment above my shop. It made my life super easy when I wanted to work weekends and late-night hours. Plus, the rent for the apartment wasn’t that much more when I was already paying for the shop.

Excitement bubbling within me, I rushed to the stairs that led up into my apartment and headed straight for the bathroom to shower and change. I used magic to blow dry my hair quickly and apply some basic makeup. I wasn’t great with that stuff, but my best friend had taught me a few tricks that seemed to work.

“Hello!” Came a familiar female voice from my living room.

I rolled my eyes and walked into my bedroom, pulling on some underwear before opening the door for my best friend. “Hey Jaydy.”

The flame haired witch grinned at me. “I heard something interesting about you today.” Her cat-who-got-the-cream smile told me that word about Maverick and I had gotten around already.

I went back to my closet, looking through my ancient clothes for something to wear.

Jaydy was right behind me.

“And what did you hear?” I asked casually as I grabbed out my favorite pair of black jeans and pulled them on. Next was a top. I had no idea where we were going. Fancy? Casual? With Maverick it could be anything from a

sweet picnic in the park to a luxurious dinner in the most expensive restaurant in town. I grabbed my soft orange sweater off its hanger and pulled it on.

If the place turned out to be super classy, I could always use my magic to change. Or maybe I'd pack a chic black skirt in my bag, just in case. My powers hadn't been exactly super charged lately with all the extra work I'd been doing. Jaydy hadn't answered me yet, so I turned around to raise an eyebrow at her. "Well?"

She was sitting on my bed, lounging back like she owned the joint. "I heard that you're going out with Maverick tonight. Tell me it isn't true." Jaydy was one of the only people who knew how much Maverick hurt me when he left. She'd been loyally by my side while I cried myself to sleep, for *months* after he'd gone.

"It's true." I told her, a fluttering nervousness in my chest at the admission. "We made a deal."

Jaydy got to her feet and marched over on her black heeled shoes. "A deal?" Then she gasped and pointed, her jaw hanging open. "What. Is. That?" she demanded. She grabbed for my left hand and hauled it up to her face. She scrutinized my gorgeous ring with contempt in her eyes. "Please tell me this isn't what I think it is?"

I fidgeted, uncomfortable now. "Well, that depends entirely on what you think it is," I answered carefully.

She gaped at me. "Pansy! Seriously? Why! Why are you giving him another chance to break your heart?"

I turned back to my closet, looking for my favorite boots, pursing my lips and ignoring her little, albeit reasonable, outburst. "Is it cold outside? Do you think I need to take a coat as well?"

Jaydy stomped over to my closet and pulled out my black jacket with a huff. "Yes. Take this one."

"Thanks." I found my boots and tugged those on, assessing myself in the mirror for a moment before turning toward my best friend again. "Jaydy, I

know you think that Maverick and I shouldn't be together..."

"No, I don't think that at all." She corrected me quickly.

My eyebrows shot up. "I'm sorry, what?"

She went back to the bed and kicked off her shoes. Then she drew her legs up and crossed them like she was fifteen again and sleeping over at my mom's house. "I've always thought you and that damn guy were meant to be together. I've even had premonitions and dreams about your wedding, Pansy."

I pulled up a chair from the corner of my room and sat down. This was interesting and I wanted to keep her focused on this part of the conversation. "Then why have you always spoken so badly of him?"

"Because he hurt you! Duh," she said, her hands exploding out in front of her and waving around. "Plus, he's an idiot. Doing whatever his parents want all the time. I never thought they'd approve of you."

Her words struck the fear already lingering in my heart. I'd been doing a good job of hiding those feelings up until this point. I tried to brush her words away, even though they stuck in my throat like a thorn. "We're not worrying about them yet, Jaydy. It's just dinner."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "Then what's the deal you're talking about?"

A smile tugged at my lips. "He wants me to give him a second chance. To see if we're meant to be together. Then on Halloween night, I get to make the decision. Forever, or never again." Saying the words made my heart physically ache. Could I really ever let Maverick go? Move on? Marry someone else? I hadn't been able to so far.

Jaydy glared at me with her all too knowing eyes. "You're going to walk away from Maverick forever?"

I shrugged at her. "I have to try, Jaydy. I've been wondering about what could have been ever since I was seventeen years old." And now I'd finally know the truth.

“You mean you’ve been mooning over that bastard...”

Now, it was my turn to glare at my friend.

She held up both of her hands in a gesture of submission. “Fine... yes, you’re right. You two never really got the chance to find out if you were meant to be together, or if you would have just broken up like most of us who fell in love back in high school.” She had a point.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I admitted. “I have romanticized Maverick a bit, in my head over the years.”

Jaydy’s eyebrows flicked up. “You think?”

I chuckled at the sarcasm in her tone. “Yes, okay—I know. *I know.*” And I did. If Maverick and I had been allowed to let our relationship run its course and find its natural end, maybe we would have found out that we didn’t suit each other after all. It was likely that his stubbornness, or my inability to accept his family’s rank and responsibility, would have ultimately broken us up.

“So?” Jaydy asked, her lips quirked as magic tingled at her fingertips. “Do you want a full makeover?”

“Hell no,” I said, shaking my head. “If Mav wants me, he’s going to have to want me like this.” I gestured to my casual, bright, blue-haired self.

Jaydy slid her feet back into her sexy shoes. “When you’re right, you’re right. You’re already beautiful just as you are.” She rushed across the room and hugged me so tightly I could barely breathe. “I love you, P. And I only want what’s best for you.”

I squeezed her back, hard. “I know, J. Which is why you know I have to do this.”

She sighed loudly in my ear. “Yeah, I do. So, in two weeks I’ll either be a Maid of Honor at your wedding, or we’re eating ice cream and getting fat until the end of the year.”

I closed my eyes. She was right. It really was all or nothing at this point—Mav has said as much—but I was ready and willing to put my heart on the

line. Even if it ended up broken beyond repair.

“It’s worth it, yeah?” I whispered to her. “To find out?”

She pulled back, grabbing my hands in hers. “You mean is love worth the pain you’ll feel if this fails?”

My eyes burned with the tears that I’d been holding onto for too many years to count. I nodded and pulled away. “Yeah. That.”

She grinned and reached for my left hand, stopping me in my tracks. “Show me that ring of yours again.”

A small smile quirked my lips and I wriggled my fingers for her.

She stared down at the artistic arrangement of rubies, emeralds, and sapphires. When she looked back up at me, she said, “Tell me they aren’t real?”

I couldn’t help but giggle at her expression, “Ah yeah... I think they are.”

She whistled, low and loud. “Girl, you need to at least *try* to make this work. That ring is to die for, and it suits you perfectly. It seems he really didn’t forget you, babe.”

I laughed and took a deep breath. She was right, of course. Not because of the ring’s beauty though. Because Maverick had been my dream-perfect man for as long as I could remember, and it was time to work out if our love had a chance and whether it was based in solid fact or fanciful fiction.



CHAPTER 6

Maverick

My mother's words rang in my ears. *“That shop girl will never be anything but a commoner. Stay away from her.”*

Back when Pansy and I had dated in high school, we'd kept it low key and casual, trying to hide the fact that we were absolutely besotted with each other. My parents, probably having used some spell on me, managed to work out how I *really* felt about Pansy. And that very day, they shipped me off to London; changing the course of my life.

Our dinner date was at seven o'clock, so I arrived at Pansy's shop at 6:45 PM. Her apartment had an external door, so I anxiously waited there with my heart throbbing away in my throat. If everything went well between us over the next week, I would have a real fight on my hands. Against my parents,

my horrible job, and the sickening burden of responsibilities they'd heaped on my shoulders.

The flip side would be even worse if that were at all possible. If everything went badly between Pansy and I, then I had to deal with the fact that my only hope of happiness would be gone forever. I knew which one I'd prefer, but both options were a palpable, heavy weight on my chest and heart.

The external door suddenly opened. Pansy stepped out, looking happy and too gorgeous for words. "Good evening," she said. Her long dark hair flowed over her shoulders and around her face.

I wanted to reach out and run my fingers through it. Instead, I reached for her waist, curled my fingers into the bare flesh beneath her sweater, and kissed her hard. A moan rose in my throat.

Her arms twisted around my neck and her lips opened beneath mine. She was so receptive, and every touch was as natural as breathing.

Had it really been ten years between relationships?

When she finally lifted her head, her eyes were glazed, and her lids were open at half-mast. "Um... that was a nice way to say hello."

I chuckled and pulled back so that I could take her hand in mine, my jeans now significantly uncomfortable—especially in the zipper region. "Shall we?"

She nodded. "Where are we going for dinner? Should I have dressed up?"

"You look great," I said, glancing down at her long black coat, bright sweater, and jeans combo. "But then again, you always do. I like the blue this year."

Pansy's hair was naturally a dark brown, almost black color. But every year she ran a highlight color through it. Last year it was pink and this Halloween it was blue.

She twirled the sky-colored curls around her finger. "Thanks. I like it, too." Pansy had always been vivacious and colorful, too much for my family and their snobbish standards.

“I thought maybe we’d go to Paris for dinner. What do you think?” I asked, “It’s 3:30 in the afternoon there, and I know an amazing little rustic bakery that you’d love.”

She stared up at me like I’d just grown antlers, her eyes wide. “You want to go to... *Paris*?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, why not? It’s not like we have to stay here.”

We stopped walking.

She glanced down at her feet, her vibrance dimming. “You mean, you don’t want anyone in town to see us, right?”

“What? No!” *She couldn’t possibly think that, could she?* “I’ll take you to London instead if you want to meet all the douchebags I work with. Honestly, we can go anywhere you like.”

Her head came up as did her eyebrows. “Douchebags?” she queried with soft amusement.

I groaned and nodded. “Hell yes. They’re bloody horrible.”

Her lips twisted into an amused grin. “I’ve never been to Paris. You know my magic won’t extend to that sort of travel. It’s too much.”

I tugged her back to the alley way where the side entrance to her home would hide our transportation. Not everyone in Salem was magical, after all. “Then hold on tight and allow me.”

She stepped into my arms, pressed her head to my chest and sighed wistfully.

I wrapped my arms around her and spoke the incantation that would transport us to a safe place I knew from my prior travels.

Wind blew around us and white magic swirled, then we were standing in a cobble stone street with French music playing in the distance.

Pansy lifted her head. “Wow,” she said. “That was incredible. I’m a bit dizzy though.”

I tucked her hand into my elbow and walked us out of the shadows. “Let’s go eat. You’ll feel better then. The pastries here are amazing.”

I walked her to my favorite café, and we ordered drinks and ten different appetizer plates to share.

“This is too much.” She gaped when the food arrived.

I gestured to the plates. “Hardly. Please, try a bit of everything.”

Without further encouragement, she dug in.

I watched her moan and gasp at the flavors as she experienced them for the first time.

“Are you going to eat, too?” she asked, swallowing a mouthful, and not slowing down.

That was another thing that I’d always loved about Pansy. She never worried about eating or drinking whatever she wanted in front of me. She was so natural and down-to-Earth that it was refreshing.

“Yeah, of course,” I said, reaching for the croissant closest to me and tearing it in half. “I was just enjoying watching you, that’s all. I’ve missed your smile.”

She grinned and thanked the waitress as she delivered our hot chocolates.

“So, tell me about your life,” I invited. “What have I missed over the last ten years?”

She put her hand over her mouth as she munched, then swallowed again. “Ah... that’s a bit broad. Where do you want me to start?”

I shrugged. “Anywhere you like. Friends, work, your parents maybe?”

“My parents?” She chuckled. “They sold up, retired early, and headed off around the world. They call me every week without fail. Last Friday they were in Darwin, Australia, wrestling crocodiles or some such nonsense.”

I couldn’t help but laugh as well. “Crocodiles? Really?”

She grinned up at me. “You know my parents.”

I smiled back at her. *Yes, yes, I did.* Her parents were the type of free spirits that my parents loathed. They had a secure, loving marriage, and cared little for material possessions and wealth. I’d always really liked them.

“Well, send them my regards, please, when you talk to them next.”

“I will.” Pansy reached for her hot chocolate and took a sip. “Mmm. What about you? What’s happened with your life over the decade you’ve been away?”

I stared down at the food in front of me and thought about it. “Ah... work. Mostly.”

“Wasn’t college fun?” she asked. “I always imagined you drinking and partying away like crazy.”

She wasn’t entirely wrong. I had, for a time. “I did, I suppose. I was pretty lonely after my parents shipped me off to London. The guys in my dorm were all long-term boarding schoolboys, so they didn’t get why I wanted to be home.”

She swallowed a little awkwardly. “So, you were bullied?” she asked, her brows furrowed.

I shrugged. “Maybe a little, but I was a High Warlock’s son, as most of them were too—from their parts of the world. So, I toughened up and pretty quickly learned how to fight back.”

“I wondered what had happened, you know, over there. That first year you came back? You were so different.”

I laughed softly, though the sound was full of bitterness. “Yeah, by then my parents had made it clear to me what my future held. College. A decade of service to the World Warlock Association. And a marriage to someone of their choosing, of course.”

Pansy’s jaw dropped. “Sorry, what? They’re going to arrange your marriage?”

I found her booted foot beneath the table and rubbed my shoe against the inside of her sole. “No. Not anymore. I’ve told them point blank that I’ll never marry anyone I don’t love. They’ve tried to threaten me on that one, but I’ve held firm.”

It was commonplace for High Warlocks to have arranged marriages. It had been happening for centuries.

Her eyes shone brightly and she visibly relaxed. “I’m glad you have.”

“What about you? No serious boyfriends? Not that I want to know the details,” I hastened to add. “But I must admit, every year I’d head home I dreaded finding out you were engaged, or worse.”

She tilted her head from side to side, as though thinking. “Well... I suppose...” she sighed heavily. “I’ve hidden the truth from myself for so long that I’m struggling to actually say it now.”

I grabbed a fruit tart and placed it on my plate. “Oh, I know how that feels. Do you want me to knock down the walls a little? I know a spell that can help you speak your truth without as much fear.”

She stared at me; her eyes wide. “Are you sure you’re ready for that? I mean... I know you were the one that came to me with this promise, but I’m not sure what’ll come out of me if you loosen the lid, so to speak.”

I raised my hand over the fruit tart and spoke the incantation that I’d been taught by a powerful witch many years ago. The magic sprinkled down on the pastry, settling into the sugar. It wasn’t a strong spell, though it would help if Pansy wanted to know how she really felt about me.

I cut the fruit tart in half and offered the plate to Pansy. She didn’t weigh much and wasn’t super powerful, so half would probably be more than ample for her. “I will if you will.”

A weighted silence hung in the air between us. This was dangerous, and we both knew it. But I only had until Halloween to convince her that I still cared, and I wasn’t wasting any time. We’d already lost ten years.

She reached for the tart with trembling fingers. “I’m scared, Maverick.”

I put the plate down and ate my half before I could even think about it. I had secrets, more than I cared to admit. But at this point of my life, when I’d had long moments when I’d seriously considered ending it all in the darkness of the night—I was all in.

She watched me, then chewed on her own half, eating the whole thing, before sighing. “That’s... interesting. Almost like a warm glass of eggnog or

something.”

It was a good interpretation and an accurate one. “I know what you mean. It’s almost like being a little drunk.” I gulped as the spell began to take effect. Inside my mind layers of tightly held emotions and thoughts began to peel away and float toward my tongue. “So, how are we going to do this? One question at a time? Or just talk openly?”

She blinked slowly, as though she were really feeling drunk. “I think... woah, yeah, this is potent.”

I’d had a lot more practice with this type of magic than she had. The boys in the dorms at college played tricks like this on each other all the time. Not to mention what they’d done to me at Headquarters. “How about we just do one question at a time,” I suggested, not wanting to take advantage of her honesty. *Maybe I should have told her to only eat a quarter?*

She nodded. “I’m going first.”

“Ladies choice,” I said, reaching for the next plate near me. A savory roll filled with melty cheese.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you still had feelings for me, sooner? I mean... it’s been ten whole years, Mav.”

We weren’t starting with an easy question. *Okay.* I could do this. I leaned back in my chair and let the unfiltered truth come to my lips. “I didn’t know if you still felt the same way as I did.”

“That’s it?” she asked. “You were afraid of rejection?”

I sighed. “Well, yes and no. I didn’t want you to reject me. That would have broken my heart. But it was more... I was too stressed to be the man you needed. I would have pulled you into a world full of snakes and deception, and I couldn’t do that to you. I didn’t *want* that for you.”

She looked away. “Then what’s changed?”

What had changed? “I...” I wanted to tell her I was older and more mature. That I could handle the stress of work as well as keep her safe. But it wasn’t the whole truth. “I... fuck. Okay. The truth is, I’m miserable when

I'm not home, near you. And I'm not sure I can survive another year in London without you." I didn't want to sound desperate, but there it was.

She fiddled with a napkin. "Don't you have... women, you can go to? You know. For comfort?"

I burst out laughing at the way her face screwed up, but had enough control to rein it in. "Sweetheart, do you really want an answer to that question?" Already my mind was filling up with women's faces, and the past I'd shared with too many of them to count. Did she really want the truth here?

Her face fell.

Damn. I groaned. "Okay, look. Yes, if I just wanted a warm body beside me at night, I could find someone. Have I dated women in the past? Of course. Have I loved any of them? No. Have I wanted to marry any of them? *Hell no.* Have any of them driven away the all-consuming pain in my heart... not even close, Pansy." I reached for my drink and gulped some hot chocolate down. That was way more information than I'd intended to share.

She blinked at me with a smile on her lips now. "And my first question is relevant once again. If that's been the case, why did you wait so long to tell me how you felt?"

Why did she have to be so damn logical, even under the influence of a truth spell? "Because I didn't think you cared, and I... and I..." *Oh God.* I really didn't want to tell her this part, but the magic inside my belly worked on loosening my tongue, and I blurted it out. "I wasn't ready to fight my mother so that I could be with you."

She reached for the garlic and cheese twist. "And you are now?"

My heart begged me to agree. "Yes... I don't know how yet, but I'm ready to fight." This was more than just a battle to love the woman I wanted. To me, this was a fight for my very life and self-autonomy.



CHAPTER 7

Pansy

If the honesty spelled cake wasn't making me feel drunk, I'd be strangely upset and disturbed by everything Maverick was saying. He'd slept with lots of women in London, that was clear. I'd already assumed that he had, of course, but getting him to confirm it was a new level of pain I wasn't expecting. But even as my heart pounded with a heavy ache, his next words soon soothed the hurt.

The fact that he'd loved none of those women made me feel even better about the time we'd shared as besotted teenagers. If the love I'd shown him as a seventeen-year-old girl could trump every wily woman in London, imagine what sort of passion we could share together as adults!

"Okay... your turn, I think," I said to him, reaching for my drink to wrap

my fingers around the mug. It was getting later in the afternoon and the café was cooler now. Lucky, I brought my jacket. A strange giggle escaped my lips, but I was too spaced out to care.

Mav grinned at me with that smile that has been melting my panties since I was sixteen. “Are you going to marry me?” he asked.

I glared at him, setting down my drink. “That’s hardly fair! You can’t ask that. We’re giving ourselves until Halloween to see if we still even like each other...” The truth was already bubbling up, eager to be free, and I was struggling to keep it down. *Bloody spell*. I should never have agreed to this.

He raised an eyebrow at me.

I pressed my lips together.

“You haven’t even officially asked me,” I managed to say, justifying to myself that I didn’t know the answer, therefore couldn’t give him the truth.

Then he asked me straight out. “Would you marry me if I asked you to?”

Fuck! “Yes.” The word was out of my mouth before I could stop it. “But that doesn’t mean that we’d be able to!” I crossed my arms over my chest and glared playfully at him. It was the same problem we’d always had. Just because we wanted to be together, didn’t mean we’d be able to.

He wasn’t laughing with me, even though I felt like he should have been.

“Why would you marry me, Pansy?” he asked suddenly, as sober as a judge. “I’ve barely spoken to you in ten years.”

The truth was once again right on the tip of my tongue, but a sadness hit me, making me swallow the words backdown.

He ran a frazzled hand through his hair. “I’m so sorry, Pansy. I really am. I should have come back a long time ago. I should have called you. I should have... *no*. We need to stop this.” He grabbed a scone, waved his hand over the cream puff, then sliced it in two. “Here’s the antidote. I can’t do any more questions.”

I stared at him, shocked at his sudden breakdown. “Since when have you ever been afraid of the truth, Mav?” It was one of the many things I loved

about him.

His brilliant blue gaze met mine and there was a pain in their depths I'd never seen before. "Since I learned that my truth means nothing to the world; that I'm not in control of my own destiny."

I reached across the table with both hands, grabbing onto Maverick with all my strength. "Of course, you are. You came back to town and proposed a second chance. You made me believe in the possibilities, Maverick. Don't you dare give up on us again."

His eyes shined with tears, but they cleared before he let them fall. "The antidote?"

I shook my head, no. I didn't want that. Not yet. For the first time since we were kids, Maverick was being truly honest with me. He may have taken half the spell to make me feel at ease, but it was working better on him than it was on me. I was honest most of the time anyway. "Take me home. Now. Please."

He frowned at me, unsure of what I was saying.

I glanced towards the café staff who were still busy cleaning. "Let's pay the bill and go home. You know where my apartment is, right?"

He nodded. "Yes... but don't you have wards against transportation spells?"

Not really. "I'm part of the transport, so it'll be fine."

Maverick pulled his hands away from me and I let him go. He pulled out his wallet and threw down some currency I didn't recognize onto the table. "Let's just duck around the corner so that no-one sees us."

"Okay." I grabbed onto his arm, letting him lead me out of the café and around a darkened corner.

"Are you sure about this, Pansy?" His hands were cupping my face, his breath was against my lips.

"Yes." I whispered back. "Take me home. Now." *Before this spell wears off and you can once again hide behind your fear.* I closed my eyes and the

hint of wind brushed against my cheek before we were warm and inside once more. I opened my eyes and clicked my fingers, turning on the lights in my bedroom.

Maverick raised an eyebrow. “You’re getting better at physical magic, aren’t you?”

I raised my hands that were tucked against his chest, to wrap around his neck so I could twirl my fingers in the hairs at the nape of his neck. “It’s my apartment. Small steps.”

He dropped his head and kissed me, robbing me of all those questions still percolating in my mind.

I opened my lips to welcome his tongue, sucking on the flesh, earning a moan from my warlock.

When he lifted his head again, his eyes were dark with desire. “Are you sure you want to do this Pansy?”

I raised my eyebrows at him. “You know I do. I’ve wanted to make love to you again for ten years.” I gulped at the level of honesty that I was expressing once again, then forced out the words. “What about you?”

He leaned forward and managed to scoop me up into his arms.

I squealed a little but held on tight. He hadn’t answered my question, but I supposed actions spoke louder than words.

He walked the short distance to my bed and placed me down on the mattress.

I hopped to my feet so that I could unzip my boots and throw off my coat. I wanted the words too. “You didn’t answer my question, Mav. Did you ever think about our night together? Did you want to do anything differently?” I’d gone over our one night together so many times... wishing I’d been more cool. More experienced. Less needy.

Maverick had kicked out of his shoes and stripped off his socks and shirt. He came towards me wearing only his jeans.

My heart thumped in my chest. “God, you’re beautiful.” Those words

came from me, not him. But I couldn't help it. His muscles were just... *amazing*. Perfectly formed and huge, covered in a multitude of black tattoos that served to highlight his strength.

His hands cupped my face and he stared into my eyes. "I've thought about the one night we had together more times than I can count. It was the single most magical, awesome, and passionate night of my entire life."

"Even though I had no idea what I was doing?" I whispered, smiling up at him.

"Neither of us did, and if we're being honest, I'd say I was the one that let you down that night."

"Oh no, you didn't," I reassured him. "It was beautiful." And perfect for a first time as far as I was concerned.

He grinned with a wicked smile now. "Oh, I intend to make it up to you, tonight. The one thing I always wished was different, was that I was skilled enough to make you come as well."

My cheeks bloomed with heat. "I didn't really know how to at the time." Though thanks to some modern devices, I'd learned how to since then.

Maverick's hands slid down my body, stopping to grab my ass and haul me against him.

I could already feel the delicious hardness of him beneath his jeans.

"Well, tonight's going to be different. I promise," he said.

I didn't want to think about how or where he'd learned the skills he was about to show me, and I didn't care. We had this moment together, and that was all that was important to me. "So, you found your way back to me?" I whispered against his lips, not even sure where the question had come from.

He kissed me softly on my lips, on my cheek, on my nose, then once again my lips. "Yes," he whispered back. "I just followed my heart back home."

I closed my eyes as a wave of love crashed over me, bringing with it burning tears. I opened my mouth to his tongue, and we kissed as

passionately as we had when we were teenagers. Big, open-mouthed kisses that were all enthusiasm and passionate and had little to do with skill.

His hands grabbed my sweater, and we broke our kiss long enough so that he could pull my top off.

I shimmied out of my jeans. The underwear I'd chosen was a matching set of black, lacy panties and a bra. It wasn't my sexiest, as I didn't want him to think I'd planned this seduction.

But he didn't seem to care at all about my choice as his gaze roamed over me with a hunger I'd never seen on his face before.

"Damn... you're the beautiful one." He raised his hands to cup my breasts through the lace, thumbing my nipples until they were hard points of yearning.

I gasped.

He dropped his head to kiss me again.

Swallowing my moan, I needed to get closer. I pressed my hands into his pecs, feeling his muscles flex beneath my fingers.

His hands went around to the clasp of my bra, flicking it open with practiced ease.

The lacy nothing fell down my arms and onto the floor and I stared up at him as I shivered. Not with cold, but with the anticipation of what was to come.

The honesty spell was still heavily working its magic on me as I opened my mouth. "What if it's not as good as we've imagined?"

He slid his hands around my waist, stroking the flesh of my back with his warm fingers. "What if it is?"



CHAPTER 8

Pansy

The room rippled with premonition. The winds of change whispered through my books and over my bed sheets. But before I could worry about what the future would hold for us, I reached up and grabbed the back of his head and pulled him down.

Our lips met in a passionate fire, each one fighting to give more than the next.

Maverick pushed me back onto the bed, the fires of our passion in his eyes.

I fell onto my back and pushed myself up so that I could lie on my pillow. He stared down at me with hunger.

Despite my insecurities rising and making me want to cover myself, I just

lifted my arms and gestured for him to come down.

He unbuttoned his jeans with a flick of his wrist and undid his zipper, exposing a bush of dark hair. Then he bent forward to push his jeans to the floor.

I waited with bated breath. I'd often tried to recall my first and only night with Maverick. I remembered the overwhelming feelings; the way his tongue had moved on my nipples, and the love I'd glimpsed that night. But so many other details were missing—his physicality most of all. I wasn't even sure I'd looked at his cock that night all those years ago. We'd been half dressed, bumbling teenagers.

Tonight at least we'd be fully naked.

I sat up on the bed and stared at him. Tonight, I was memorizing every last detail of his body, so that if I had to, in another ten years' time, I'd remember every inch of him. Every freckle. Every taught, tight muscle.

He kicked his jeans away.

I gulped. Wow. His cock was beautiful, just like the rest of him. Long and thick, the bulbous head was pink with blood. I licked my lips, already wishing that he was closer, so I could wrap my lips around his shaft.

Maverick reached for the elastic on my panties and tugged them down my thighs.

I lifted my ass up and helped him as best I could, then I was fully naked and exposed to him.

He crawled up the bed and lay on top of me, his hard cock pressed into my belly as he kissed me gently. "I've thought about this night so many times," he whispered against my lips. "Now, that I'm here, all I want to do is kiss you."

I pushed firmly against his shoulders and encouraged him to flip over so I could straddle his waist. Sitting up, I brushed my long hair back off my shoulders. "Well... I have a lot more planned than that." I ran my nails down over his pecs and circled his nipples with them, tantalizingly. "I've dreamed

about this night too, Mav. And I intend to do everything I've ever imagined."

I slid down, now on my belly, pressing hot kisses to his skin. His own belly was flat and muscular, and shivered beneath my lips. I moved even further south, wrapping my hand around his shaft to stroke him softly.

His gasp filled the room and settled between my thighs.

I dropped my face and kissed the large head, enjoying the heat and softness against my full lips.

"You don't have to do that," Mav grated out through clenched teeth.

I chuckled against his flesh, then looked up and met his eyes. "Yes, I do. It's on my dream list of things to do to you." Then I dropped down again, and parted my lips, sucking his cock into my mouth. *Damn*, he tasted good. I moved my hand in time with my bobbing head, exulting in his groans and gasps of pleasure.

Maverick grabbed me after a time and pulled me up to his body.

I didn't fight him. I just let him flip me onto my back and watched with anticipation.

He journeyed down my body, stopping at my breasts, before suckling deeply, while his fingers stroked luxuriously between my thighs.

My eyes slid closed on a wave of pleasure.

His hand moved lower.

I was aching now and needed to feel him inside of me.

But he seemed in no hurry, leisurely kissing a path down to the juncture of my thighs and settling there.

I shuffled away; not sure I wanted him lingering there. I was already wet enough for him—so he really didn't need to prepare me anymore. "Come up, Mav. Please."

He pressed a kiss to my clit, then swirled his tongue around it. "Hell no. I'm in Heaven."

I cried out as he slid two fingers up inside of me, making my pussy squeeze his fingers. Then he sucked and licked my clit, making pleasure rise,

crest, and slam into me, over and over again with exquisite force.

I grabbed onto his head, digging my nails into his scalp. “Oh fuck... Mav... oh...!”

But he clearly had no intention of stopping. He was pushing me closer and faster towards orgasm. With every flick of his tongue and stroke of his fingers inside my body, he played me like a musician stroking his strings.

I gasped loudly, my body going rigid.

He pulled his fingers away and moved over my body. “Not without me,” he said.

My mind was fuzzy, and I could barely think. Every nerve in my body was stretched tight, humming, and screaming for release.

He spread my legs with his thighs and lined his cock up against me.

I lifted my legs to wrap around his waist and clung to his biceps, needing him inside of me once and for all.

He rolled on top of me and impaled me with one long thrust.

I cried out against the invasion, the move as foreign as it was pleasurable. I clung to him like a limpet to a rock, my teeth digging into his shoulder as my knees pressed into his sides.

“Are you okay?” He whispered into my ear, shaking in his restraint to hold back.

“Yes.” I whispered back. “Just give me a moment to stretch.” I felt unbelievably full but didn’t want him to leave me.

He relaxed against me, kissing my neck, and whispering to me sweetly about how beautiful I was.

My body soon began to ache in a different way. I needed more. I was as tight as a tuned string, ready to be plucked and ring out loud and clear. “Please,” I said, lifting my head so I could speak against his lips. “Please. More. Now.”

Maverick kissed me deeply, then pushed his hands into the mattress and came up over me. He began to move. Slowly at first, withdrawing from my

body, then thrusting back inside of me. Every movement was a measured, controlled dance step. Perfectly timed, perfectly balanced.

My body responded in kind; gripping him and causing ripples of pleasure to move through my body. But I wanted more. I needed the raw, passionate, out-of-control Maverick that I'd known all those years ago. I used my internal muscles to squeeze him tight, lifting my pelvis to meet him in the rhythmic dance.

He began to groan and fuck me harder.

I gasped in pleasure and called out to him, telling him in sounds more than words, just how much I was loving what he was doing to me. "Yes... more... oh... wow..." I threw my head back as his pace quickened, the headboard of my bed slamming into the wall behind my head.

White lights flashed behind my eyelids as my pleasure peaked. I couldn't hear, I couldn't think. I could only hold my breath as I froze in time and floated high above the bed.

With one final thrust, Maverick called out. His cock pulsed deep inside of me, calling me back into my body.

I shuddered and screamed with pleasure, clinging to him as I sobbed against his skin.

His body strained against mine, then he collapsed onto me, rolling us to the side as we panted together, our skin slick with sweat and the room filled with the sounds of our pleasure.

I cupped his beautiful face, staring up into his blue eyes and memorizing the moment as best I could. I didn't want to say anything, in fact, I was hoping that not another word would be said, so there wouldn't be any chance that we could possibly ruin it. I wanted to treasure this moment forever.

Maverick must have been thinking the same thing because he rolled onto his back and pulled me up onto his chest.

I put my head on the crook of his shoulder and closed my eyes, shivering.

Maverick snapped his fingers, covering us with a blanket. Then he kissed

my hair and his hand pressed gently against my lower back.

I closed my eyes and listened to the steady beat of his heart beneath my cheek. The last time we'd made love, all those years ago, Maverick had been shipped off the next day. *Would that happen again?* "You're staying until the first of November, aren't you?" I whispered; my stomach too knotted with worry not to ask the question. "You're not going to disappear on me?"

He kissed the top of my head again to reassure me. "I'm not going anywhere, Pansy. Sleep."

I nodded and tried to relax but everything inside of me was beginning to panic. Each time I gave my heart to the High Warlock's son, our two worlds seemed to collide, only to break us apart.

Despite what I'd told Jaydy, if Mav walked away this time, there was no way I'd escape without a broken heart...



CHAPTER 9

Maverick

I woke up to several urgent texts from my mother, demanding I attend a meeting with a local family for morning tea. It was the last thing I wanted to do, but my responsibilities as the High Warlock's son weighed down on me like a physical stone on my chest. *Though, I rationalized. If I could show my mother that I was an asset to her here, in Salem, perhaps selling my parents on the idea of me staying long term wouldn't be such a hard job?*

I closed my eyes and memorized the moment, committing it to memory. The feel of Pansy's beautiful, soft body against mine. The feel of her long brown and blue hair cascading over my arm.

I didn't want to risk waking her, so I held my breath and used my magic

to transport myself to be standing up beside the bed.

She complained with a soft moan, then snuggled deeper into the pillow beneath her, and kept on sleeping.

Thankfully, my magic came to my aid in getting me dressed and washing away the physical scent of my night with Pansy. Not that I wanted it gone. But I didn't want to waste time having a shower or getting dressed the human way. I wanted to just stand here and stare down at the woman who'd single handedly given me hope for a better future—one I actually wanted—a *happy* future.

Pansy wouldn't want the life of the High Warlock and his wife, but she would be amazing at the role, nonetheless. She was kind, and fair, and hard-working. All the things my mother was not.

My phone buzzed *again*, and I angrily grabbed it. 7:30 AM in the fucking morning! I had hours before I needed to be anywhere.

I typed back a message to my mother telling her I'd be at the damn morning tea, then threw the phone across the room. I used my magic to save the phone, mostly so that Pansy wouldn't be woken by the noise, but was so angry I had to leave the bedroom to pace the kitchen.

How was I going to live in a town where my parents were going to try and pull me anywhere, anytime they wanted? "Fuck..." Was London and the hierarchy of corporate bullshit better than having to deal with my parents being on my back all day and night? I didn't know.

"Maverick?"

Pansy's worried voice had me charging back into the bedroom. "Morning sweetheart," I said, kneeling on the bed to kiss her rumpled face, before pulling back. "Can I make you breakfast? What are you in the mood for?"

She relaxed when I offered breakfast, rolling onto her side to smile at me. "Oh, anything would be amazing," she said appreciatively.

I wriggled my eyebrows at her. "Anything...?"

She laughed and rolled onto her back, the covers slipping so that part of

her lush cleavage was exposed to my gaze. “Sure...” she said with the allure of a siren.

My phone buzzed once more, and my teeth clenched together so tight a familiar headache thumped behind my eyes. I sighed with an apologetic look and took a step back. “My mother won’t stop harassing me. So, I think I better take my anger out on some scrambled eggs. And some bacon maybe?”

She sat up, holding the sheet against her breasts to stop it falling again. “Why don’t you just turn it off? It’s first thing in the morning.”

I pointed at her and forced a smile to my lips. “You’re right! I’m going to do that, now, but give me a minute, yeah?”

She nodded, though she looked concerned.

I ran back to the kitchen and gripped the countertop, screaming in anger inside my own mind. *What the hell was this torment?* I grabbed my cell phone and turned it off, exactly as Pansy had recommended. It gave me a small amount of relief, though not a lot. So, I turned my attention to Pansy’s kitchen.

She didn’t have a lot of food in the fridge, so it was magic time. I rolled up my sleeves and created a new set of plates and cutlery, all blue and engraved with our initials. I ran my hand over the letters, my heart warming with the love it had been dying to feel for too many years to count.

Food! I put out my hands and used multiple spells to create a big fry up. I made crispy bacon and scrambled eggs, sausages and tomatoes, and buttered sourdough toast. When it was done, I magicked up two trays and carried them both back into Pansy’s bedroom. The air still smelled of sex. I placed the food down in front of my lover with pride.

“Oh wow. This looks amazing,” she said, reaching for the cutlery.

I waved my hand over the top of the tray and created a large Halloween themed glass filled with fresh orange juice. “Is that okay? Unless you’d like something else?”

“No, this is perfect,” she said, picking up the toast and crunching down

on it.

I sat down also and began to eat. The food was tasty, yet I couldn't stop the weird feeling of tightness building in my gut.

"Hey, what's wrong?" she asked between sips of juice and bites of food.

"Nothing," I said shrugging.

She chuckled. "Yeah right. I smell the cogs in your brain burning from over here. What is it, Mav?"

I sighed. I really didn't want to get into anything with her now. I just wanted to focus on being happy. Just for another hour—if I could.

"You know, it's just family crap. I don't really want to talk about it. I just want to enjoy this."

"What do you want to talk about then?" she countered, still eating the mountain of food I'd put in front of her.

"How about how good last night was?" I suggested, grinning at her. "Or at least it was for me. I finally got to taste you and make you come."

She giggled nervously but managed to hold my gaze as she stared back at me. "Ditto."

I laughed and my chest felt suddenly lighter. "God, I've missed you, Pansy. Somehow, you always make everything better."

She shrugged. "You can thank my parents for that. Their philosophy was, if it's not life threatening, just let it go. Which certainly puts things into perspective when you apply the rule correctly. You can't control everything all the time. It's insanely stressful to even attempt to."

"True... very true," I agreed, still struggling to shove my parents' voices out of my head. I was just inches away from screwing this all up, I could feel it. I put my tray on the bedside table and slid closer. "So, am I taking these clothes off and climbing back into bed with you... or?"

An alarm went off and Pansy groaned. "Shit, that's me."

"That's you?"

She smiled at me, but this time it was as an apology. "Yeah, the shop

opens in half an hour, and I've got to get ready. I'm sorry."

Relief flooded me and I realized that having sex with Pansy again when I was just trying to distract myself was the worst possible way to continue in this relationship. Our sex should always be passionate and our focus entirely on each other. I didn't want to fuck her while my parents' and their yammering plagued my thoughts. *Gross.*

"Thanks for breakfast!" she said as she flipped back the covers and got out of bed. Her grin was contagious as she ran for the bathroom door. "I'm going to have a quick shower and get dressed. Are we catching up tonight?"

"Ah..."

"Oh shit," she said, slapping her hand against her forehead. "I'm meant to be having dinner with Jaydy."

"Well, tomorrow night's perfect," I rushed to say, before she offered up a solution. I needed to check with my parents before I booked in another night with Pansy.

"Great." She grinned, then bolted into the shower. "I'll only be five minutes!"

"Okay. I'll clean up," I said, taking the trays back to the kitchen. Thanks to my genetics and training, I could do most physical magic without an ounce of stress.

I clicked my fingers and cleaned all the dishes, leaving everything I'd created for her on the counter, including the plates and the glass that she'd enjoyed. I waited for a few more minutes.

Then she appeared, dressed in a cute little black skirt, boots, and a purple striped sweater. She had a hairbrush and was rushing it through her hair. "Almost ready. Sorry, that took so long."

She got ready like a human, and I couldn't stop grinning at the idea. "You don't just... magic yourself dressed?"

She frowned at me, perplexed, as if the answer were obvious. "No. I don't have enough magic to do that."

Now, *I* was the one that was confused. “You don’t have enough magic? What do you mean?”

She grabbed a silk scarf off the tallboy drawers and wrapped it around her neck. “I mean exactly what I said, Maverick.”

A shiver coursed down my spine as she said my name. Not with the heat and passion of last night, but with the contempt of the past decade.

“I’ve got to get the shop set up before I open.” She headed for the door.

I grabbed her arm as she made to go past me without so much as saying goodbye. “Hey, hey.” I said, pulling her stiff body closer to break the tension. “I didn’t mean to upset you, beautiful. I’ve just never met a witch who didn’t take advantage of her magic to do everything for her. It’s different, that’s all.”

Pansy’s eyes were blazing blue fire as she flicked her gaze up to mine. “That’s because you’ve never hung out with witches *like me* before. I’m good at potions, Maverick, but if I do more than a little physical magic in a day, I’m completely drained. I can’t make food regularly, and I certainly can’t magic up jewelry, or gold, or money. I *work* to pay my rent. My parents worked hard too and saved their money. They fly in airplanes; they don’t just click their fingers and transport themselves halfway around the world.”

Her tone was starting to grate on my nerves now. “Hey, you didn’t mind hopping to Paris last night.”

“No, I didn’t,” she said, tugging her arm out of my grip and taking a few more steps towards the stairs that lead down to the shop level. “But that was a one-off, amazing night. I’ve never lived with that much power, and I never will. It’s not in my DNA or my blood or *whatever*.” She turned away.

“Wait!” I called out. “I’ll see you tomorrow night, right?”

She smiled sadly as she turned back around to answer. “Yeah, sounds great.”

Then she was gone.

I groaned and thrust both hands into my hair. My mother had always said that the differences between Pansy and I were too great to overcome, but I’d

never believed her. Not even for a minute. But was this what she was talking about? That Pansy and I were somehow different on a cellular level, or because of some bullshit about strong blood lines? Now, I was just confused and strangely furious.

I zapped myself home to my bedroom in my parents' house. I was clean and dressed, but I opted for a shower just to spend some time with my own thoughts. They weren't pretty. The depression that had been chasing me began to seep back into my mind. Pansy's influence hadn't lasted very long. Reality was always waiting to rear its ugly head.

By the time I was dressed again and standing out the front of a mansion in the East end of town, I was in full corporate mode once more.

The door opened and a woman in pearls answered with an *almost* smile. "Maverick," she said. "It's nice to see you."

I nodded my head in greeting and ventured inside. I had a reputation to uphold after all. My parents' reputation. I knew this world and was proficient in managing everyone's expectations. My parents and the town members were happy, after all. I was doing my job. I should be happy also. *So, why was I anything but?*



CHAPTER 10

Pansy

I crunched on some salt and vinegar potato chips, then grabbed a can of soda. I was eating my feelings, and I didn't care. I'd lost three pounds this week already with all the extra work and none of the eating. I could afford a bit of a binge tonight!

"So..." Jaydy said. "What happened?"

I set down my soda and reached for a slice of pizza. Jaydy and I had decided to stay in for a girl's night, which meant pizza and wine at my place. Or whatever we felt like, really.

"Same old shit, basically," I said, skipping over the part about Paris and the sex that had completely blown my mind.

"What?" she asked, obviously wanting clarification. "You guys had a

great night, then fell into a self-destructive pattern of fighting?”

My jaw dropped and I stared at her.

She shook her head and picked up the bottle of white wine to pour herself a glass. “I know you two better than you think, P.”

I bit into my slice of pizza, loving the greasy slide of melted cheese over my tongue. “Yeah... well, you’re right. It seems we can’t even go one day without getting into a fight.”

Jaydy raised her eyebrows at me. “But how was the first part of the date?”

I chewed on my dinner, not sure I wanted to answer that.

She chuckled. “That good, huh?”

My cheeks were hot enough to make me glance away and grab for my ice cold can of soda. “Ah... yeah. You could say that.”

“Have you ever thought about the fact that you two always fight at the end of your dates?”

“What do you mean?” I asked. We hadn’t had that many dates for me to be able to see a pattern.

Jaydy sighed. “Did he say something that set you off when you were walking out the door? Or leaving him, by chance?”

I opened my mouth to say ‘no’, then realized she was totally right. *Shit.* “Um... yeah, actually. I was rushing to get to work. Why? You think he was annoyed that I had to go to work while he’s here on vacation?”

I hadn’t noticed it before, but now that I thought about it—she was right. We had more fights at the end of our dates as teenagers, even on our best days. I’d always assumed that it was just because we weren’t meant to be. We were combustible when put together. Fire and tinder. Hot, but not a good match.

“No. I think he doesn’t want you to leave him. Like... ever.”

I groaned and rolled my eyes Heaven-ward. “You can’t say shit like that to me, Jaydy.”

She cackled out a laugh. “Of course, I can. I’m your best friend. If I can’t

tell you the truth as I see it, who can?"

I put down my food and wiped my fingers on some napkins. "But why?" I pressed. "You of fall people can't possibly want us to be together."

Her gaze dropped to my hand. "And how's that ring feeling on your finger?"

I covered the ring with my right hand, the stones cool and smooth beneath my palm. "Ah... I don't know."

She narrowed her eyes at me then held out her hand. "Can I try it on?"

"No!" The word burst out of me before I could stop it. And before I could apologize to my best friend, she burst out laughing.

"You're nuts, the *both* of you."

I uncovered my ring and considered taking it off and letting her try it on. But even as I reached for the band, I caressed the gold and left it there. I couldn't take it off. *I couldn't*. A defeated sigh left my lungs. "I don't know what to do, Jaydy."

"Run away with him," she said, grinning at me like a Cheshire cat. "Grab that gorgeous hunk and go find a deserted island where you can have babies and homeschool them and do all those hippy things you've always dreamed about."

"I have not," I denied, but even I could hear that my tone was only half-hearted at best.

"Well, then, let him go," she said flippantly. "Enjoy the next two weeks with him. Date, eat, and shag your damn brains out. Then, you can let him go and you'll finally have gotten the drug that is Maverick out of your system. Right?"

Every word out of her mouth made me want to punch her in the face. Which I supposed was the point.

"Right?" she asked, pushing harder, leaning back on the couch and crossing her arms over her chest. "He isn't the guy you've been putting your life on hold for? Because if he is, I'd be fighting a bit harder to hold onto

him, if it was me.”

I reached for my pizza again then pointed to the bottle of white wine. “Can you pour me a glass, too?”

“Absolutely.”

Jaydy poured me wine and I reached for it.

“Now.” She clapped her hands together. “You’re going to tell me how good the sex was! Was it everything you imagined? Or more like riding a bike after ten years? Awkward as hell?”

A giggle bubbled up inside my chest and finally, I opened up to my friend. I told her how amazing everything had been. How happy and in love I’d felt. But I also told her how afraid I was of getting my heart broken, again; because there was only one man in the world who could hurt me in that way, and I’d served my heart up to him on a silver platter.



THE NEXT EVENING ARRIVED, and it was time for my follow-up date with Maverick. Once again, I’d run around like a headless chicken all day in the shop, and barely eaten. I was actually a little bit dizzy from hunger as I closed up. I finished dealing with the cash register and headed to the front door. And there, on my stoop, was the High Warlock, himself.

Fuck. “Warlock MacCready,” I gasped out, holding open the front door for him. “Can I get you something from my shop? Or are you after...”

The High Warlock was a good-looking man. Similar to Maverick in lots of ways. Tall, with bright blue eyes. He was just starting to gray at the temples and wore his responsibility with a tire around his middle. “I’m here to speak to you about my son.”

The weariness in his tone caught me off guard and I couldn’t help myself.

“You don’t want to be here either, do you?” Then I slammed both hands over my mouth. *Oh my God.*

The High Warlock’s lips trembled with a small smile. “My wife embeds a truth spell into most of my clothes,” he explained. “It’s subtle and generally only works on people who have something to hide.”

I dropped my hands away and glared at him. “I don’t have anything to hide.” This time I wasn’t worried about what he thought of me. My parents had taught me to respect the High Warlock, the most powerful magical being in our community, but he didn’t get to come into my shop and insult me.

“I know,” he said with a soft smile. “I believe it works on you because you’re already too honest. Your thoughts and feelings simply burst out.”

I crossed my arms over my chest somewhat defensively. “Go on then, ask away. Maverick and I are having dinner soon and I need to get ready.”

The High Warlock’s gaze was fixated on my ring. “May I?” he asked, holding out his hand.

I didn’t want to, but I felt compelled to extend my arm and place my hand into the High Warlock’s grip.

He stared down at the ring, then sighed. “My son loves you.”

I pulled my hand back and couldn’t stop myself, again. “Are you sure your wife’s truth spell doesn’t affect you, too?” *Shit! What was wrong with me?*

The High Warlock touched a finger to his top hat and nodded his head. “Good night, Pansy.”

My jaw dropped as I watched him walk away. “But...wh— huh?”

He hadn’t even asked me a question! And he hadn’t talked to me about Maverick either!

“For fuck’s sake. That family,” I muttered to myself, locking the door and staggering back into my shop. I didn’t have enough magic to get myself upstairs, so I went the normal route of walking.

I kept some candy in my kitchen for emergencies, so I immediately

stuffed some pieces into my mouth to get my blood sugar back up. “Bloody magical douchebags,” I muttered to myself, as I made my way into my bedroom for a quick shower and to get dressed.

It was warmer tonight, so I went in a long dress and my best and sexiest underwear. Maverick’s parents might be weird, and our worlds as a collective were completely polar opposites, but I wasn’t going to let those things de-rail my night with the one man I wanted more than anything or anyone in the world.

If we were going to fuck up this relationship, it was going to be because we didn’t work. *Us*. Not his parents. Not his work. Not anything else. I wasn’t going to let them take away our second chance. Maverick had gathered the courage to promise me the two weeks, and I had the courage to see it through.

Fuck the High Warlock and his wife. If Maverick and I worked out in the future, and his parents didn’t want to see me, they didn’t have to. I had enough going on in my life to keep me occupied without worrying about asshole in-laws. Buoyed by the anger I was feeling towards Maverick’s parents, I shoved another few candies into my mouth. *Fuck them. Seriously.*

My doorbell rang and a shot of adrenaline rushed through me. He was here. He’d come, despite our grouch yesterday. I quickly grabbed my purse, cell phone, and keys. I was never going to be an on-time person. “Coming!” I called out, though I wasn’t sure if he’d hear me from outside the door. Exasperated, I slipped some ballet flats onto my feet and hurried down the stairs.

Maverick was waiting for me outside on the street and turned to stare at me as I pushed open the door.

Fuck me...

He stood there relaxed and far too sexy for his own good. His hands were shoved into his pockets, making his arms bulge. He wore a plain grey t-shirt that hugged every muscle and a simple, but elegant pair of black jeans that

made me want to drag him straight back upstairs and into my bed.

“Dinner?” he asked, forcing me to drag my eyes back up to his face where I saw that his gaze was as hungry as mine.

I nodded because I was still freaking starving, then rushed into his arms. I couldn't go another minute without feeling his lips on mine. I lifted my chin and welcomed his kiss as my fingers dug into his t-shirt. And I didn't hold back this time. All my pent-up passion transferred into the kiss. I ran my greedy hands over his chest and grabbed at his huge arms, grinding my pelvis into his.

When he finally broke the kiss and lifted his head with a groan that made my stomach quiver, his body wasn't relaxed any longer. His fingers dug into my ass cheeks and his cock was thick and hard against my belly. “Upstairs. *Now.*”

I turned and ran up the stairs behind me, a shriek of excitement in my throat over his dark and commanding tone. *Was I going to get fucked, or spanked, or both?*

The sound of the outside door being closed and locked behind me made a laugh burst from my lips. I made it to the top of the stairs before he caught me, but that was where we stopped. The landing of my apartment. The middle of the living room.

I twisted in his arms and tore at his clothes, pulling at the tight t-shirt.

He dragged it over his head.

I wanted him naked. *Now.*

My dress was next, the thin material felt like a thick barrier preventing me from feeling Maverick's hot flesh against mine. I pushed the shoestring straps off my shoulders and moved to shimmy out of the garment.

Maverick grabbed the waistline before I could and pulled it to the floor.

The gray rug beneath my feet was thick and soft. So, I kicked off my shoes and licked my lips, waiting on tenterhooks of anticipation.

Maverick threw away his jeans. He was as hard as I'd imagined. Long

and thick and deliciously pink with arousal.

I wanted to taste him, to drop to my knees and wrap my lips around his firm cock, but my body tangibly *ached* for him. I didn't want to wait.

"I need you." Maverick said, his voice guttural, low, and raw. "But I don't want to hurt you."

His words sent a shiver down my spine, awakening something deeply primal in me. The need pumping between us was bordering on chaotically desperate now. I wasn't sure what had happened to him in the thirty-six hours we'd been apart, but it was obvious he wanted to fuck me into sweet oblivion.

I desperately needed the same catharsis. No holding back. No more walls between us. I needed to know, to *feel*... that he wanted me just as much I wanted him. No more guessing. No more teasing. No more wishing that I could have Maverick and he could have me.

Maverick wasn't moving though. He wasn't taking me the way I wanted him to. He obviously cared too much about my feelings to shove me up against a wall or bend me over the nearest piece of furniture. He wanted to be careful with me. And that was the very last thing I needed.

"I need you to take me, Mav," I said, saying the scariest thing I'd ever uttered in my life. "Please. Show me how much you want me."

Before I could think about how exposed this moment made me, or stop myself from acting on the truly base desires I was feeling, I peeled off my underwear and dropped onto the rug at my feet. I turned away from him and arranged myself on all fours—presenting myself to him like a bitch in heat.

I looked over my shoulder, feeling acutely vulnerable and scared that he would reject me now that I was down here and baring it all.

But he didn't run away or reject me. Instead, he was already moving to cover my body with his. He knelt between my legs and used his thighs to force me even wider. "Go down," he ordered, putting a hand in the middle of my back and pushing forward. "And brace yourself."

I pressed my forehead to the rug and stretched my hands out in front of me, grabbing hold of the shaggy carpet of the rug, practically shuddering with need.

Maverick's cock slid between my thighs, nudging me open.

I flexed my spine and pushed back against him, needing him inside of me. Possessing me. Loving me. Reassuring me that he was there for me.

His cock forged inside me, and I cried out at the sudden, thick invasion.

He pressed his chest to my back, biting into my shoulder as he fucked me from behind. He wasn't gentle. He went hard and deep; thrusting his cock inside of me over and over, rutting me like an animal driven by the need to breed.

It was the hottest thing I'd ever experienced. There was a strange sort of pain in the possession. My knees pressed into the rug as his big cock opened me and assuaged some of the deep ache buried within me. *But I wanted more.* For years I'd wondered if Maverick and I would suit each other as adults. Would our personalities, tastes, and carnal hunger match one another?

I reached over my shoulder with one hand and grabbed his hair, hard, and held him to me.

He panted and groaned over my back like a beast.

Pleasure like I've never experienced filled me. Raw, all consuming, pulsating pleasure. I gasped with every rough thrust of his cock, and I groaned with every twang of ecstasy.

He pushed himself up and leaned back on his knees.

I followed his lead and rearranged myself again, getting my knees under me and bracing myself for whatever was coming next.

Maverick grabbed my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh in a wickedly possessive move.

I cried out, the sound tearing from my lips before I was even aware of it.

Then he began fucking me faster and harder.

I couldn't stop the brutal orgasm that slammed into me from the moment

he began to *really* take me. I screamed, my pussy clenching down on Maverick's cock and rippling around him in waves.

But he didn't stop fucking me. Then a vibrating warmth consumed my clit and pushed my pleasure to even greater heights.

I could scarcely breathe! Wave after wave of heat washed over my already tacky, and sex-hot skin.

Cheater.

He was using magic to drive me out of my mind.

But I couldn't verbalize anything or even call him out on it. My pussy was throbbing too hard, just aching for more.

The sounds coming from both of us were outrageously loud and guttural. Moans and gasps added to the *thwacking* sound of flesh repeatedly meeting flesh.

When my second orgasm hit, I grabbed for one of his hands at my hips and bucked against him. My shuddering belly made my screams even louder as I hit a level of pleasure I'd never even known could exist.

Then he was exploding inside of me, his cry of pleasure making my own so much more intense. As he collapsed on top of me, we both fell to the floor.

My eyes were closed, I was covered in glistening sweat, and the sounds of my panting breath still filled the air.

Meanwhile, Maverick shuddered in the aftermath of his release, his arms wrapped around me so tightly that I didn't think he'd ever let me go.



CHAPTER 11

Maverick

My heart pounded in my chest like a tribal drum. I couldn't catch my breath. I'd never wanted a woman the way I needed Pansy. She was my moon, my sun, and my stars. My reason to live. *Fuck...* she was the Goddess Aphrodite and an alluring siren wrapped into one. Where on earth had that come from?

I rolled onto my back and pulled Pansy into my side. I didn't want to ruin the moment, or say the wrong thing, but all I could think of was how incredible that had been. Before I could come up with something non-sexual to say, her stomach grumbled loudly and saved me.

"Hungry?" I asked with a smile. "I know we were going out for dinner, but how about I make us something?"

She looked up at me, her cheeks pink and her skin shiny with sweat. “I didn’t eat today, I’m sorry. I was too busy in the shop.”

I kissed her sweet lips and rolled towards her, still fully naked and lying on her living room floor. “Do you want to go have a shower and I’ll feed you chocolate covered strawberries?”

She nodded. “Mmm. Sounds like a plan.”

We managed to stagger to our feet.

The giddiness inside my head was almost like being drunk. I couldn’t help but grab onto Pansy’s waist. “Are you okay?” I asked. “I didn’t mean to be rough with you.” If she hated me now, I wasn’t sure how we’d ever come back from this. That was the hottest sex of my life. I would happily, no... I’d *beg* her to do it all over again. Exactly the same.

She grinned up at me and a truly spectacular light lit up her eyes. “It was perfect. Thank you.”

Relief flooded over me. *But thank you?* With a satisfied smile and a shake of my head, I pulled her into my arms and kissed her deeply, just breathing in the scent of her. I wanted to truly enjoy these precious, sexy, stolen moments of perfection with my beautiful little witch.

She lifted her head again. “Shower?”

“And food!” I said, holding out my hand and magicking up a plate covered in chocolate dipped strawberries. I moved the plate towards her.

She grabbed two, one for each hand. “Oh my God, thank you!” She moaned deeply as she sunk her teeth into the lush strawberry.

I smacked her on the ass playfully. “You better get into that shower before I decide to fuck you again.”

She squealed and ran off towards the bathroom, throwing a sultry look over her shoulder.

A growl rolled through my chest and my cock stirred once more. Despite having experienced the longest, most intense orgasm of my life only moments ago, I could absolutely go again. I followed my naked, gorgeous

woman into her bathroom and held out the plate for her.

She reached out and grabbed two more strawberries before ducking back under the hot water. “I can’t believe we didn’t even get out the door!” she said, grinning broadly. “That was definitely the hottest start to a date, *ever*.”

I put the plate down on the bathroom vanity and leaned against the wall to watch her. *Damn, she was beautiful*. All gorgeous curves and lush femininity. “Yes, it was. Definitely.”

She finished showering then slid out of the cubicle like a ninja to grab the plate of strawberries once more.

I laughed, loving the way she was so candid and unafraid to be herself. Then jumped under the water, myself, washing off the scent of sex and sweat. “So, did you want to go out? Or are you happy to stay in? I don’t want you to think I’m hiding you or making choices for you.” Because I definitely wasn’t. After what I was forced to endure because of my parents, I’d never abuse control like that, especially not when it came to my Pansy.

She tilted her head to the side as though she was thinking. “Um... I’d like to stay in if that’s okay? I’ve had the biggest couple of days, and to be honest? I’m totally zonked.”

I turned the shower off and grabbed an orange towel to dry off. “Sounds good to me. You feel like Chinese food in bed maybe?”

“Yes!” she cried, grabbing her bath robe and pulling it on over her nakedness. “Let’s do that. Bed picnic and a movie maybe?”

So that’s exactly what we did. We ate, we cuddled, and we watched a movie.

Pansy fell asleep on my chest not even halfway through the old black and white Christmas movie we’d chosen.

So, I turned it off and lay in the bed smiling. The smell of the Chinese food permeated the air, and I couldn’t believe how happy I felt. Just yesterday my mom had tried to convince me that Pansy was the last woman I should be dating, yet tonight Pansy had proven to me that she was the only

woman I wanted. Closing my eyes, I fell blissfully asleep, happier and more relaxed than I had been in years.

Something in the room stirred, and I woke up to Pansy creeping out of the bedroom, fully dressed, and holding her shoes in her hand. “Where are you going?” I asked, rolling over and forcing my eyes open blearily. “What time is it, babe?” *And why was I still asleep?*

She turned around to face me but didn’t stop her slow shimmy towards the door. “It’s almost nine in the morning and I have to run downstairs to work.”

I opened my mouth to say something.

She held up her hand to silence me. “Jaydy pointed out to me that we only ever seem to fight when we’re about to say ‘goodbye’ so how about we don’t say it? We’ll just say, ‘see you soon’, instead.”

I frowned in thought and my fatigue-compromised brain began to spiral downward. “You’ve been talking to Jaydy about us?”

Pansy dropped her shoes and slipped her feet into them. “Thank you so much for last night. It was awesome to hang out, just like we did when we were teenagers.” There was a beat of silence. “So, I’ll see you soon, okay? Your choice of restaurant, or whatever,” she added.

“But...”

“*See you soon!*” She cried and made a run for the door.

I moved to sit up, then flopped back down onto the mattress as the sound of her feet on the stairs leading down to the shop sounded in the room. *Was she right? Did we only fight when we were about to leave each other?* I didn’t know, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to answer that question this morning. Despite sleeping incredibly well, I’d woken up with that familiar feeling of a weighted stone in my gut.

I needed to get home so that I could talk to my parents about all of this. I closed my eyes and magicked myself back to my bedroom, to the cold sheets of the bed I’d grown up sleeping in.

There was a knock at the door as though my parents knew I was home.

“Come in.”

The door opened and my father walked inside.

I sat up and threw my legs over the side of the bed, clicking my fingers to dress myself instantly.

“Good morning,” my father said.

And it was a good morning or at least it should have been.

“Hi Dad. I didn’t expect to see you this morning.”

Being the High Warlock was a lot more responsibility than most people knew. Everyone assumed it was just a title. That it was a privilege to be born to my father’s blood line. But it was endless meetings and managing people, stopping fights, and smoothing over issues between the covens, the shifters, as well as the vampires. My dad had never been home much as a result when I was young.

“Yes, well I’ve missed two meetings already,” he said, his annoyance obvious in the stiffness of his posture.

I groaned as I dragged myself to my feet. “Is that my fault somehow?”

Dad’s nose lifted even higher. “I wanted to speak to you before I had my lunch meeting with your mother. She wants to discuss your... time with Pansy Motley.”

I inhaled sharply. “Pansy is none of your business. And certainly not Mothers.”

My father lifted his hand.

I twisted the gold ring on my finger, raising my shields against offensive magic.

My father’s spell wafted over me like a soft mist.

I shook my head. “*Don’t*. Father.”

His surprise was a palpable thing.

I raised my eyebrows. “You never worked in the London office, did you, Dad?”

He frowned but didn't speak.

I paced, needing to move to dispel some of the annoyance rising inside of me. "None of your spells will work on me, Dad. I have every defensive spell possible protecting me right now." From my ring that was the center of my power, to three of the tattoos on my body. My back, my chest, and my right arm all protected me from different sorts of magical attacks.

"Why would you say such a thing to me?" he asked.

I glared at him now, still moving around my bedroom, my bare feet sinking into the plush carpet as I walked. I hated lies, and my father walked the line of grayed out truth often. "Because you just tried to cast a spell on me. A truth spell of some sort probably, and I won't be manipulated." I'd had to twist my ring multiple times the other night to turn off my defenses so I could eat the spelled cake with Pansy. Even then the affect on me had been small compared to how she'd opened up to me.

"I didn't..."

I lifted my head and eyeballed my father.

He sighed. "It wasn't malicious. I just need the truth."

"Then ask me!" I spat back. "I'm an adult. I don't need to be twisted and worked on, Dad. I get enough of that when I'm at work." I ran my hand through my hair, feeling frazzled.

My dad coughed, clearing his throat. Now, he was looking uncomfortable again. "You don't enjoy working at headquarters? It's quite prestigious."

"For you, maybe." *I hated it.* "There's nothing special about working there. My colleagues are malicious, backstabbing city types. I've literally been poisoned, stabbed, and demoted without cause." And those were only some of the more memorable moments during my tenure.

"You were... stabbed?" my father gasped out.

I lifted my shirt and pointed to the gash beside my belly button. "This isn't an appendix scar, Dad."

My father's gaze zoomed in on the mark I wore for strength.

I could have used magic to remove the scar, but I wanted to remember to never trust anyone at work. And not to turn your back on an open challenge. Ever. I'd have been dead if my boss hadn't stepped in when he did.

"Why didn't you tell me?" my dad whispered. There was no anger in his voice. No disappointment. Only incredulousness. Horror, even.

"It's fine," I said, flipping my hair out of my face. *I really needed a haircut.*

"No, it's not," Dad said, his tone sharper this time. "I had no idea. My father died when I was sixteen, and I was never able to go to college. To represent our family amongst the elite. I... didn't know, Maverick."

All the tension leeches out of my shoulders. "It's okay, Dad. It's only a few more years..."

"No." Dad shot back, resolute. "No. You don't need to go back."

I stared at him, shocked. "But..."

"No buts," Dad said, taking a step towards me. "I'll handle headquarters, and your mother."

I gulped. *He wasn't serious, was he?*

Dad continued. "You know, I wasn't the one who tore you away that day, ten years ago."

My throat thickened with hot emotion. "But you didn't stop her."

He stiffened. "No, I didn't. I've always followed your mother's instructions when it came to you, my son. I believed she knew what was best for you. For us. As a family."

My heart ached with pain that I felt mirrored in my father's eyes. "It wasn't best to send me away, Dad. I love my town. And I love..."

"Pansy." Dad finished for me.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. None of my attack warnings were going off, but it was hard to let my guard down around my father. I'd always known him to be the strongest, and best warlock in our town. I didn't know he had a heart though, but then again, I didn't get mine from my mother.

“You love her, I know.” Dad sighed heavily. “I went to see her last night.”

“You what?” *I didn’t know that.* Pansy hadn’t said anything.

Dad’s laugh was light and sounded foreign to my ears. “She is... different, I must admit. Your mother told me I had to go to Pansy and tell her that she couldn’t see you anymore. That she had to send you back to London.”

My anger was back, burning in the pit of my stomach. “And what did she say to that?” I knew how my night with Pansy had begun, and she certainly hadn’t sent me packing. Quite the opposite.

Dad’s lips lifted into a smile I hadn’t seen in years. One of introspection and humor. “I didn’t give her the message. She was so fierce, so... in love... with you. And I saw her ring. I felt the power behind the magic, and I knew I couldn’t interfere. Not again.”

Tears that I’d never shed filled my eyes and I stepped forward, opening my arms to my father.

He embraced me, holding on tight. “I’m sorry, Son.”

And there they were. The only words I’d ever wanted to hear, but never thought my father would say. My heart was bursting as I pulled back and blinked away the tears clogging my throat. “Thank you, Dad.”

I took a step back and magicked up a couple of bottles of water, handing one to my father. I gulped down the cold liquid, forcing back the emotions that had risen to the surface like a long-forgotten memory.

The teenage version of me was staggering. I’d finally been heard, and my father had actually apologized for ruining my life.

“But what about Mom and the council? Everything?”

“We will devise a plan,” Dad said slowly.

I raised my eyebrows and offered him a hesitant smile. “Now?”

Dad grinned at me. “In a hurry, are you?”

“Pansy and I have a deal, and I’d like to sort everything out before I make

my offer to her on Halloween night.”

“Your offer to her?” Dad repeated. “As in... you intend to marry her?”

I crossed my arms over my chest. *I'd run away with her if I had to.* My parents were never going to separate us again. I'd make sure of it. “Yes, I do. I know she isn't the wife mother would choose for me. She isn't exceptionally powerful, or from a blood line you approve of.”

Dad sighed. “We'll deal with all of that, Son. I promise.”

I gripped my dad in a tight hug again, hope for the future truly filling the darkness in my heart for the first time.



CHAPTER 12

Pansy

I spent the day as I always did, serving customers, stocking shelves, and magicking up the occasional special piece of festive frockery for my Halloween obsessed patrons. But I did it with a smile and with true love in my heart. I was happy—truly happy—and part of me was in shock that it had happened.

Maverick was truly the man I remembered; he was the guy I needed. Come Halloween night, I'd be able to say to him truthfully that my feelings had never changed and that I wanted him. Heart. Body. Soul. Hopefully he'd still felt the same, too.

“Do you have any Halloween candy, left?” A woman asked, juggling a toddler on her hip.

“I do,” I said, grinning at the gorgeous little cherub in her arms. “What kind would you like?” I led the woman over to the corner of my store where I stored all the bags of candy. “I’ve got them in huge bags, of course, for trick or treaters. But I’ve also personally made-up little Halloween novelty bags that include a party favor of some sort in each of them. A piece of jewelry, some vampire blood, fangs, and the like.”

The woman took the little bag out of my hands, exclaiming happily. “Oh, these are fantastic! Just what I need. How many do you have?”

“About a dozen,” I said. *How many did she need?*

“Oh... I’d need at least fifty. Can I put in an order and pick it up in a few days?”

“Fifty?” I repeated, my eyes wide.

“Better make it seventy-five, actually,” the woman said, pulling out her purse. “Could I pay extra for you to make some adult style bags, too? I’m throwing a big party.”

I laughed at her enthusiasm. “I can... but I’ll definitely need a few days to make them. I’m so busy during the days, I’d have to take time out at night to put them together.”

The woman slapped the card down on the desk. “I would so appreciate it if you could. I have four of these little monsters, so you’d be doing me the biggest favor.” She tickled the little girl in her arms who burst into a fit of giggles.

I sighed, giving in. “I’d be happy to. Let me just work out a price for you and we’ll set a pick-up time.” Despite the large sale a sense of cold disappointment settled over me. I’d have to call Maverick and cancel tomorrow night, unless he wanted to help me magic up some bags. *Hmm... that was an idea!*

“Here you go,” I said, pushing the quote I’d written down toward the woman. “Does this work for you?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “And can I pick them up on Halloween morning?”

“How about the night before?” I said, calculating the time I’d need and my plan to take the day off. “I’m closing on All Hallows’ Eve, because of the parade and everything.” The ‘everything’ being that I was hoping to completely change my life and future.

“Oh... that’s perfect,” the woman agreed.

I rang up her purchase. Only four more days of craziness and I’d get a day off to celebrate surviving October, and hopefully more—with Maverick.

When I’d finally finished the day, I was reconsidering my ‘do everything myself’ approach. Next year, I needed to hire some help over October. Even if it would cut into my bottom line. Surely the pain in my feet was worth something? I collapsed onto my couch and pulled out my phone, ordering some Uber eats delivery before I groaned. I threw my head back against the head rest. *What order was best for me tonight?*

Shower? Foot soak? Bath? Or wait for dinner and make sure I ate before I collapsed for the evening? Thank goodness I hadn’t planned anything with Maverick or Jaydy. The phone rang before I could decide on what to do next. “Hello?” I answered, not recognizing the number.

“Hey beautiful, how was your day?”

My heart lit up as I closed my eyes. “Maverick... how do I not have your number?”

He chuckled. “Don’t know... but I change my cell regularly...or I used to. Anyway. How are you? You sound exhausted.”

“Oh, I am,” I agreed. “Tonight is a dinner, bath, and bed night.” I snorted out a laugh. “Isn’t that like a baby’s routine?” Oh my God. *Did Maverick want a baby? Babies?* We’d never really discussed it and hell... I was too tired to have that conversation tonight.

Maverick chuckled on the other end of the line. “You sound completely zonked. Can I help in any way? You want dinner... or?”

I lifted my head and opened my eyes, letting out another groan. “Thanks, but I’ve already organized something. But as far as help goes, how do you

feel about helping me magic up some Halloween goodie bags for the shop?”

Oh damn, now my eyesight was going fuzzy as well. I couldn't even see straight.

“Ah, I'd love to, but I have to head back to London tomorrow. That's why I'm calling, actually.”

I rubbed my eyes with my free hand. “Oh? So, you've got to cancel our date?” That kind of worked in my favor.

“Yeah... I'm sorry, babe.”

“No. It's all good. It's only a couple of days until Halloween so if you have to work, it's okay.” I had to work, he had to work. *Look at us, a normal couple already.*

His tone was all smiles. “You're the best, Pansy, thank you.”

I lifted my hand and stared down at my promise ring. “You'll be back for Halloween yeah? For the parade? For our talk?”

“Yes. Of course. I've just got a few things to tie up, then I'll come home.”

“Home,” I repeated. I liked the sound of that.

“Yeah.” He chuckled. “I won't be longer than a few days.”

“Okay. No problem.” I answered. “I better go before I fall asleep and don't get dinner or a shower in.”

“No problem. Good night, beautiful.”

“See you soon, Mav.”

We hung up and there was a knock at my outside door.

“Argh... why do I have to live on the top floor?” I managed to haul myself off the couch to stagger down the stairs towards the sound of my food delivery. “Coming!” I called.

I opened the door. “Hey. Thanks Taylor.”

The local brown-haired teenager smiled at me and handed over the noodles and chicken stir-fry. “Night, Pansy,” said Mark, the younger brother of one of the guys I went to school with, before he headed off again.

I managed to stagger back upstairs, eat most of my dinner, have a half

decent shower, then fall into bed. Utter exhaustion descended upon me, and I passed out, hard.



THE NEXT DAY was just as busy as the one before, and I spent most of the night making the party bags for my new favorite customer. Despite the tall order, I managed to get another early night; although I went to bed a little bit sad that Maverick hadn't called me all day.

Goodnight. Can't wait to see you when you get back.

I sent him a text to the number he'd called me on the night before. I wasn't really sure of the time difference—he could be working or asleep—something to think about and figure out in the morning. When I didn't hear back within a few minutes, I turned my phone off and went to sleep.

The next day was the thirtieth of October. Just one day until Halloween. I'd managed to get all the party bags done and was dealing with a few disgruntled customers.

“But I was really hoping for a black zombie outfit,” one mother said.

I forced a smile to my face. “I'm sorry, but everything I have left is on those racks. I won't be getting in anymore until next year.”

The last day before Halloween was super crazy. There was always a rush of last-minute purchases by people who'd just decided to participate in a holiday that was on the same day *every* year.

My phone buzzed and I pulled it out, staring down at the screen in the hopes of seeing something from Maverick.

Nope. It was a text from my dad.

Wanted to say, before things get too crazy, have a fantastic All Hallows' Eve, Pansy. Love you.

Even though it wasn't the man I wanted to hear from most, it was still lovely to receive. I smiled as I texted back.

Thanks Dad. You too! Love you.

"Excuse me. Can you help us?" A girl asked from the other side of the counter, her tone haughty.

"Yes, of course." I said with another forced smile. "What do you need?"

And on the day went. I gave more and more things away throughout the afternoon, giving bonuses and specials to people who were polite, to get rid of the stock. I could just store it for next year, or use my magic to get rid of it, but I was exhausted. Not to mention the fact that my strange tingles of premonition were telling me that things would be very different this time next year. *Who knew?* I could be in London. Or I could be travelling the world like my parents.

When six o'clock rolled around my shoulders ached and my head throbbed. I needed a bloody drink and soon. "I'm done." I closed my eyes and celebrated inside my own head. The silence around me was heavenly after a day filled with crying babies, annoyed mothers, and shrieking, entitled teenagers. *Bliss.*

When I opened my eyes Maverick's mother was standing right in front of me.

"Holy..." *Shit!* I jumped back instinctively and put a hand on my heart as it hammered in my chest. "God... Mrs. MacCready! You scared me."

"Did I?" she asked. "I'm sorry." But her tone and her expression indicated that she was not the least bit sorry.

"Can I help you?" I asked before I realized my mistake. "Oh! Your order. Right! The final ingredient came in today. Let me get it for you."

I turned away from her though part of me wondered why I did. She was dangerous, and tonight, her rage was directed at me. I retrieved the package I'd made up for her and brushed off the dust on the neat bow that I'd tied. Then I rushed back to the desk and pushed the small box across the desk and

toward Maverick's mother. "Here you go."

She reached for the box then slipped the contents into her large bag.

Strangely, she wasn't speaking and that freaked me out even more than normal. "Um... will you be at the parade tomorrow?" I asked to break the tension in the air.

"Of course," she said, as cold as winter. "Will you?"

I grinned at her, feeling awkward. "Of course. I never miss it."

She nodded her head but still didn't speak further. And didn't leave.

"Ah... is there anything else?" Surely, she wanted to say something. Or buy something?

"Yes," she said, lifting her chin. "I didn't want to tell you, my husband begged me not to say anything, but you're too nice a girl not to know the truth."

Thud. Thud. Thud. My heart beat sickeningly hard against my rib cage. "What do I need to know?" I asked, surreptitiously wetting my suddenly dry lips with my tongue.

Mrs. MacCready glanced away as though she felt modest suddenly.

I waited, though I was feeling sick now. I reached nervously for my emergency stash of candy from under the counter, bringing out the bag before offering her some.

"Oh, no thank you."

I popped three pieces into my mouth and held onto my patience by a fraying thread.

"Well, it's just that... my son has always been a little... flighty. No, that's not the right word."

I stifled a groan. *Please just get to the point!*

"You see, he... Maverick, he realized that he owed himself more than a simple life here in Salem, with you and us. He's gone back to London to work. And he's decided he won't be coming back. I just thought you should know."

I stared at her, trying incredibly hard not to react. Not to give her the satisfaction of seeing my very real and blossoming pain. “Maverick told me he was going back to London. He called me last night,” I said vaguely.

“Oh no,” she pouted, covering her mouth with her hand. “And he didn’t tell you he wasn’t coming back again?”

No... he told me the complete opposite. My right hand moved to cover the ring still clinging to my left middle finger. He’d made a promise. A *magical* promise. He wouldn’t break that. *He wouldn’t*. I faced the High Witch. “I don’t believe you.”

She laughed softly. “Oh, poor little Pansy. You seriously think that my son, the future High Warlock of this city, would marry... *you*? You’re nothing. You’re a peasant. You’ll never be accepted by me, my husband, or anyone else in the coven.”

With every barbed word came a new stab to my heart. I didn’t want to believe her. “Maverick...” I swallowed the word. What was I going to say? That he’d promised to give us a second chance? I’d sound like some sort of love starved teenager.

“Yes?” His mother taunted me. “Maverick said what? That he loved you? That he wanted to change his whole life to be with you? Oh Pansy, Pansy...” she *tutted* as she shook her head. “My son is far too good for a girl like you. I suggest you try dating boys a little more your speed and just leave my son be.”

Before I could react, she lifted her hand and blew a silver powder over me.

I sneezed, feeling immediately woozy. Then everything went black.



CHAPTER 13

Maverick

The Warlock World Headquarters had taken my phone from me the moment I'd landed back in London. *Why?* I didn't know. And now, I was sitting in a jail cell inside my old work building. They hadn't even put me on trial yet for whatever stupid thing they wanted to charge me with.

I closed my eyes and tried to send out a communication spell, calling for my father, for Pansy, to anyone who could hear me. But the walls in this underground room were thick and lined with lead. There was no way anyone could hear me.

I waited for what felt like days before I heard a familiar voice.

“Maverick MacCready.”

I jumped to my feet as my boss, High Warlock Novack walked up to my cell.

“Sir,” I said, standing as close to the bars as I could without touching them. “Why am I here?”

“We got word that you wanted to quit.”

I blinked at him. “And? My contract was over years ago. I can leave at any time.” And while I knew that to be true, there was a different expectation of those that worked at head office.

“Your mother called us,” my boss said, putting his hands behind his back and pacing the hall in front of my jail cell. He was wearing an expensive suit and a royal purple tie, his classic power outfit.

I fidgeted with my ring, turning it up to full power. I had no idea if it would work down here, but I had to do something to protect myself. “My mother?” I repeated. “Why would she do that? My father was the one that decided with me that I was going to step away from the corporate world and go home to learn the ropes of his role.” We’d devised a plan and executed it—only to be ambushed by those we trusted. *Typical.*

High Warlock Novack nodded his head. “I went to college with your mother, did I ever tell you that?”

I gaped at my boss who I hadn’t realized was as old as my parents. He looked barely thirty. *Bloody Hell.* “Ah... no. You didn’t.”

“She was one of the most beautiful women I’d ever seen... but rotten to the core.”

I couldn’t help the strangled laugh that bubbled out of my throat. “Yes. That sounds like her.” I hadn’t realized just how bad she was until this very moment. “She asked you to lock me up, then? Keep me here in London?”

He turned around in his pacing, facing me now, “Yes. She did.”

“Forever?” I asked, my chest tightening like a python had wrapped around my ribs. *Pansy!* My beautiful girl.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Just until the first of November.”

I groaned and closed my eyes on a wave of pain. “That fucking bitch.”

It was my boss’s turn to chuckle. “I’m glad you’re finally realizing it.”

I opened my eyes and looked at him. “Sorry?”

“Your mother is the reason you’ve been here as long as you have. Now, don’t get me wrong, Maverick, you’re a good and hard worker. But ultimately? You’re bad for business.”

My jaw dropped. “Ah, excuse me... What?” Had I stepped into some sort of twilight zone? *What was happening here?*

“You’re *too* good Maverick. You’ve let... how many men walk over you to the next promotion?”

I took a step back, feeling strangely unwell. “Ah...”

“Exactly. I don’t want men like you here.”

“Men like me?” I repeated. Was this some sort of cosmic joke?

“Yes,” he said, a sneer creasing his nose and lips. “Some of us are made for headquarters, and others need to run home to their dinky little country towns, and rule over the witches who spend all their time cooking dinner and making Halloween costumes.” The words were snarky, degrading even, yet I heard the message beneath the tones. *Go home.*

“So, I can leave?” I asked, my heart beginning to race. “Is it the first of November, already?” I couldn’t tell how long I’d been down here. It felt like forever and yet I’d been brought no food, and not been to the bathroom.

The High Warlock glanced up at the ceiling. “Time does pass differently down here, doesn’t it?”

I nodded but didn’t speak. I was holding my breath, waiting for his answer. “Sir?”

The High Warlock smiled, *actually* smiled at me. “It’s around one in the afternoon, on All Hallows’ Eve, Maverick. Take a few hours to gather your things and get your apartment and finances in order. With the time difference, you should easily make it home in time to do whatever your mother is trying to stop you from doing. So, go back to Salem and stay there.” He clicked his

fingers and the door to my jail cell popped open.

I hurried out and followed my old boss along the corridor and into the silver elevator. I had to ask. “Sir? Why are you helping me?”

The High Warlock didn’t turn to look at me but said, “I owe your father.”

“For what?” I persisted, needing to understand.

The High Warlock coughed a little as though he were clearing his throat. “He did what I couldn’t. He took over our father’s role and became the High Warlock in his place.”

Each word hit me like a truth bomb. *Boom, boom, boom.* “Father? ... You’re from Salem?!” *How did I not know that?*

He chuckled. “You will not repeat that to anyone. Ever.”

“Hang on...” I reached out and grabbed his arm, turning my old boss back to look at me. And there it was, plain as the nose on his face—the eyes. The MacCready blue irises. “You’re my father’s older brother... aren’t you?” I asked.

He nodded. “I am.”

“But... Dad said you died. No, you disappeared. Wait, no...” I shook my head, not sure of anything anymore.

The High Warlock chuckled. “Yes, my little brother was always good at smudging the truth. I was at college when our father died, and I didn’t want to go back. So, your dad said he’d do it. He’d stay in Salem and marry the woman that had been lined up for me...” The man in front of me shuddered.

“You’re my uncle.” The knowledge tilted my world on its axis.

He grinned. “That I am, and I’m truly happy to say that you’ve turned out better than anyone could have hoped for. You have your mother’s knack for spells and your father’s heart... his soul.”

The compliments were too much, and I looked away. My brain was whirling through all the information to come up with something that made any sense.

“But you’re a High Warlock. High Warlock titles are inherited.”

He shrugged. "I married a girl I met in college. She was an only child and when they found out who my father was, her parents gave me their family name and title."

I gaped at him. "I have an aunt? Do I have cousins?"

The man's face paled. "No... we..." This time his cough was clear. "We don't have any children, though my wife would sneak in to meet you on occasion. Red curls and an inquisitive smile ring any bells for you?"

"Veronica!" I realized. "I thought she was one of the higher ups' daughters, or something."

My uncle smiled. "Well, now that you're out, I want you to come back and visit us some time. Come to our country home. And bring the woman your mother is so desperately trying to keep you from."

I opened my arms and hugged my uncle tightly. Everything made so much sense now. Like why I'd survived that stabbing.

He hugged me back. "Go on. You haven't got long to get the girl."

When I pulled away the elevator doors opened on my uncle's command.

We walked out together, and he held his hand out to me. "Good luck, Maverick."

"Thank you." I turned and ran to my office to clean everything out. Then I went to my apartment to take the few things I couldn't replace, then contacted my real estate agent to rent out my place. Within a few short hours everything was sorted, and my head was clear, my shoulders light and relaxed. The weight of the world had been taken off me as so many family secrets were revealed.

I patted down my jacket. "Shit." I still didn't have my phone. *Oh well.* It didn't matter, I'd be back in Salem in a few minutes. I'd speak to my father before dealing with my mother, but first, I had to see Pansy. God knows what she thought about me disappearing like this.

I took a deep breath, centering myself. After days in the cell my magic was severely depleted. It felt like I had just enough to get home, though I'd

be weaker when I arrived. There was no choice though. I'd made a promise to Pansy, and I wasn't going to fail her. I closed my eyes, clicked my fingers, and transported myself home.

When I opened my eyes, I wasn't in my bedroom, I wasn't even in Salem as far as I could see. I looked around. "Shit, where am I?" It looked like bloody Vegas. There were lights flashing and the sound of coins clanking inside of pokie machines. I blinked and walked over to the closest person I could find, a woman in her eighties with purple tinted hair and a sparkly vest.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where I am?"

The lady didn't even glance up at me. "Caesar's palace, nitwit. Where do you think you are?"

"In Vegas, Nevada?" I asked, trying to make sure I knew exactly where I was.

This time she did look up at me from eyes weighed down with blue eye shadow. "Is there something wrong with you, boy?"

I couldn't help but laugh at her tone. "Um... some would say so, yes. It's just been one of those nights."

She cackled at that. "Oh, I've had nights like that."

I glanced around looking for a clock on the wall and finding none. "When I left London, it was 5 PM, which means that it's..." I did a few quick calculations in my head. "Nine in the morning or so?"

The old woman frowned at me now. "Yeah... so?"

"I've got to get to Salem by this evening. They're three hours behind and it'll take a few hours to fly there."

The woman *hmped* out a laugh. "A few? More like six."

I groaned in frustration. I had no phone. No credit cards and no magic to transport myself or conjure anything. I wasn't even sure I knew anyone's phone numbers in Salem, even if I could get the money together to call. I had just over twelve hours to make enough money to buy a plane ticket to Salem, which was six hours in itself, and I'd need to drive back to L.A for the plane.

Fuck!

“What’re going to do?” the woman asked, interested now.

That’s when I saw the bucket sitting in her lap, full of quarter dollars. I was completely drained of all magic, but I still had my premonition abilities, I should be able to work out which machine was going off next.

I glanced around at the pokie machines. *Yes.* That one. I turned back to the woman who hadn’t exactly been helpful. “Could I please borrow a quarter? I will pay you back as soon as I win a dollar.”

Her gaze slid down over my shirt and suit pants, then all the way back to my face as if assessing whether I was good for my word. “All right. But only one quarter.” She fished into her bucket and her fingers came back out clasping the coin. “A loan, yeah?”

“Yes. Thank you,” I said, taking the coin and walking over to the machine I could feel would make me enough money to get home. Warlocks didn’t worry much about currency, at least not the human kind anyway. And certainly not magical beings of my rank. I could conjure a piece of gold or silver—usually—at any given moment, so money meant nothing to me normally. That was, until I was stranded in the literal desert with no magic, and no freaking way to get home.

I sat down on the chair, inserted my only coin, and hit the play button.



CHAPTER 14

Pansy

When I opened my eyes, I didn't know where I was. There was a cold floor beneath my face and my fingers gripped the side of something wooden. I blinked my eyes clear and tried to lift my head. It felt like someone had hit me with a lump of bloody wood. "Ow," I moaned.

My mouth was dry, like I'd eaten cotton wool. I also felt dehydrated, like I was hung over or something. *Yuck*. Had I been drinking last night? No... no way. I managed to push myself up into a seated position to find that I was still in my shop— behind my desk. "What time is it?" I said aloud.

I hauled myself to my feet and looked around. It was still dark outside,

and I still felt... weird. I couldn't really explain it. I staggered to the door to find it had been locked. "Did I do that?" *Strange*. My cell phone was still in my pocket, so I pulled it out and stared down at the time. 5 AM. *Woah*. I'd slept all night.

I managed to walk up the stairs and get into my apartment. Why was I so exhausted even though I'd slept all night? Peeling my clothes off, I fell into bed. It was All Hallows' Eve. I had the day off. My first day in forever.

And Maverick... Maverick didn't care about me. So, I had the whole day to sleep.



WHEN I WOKE up again the fading sunlight was streaming through my window and a depression unlike any I'd ever known before had settled inside my gut like poison. I didn't want to get out of bed, and I had no reason to. I pulled the duvet over my head and let the warmth wrap around me. My phone didn't ring and although I managed to drink a gallon or two of water, I didn't really eat.

My door had been knocked on so many times, but I hadn't been able to get up and walk down those stairs. It had to be trick or treaters. It was almost six o'clock and I knew the little ones started as soon as school ended.

"Pansy!"

Jaydy's voice startled me, and I sat up in bed. "Jaydy?" I answered, my brow furrowed.

My best friend stormed into my room, her hands on her hips. She was already dressed in her nurse zombie combination of white linen and blood. "What are you doing in bed, still?" she demanded.

"Maverick doesn't love me," I said. The words I'd been thinking all day.

Jaydy stalked closer to the bed. “What are you talking about?”

“Maverick’s gone,” I said, still not moving to get out of bed. “But you look nice.”

Jaydy groaned. “Where’s your costume, P? Halloween has started. You’re missing all the fun!”

“You know I don’t like Halloween, Jaydy.” Trick or treating was for people who didn’t get to do magic all year round like us.

Jaydy stomped over to my bed and threw back the covers.

I was still wearing my flannel pajamas I’d managed to pull on when I was cold earlier.

“Okay. Get up. Have a shower. And I’ll get a costume ready for you.”

“Why?” I asked, moving to do as she told me anyway.

“Because the parade is going to start in a few hours, and you never miss it.”

I got to my feet and began inching my way towards the bathroom. “The parade. The place Maverick and I were going to declare our intentions toward each other.” A massive sigh left my lungs as I pushed open the bathroom door. “I should take this ring off, but it won’t come off.” I tugged at the promise ring once more and it hummed, warm, and annoyed against my finger.

Jaydy charged into the bathroom and flicked on the shower head. “You need to snap out of this Pansy. What on Earth happened to you?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know.” *And I didn’t.* I had no idea what had happened after I closed up last night. And yet when I woke up, I knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Maverick didn’t love me.

Jaydy pointed to the shower. “Go! Get yourself clean. I’ll see you in a few minutes. Did you eat?”

I shook my head.

Jaydy snapped her fingers, conjuring up a smoothie in a takeaway cup with a paper straw. “Here, drink.”

I took the cup and sucked on the straw, the flavors of banana, honey, and strawberry coating my tongue and making me moan. “Thanks Jaydy.”

She flicked her long blonde hair at me and sauntered out the door. “Yeah, yeah. Let’s do this.”

I shut the door, stripped off and stepped beneath the shower. Part of me had known that Maverick and I wouldn’t work. Of course, we wouldn’t. He was the High Warlock’s son. I was, well... nobody.

“He’s too good for you.”

The words rang in my head as though someone was saying them, but I didn’t remember anyone saying such a thing to me. Who would do that? No. It was just the truth. He had gone back to London, and he was staying there. We were done. It was over. Once I’d showered, I wrapped myself in a towel and shuffled back out toward my comfy bed.

“Oh, no you don’t. I’m going to have to magic you up, tonight, aren’t I?”

I sat on the bed with a *hmpf*.

Jaydy was a powerful witch from a strong bloodline. “You know, Maverick will probably have to marry you—or someone like you,” I said, crestfallen.

Jaydy was pacing my bedroom, tapping her finger against her mouth as though thinking deeply. “I’m sorry, what?”

“You know. Someone from good blood lines.”

“When have you ever cared about blood lines, Pansy? You’re talking craziness. Now, stand up.”

I did as she said.

She began to chant an incantation that had my towel disappear and my hair drying and curling.

I closed my eyes and let my fairy godmother dress me for the Halloween Ball. I opened my eyes.

Jaydy was grinning at me. “Go look.”

I took a few steps over to the only mirror I owned and gaped at the image

that reflected back at me. “Jaydy, this isn’t me.”

She’d created a virtual ballgown of puffery and glitz and a tiara to match that sparkled like it contained real diamonds.

“It *is* you,” she exclaimed. “You’re Glinda. The Good Witch of the North.”

She magicked up a long wand that was just like the Wizard of Oz’s character.

Tears gathered in my eyes. “The dress is beautiful.”

“And so are you,” Jaydy said.

I blinked the tears away as I turned to the side to admire her handiwork. The dress was truly stunning, and my hair had been swept up into a wedding styled do.

“Why did you do this, Jaydy?”

She grabbed my free hand and spoke with urgency. “Because tonight Maverick is going to find you. He’s going to ask you to marry him, and I want you to look as pretty as a bride.”

This time the tears gathered and fell. “Jaydy... he doesn’t love me. I told you. I’m not good enough for him. He’s gone back to London.”

“I know. For work,” Jaydy said, still grinning and nodding.

“No. He’s going to stay there!” I said, sniffing and reaching for a tissue. “All my hopes, my dreams... they’re all gone.” But what else did I really think was going to happen? “He left me ten years ago for his family and responsibilities, and nothing’s changed.”

Jaydy grabbed my hand and hauled me towards the door.

“Where are we going?” I asked her, digging my heels in to slow her down.

She turned around and glared with all her brilliance at me. “We are going to the parade, and we are going to participate in the biggest event of the year. And no matter what this stupid depression thing is you’ve got going on, we’re going out!”

I didn't want to, and Jaydy knew it. But Jaydy was a force of nature. So much so that I knew there was no way I was winning this battle. Her strength and ability to ride roughshod over my worries was one of the reasons we were friends, and the main reason my mom always encouraged our friendship. I needed her. Jaydy always pulled me out of my shell, whether I liked it or not.

“Okay. Okay. Don't pull me down the stairs!” I lifted my dress and walked down to the ground floor, noticing the glass slippers Jaydy had created for me too. Crazy comfy for shoes that looked like they were truly made by fairies.

We stepped out onto the path.

I turned to lock the door to my apartment and drew in a deep breath. There were pumpkins everywhere and orange lights adorned every shop front in the street. My heart lifted. “Okay, Jaydy. Let's do this.”

There had been life before Maverick, and there'd be life afterwards. I was sure. I just had to get through tonight and tomorrow, then I'd look up where my parents were travelling to next. Halloween had been good for business this year, so I had enough money to go somewhere fun for a few weeks and clear my head. Hopefully mom and dad were staying somewhere warm—with cocktails and beaches aplenty.

Arm in arm I walked with my best friend down the street and towards the main road of Salem. All the shops were open and twinkling with lights and festive fall decorations. The road had been blocked off and everyone was celebrating.

“The carnival's started.” Jaydy said, pointing at the Ferris wheel going round and round.

I nodded. “Hmm.”

“Oh, there's Maverick!” Jaydy cried, pointing across the square excitedly. “Oh, and he does not look good,” she added as an afterthought.

I didn't bother looking that way. He was nothing to me, now.

Jaydy was waving her arm over her head to get his attention.

I growled at her. “Stop it. Please! He doesn’t want me. How many times do I have to tell you?”

Maverick had caught up to us now and he reached for my hand.

I pulled my fingers out of his grasp and turned to face him. “Don’t touch me. You don’t owe me an explanation. Please. Just go.”

He turned towards Jaydy, a pained expression on his face. “What’s happened?”

“Nothing,” Jaydy said, jerking her thumb at me. “But there’s something wrong with her. She thinks you don’t love her. That you don’t want her.”

“What!” Maverick exploded, throwing his hands around emphatically. “They fucking threw me in jail in London! I tried to transport back with only a fraction of my magic and ended up in Vegas. I had no phone and had to win enough money for a bloody plane ticket. Oh Pansy, you have no idea! I’ve moved Heaven and Earth to get back to you for our Halloween night, just like I promised.”

I stared at him, then blinked slowly. His words sounded impassioned and yet I felt nothing at all. “I’m sorry for the inconvenience you’re gone through Maverick, but I don’t think that has anything to do with me, anymore. Have a nice night.” I picked up my skirts to leave.

Maverick’s hand grabbed onto my arm. “Pansy, wait!”

I sighed and turned back. “Can you let me go, please. I know you don’t want me, and it’s okay. Please. Just walk away.” I didn’t know why he was bothering to lie to me. I knew the truth and there was nothing he could say that was going to change that fact, or my mind.



CHAPTER 15

Maverick

I stared at Pansy in disbelief. “What are you talking about?”

Pansy just stared at me blankly.

I turned to Jaydy, her blonde best friend. “What’s happened to her?”

Jaydy threw up her hands. “I knew it wasn’t just me! She’s been like this ever since I picked her up. She’s convinced you don’t love her and that you’re moving back to London forever.”

I turned towards Pansy and knew something was wrong. *So wrong.* My magic was coming back. The sleep I’d managed to catch on the plane had partly re-invigorated me. But I wasn’t sure what was wrong. “Jaydy. Will you help me?”

The blonde nodded. “Yeah, of course. But where do we start?”

“I think she’s been hexed.”

Jaydy gaped at me. “You think... Oh my God. Your fucking mother!”

“My mother?” I repeated. *No. She wouldn’t.* Surely?

Jaydy threw her hands up in the air. “Who else would it be?”

I thought about it for too long.

Jaydy actually whacked me in the arm in response. “Snap out of it!”

I coughed to clear my throat. “You’re right. Let’s focus on Pansy.”

Pansy patted me on the arm as though I were a child. “Bye Maverick. It’s okay that you don’t love me. You deserve better. I don’t have good blood lines. We wouldn’t suit.”

A cold chill rolled down my spine and I clenched my jaw together. “Definitely my mother.”

“Told you,” Jaydy quipped back.

I blew out a long breath. “Okay. Okay. So how do we fix this?”

“You could tell your mom to lift the hex?”

A smile lifted my lips. “I’ve got a better idea.” I glanced out into the street where the parade was going past. There they were—my parents—on the main stage. I grabbed Pansy’s hand. “Pansy. Come with me, okay? I need to tell you something,” I pleaded gently.

She blinked at me sadly as if totally numb. “It’s okay,” she insisted.

“*Please,*” I urged her. “Just come.”

She nodded mutely.

I pulled her towards the stage, up the stairs, and towards the microphone.

My father stopped speaking immediately upon seeing me and stepped out of the way.

I glared at my mother as I grabbed the microphone off the stand. “Sorry to interrupt folks, but I’m here to make an announcement.”

Ever the schemer, my mother tried to interrupt. “Maverick. Leave the poor girl alone. Can’t you see that she doesn’t want to be with you?”

“Dad!” I called out to my father. “Lock her up. *Now.*”

My father, God love him, grabbed my mother by the arm and snapped his fingers and they disappeared into thin air.

The crowd around us gasped loudly. Most of them were humans.

I let go of Pansy for a moment to fake clap. “Bravo! A round of applause everyone for my parents’ amazing magic trick!”

Pansy tried to leave.

I raced after her, grabbing her hand, and falling to my knees. “Pansy, please look at me.”

She turned to frown at me.

I grabbed her left hand, making sure I touched the ring I’d given her. I’d imbued a large amount of powerful energy into that ring and if anything could break the hex on my beautiful girl, it was my love for her.

“Pansy, I made a promise to you and I’m here to fulfil that promise. I love you and I want to marry you. Will you be my wife?”

There was a hushed silence that fell over the crowd and the occasional gasp and whisper.

I kept my gaze on Pansy, refusing to let her look away.

Her eyes were filling with tears. “But. You said...”

“No, I didn’t. Feel the heat of the ring. Of my promise.” I squeezed her hand and sent her my love in the form of a spell. My magic surged and met resistance. Met a bad memory. *Met a curse.*

“Pansy, I need you to fight for me. Please,” I beseeched her.

She was shaking her head, but also crying and trembling.

I wanted my father, I needed help. But no one was there to help me except my love. I jumped to my feet. There was only one option left. One chance! I focused myself and began reciting the spell of my promise, the one that had created the ring; everything from the gold to the jewels. My love was interwoven into every word. My hope, my sadness, and my fears.

Pansy took a step closer and slowly began to nod, as if she were waking

from her magic-induced stupor. “Yes, Maverick,” she said. “Yes. Yes. Yes!”

I finished the spell to be safe and stared down into my woman’s eyes. “You’ll marry me? Even if my family is crazy, and I have no idea what I’m going to do for the rest of my life?”

“What about your job in London?” she whispered.

“I quit,” I said. “I never wanted to work there; it was just one of the many things I did to keep my parents happy.” My mother, anyway.

Pansy began to cough, hacking, and wheezing violently.

I stepped up behind her and patted her on the back. “It’s all right. Get it out.”

She bent forward and out came the silver dust. The hex. My mother’s favorite sort.

I glared at the offending powder.

Pansy stood back up, putting a hand over her mouth. “What is that?”

I took her free hand. “I’ll explain everything later. Come with me.”

I waved at the crowd as they clapped and cheered us as if we’d just put on some kind of costumed performance. Pansy looked like Cinderella, or some other fairytale queen. “You look beautiful.”

She grinned at me as she walked down the steps, holding the dress in one hand. “Thanks. Jaydy made it for me.”

“Where shall we go?” I asked, glancing around at the crowds of people.

Music was playing through large speakers on the street.

Pansy stepped close and wrapped her arms around my neck. “How about we stay right here?” She began to sway against me, a smile on her lovely face.

I put my hand on her waist, moving in time with the beat of the music.

She twirled her fingers in my hair and grinned up at me. “Thank you for coming back for me.”

I kissed her gently on the lips. “I’ve loved you forever, Pansy. I wasn’t letting anyone, or anything, get between us. Never again. I promise you.”

She brought her hands around to my face and lifted her chin to brush another kiss over my lips. “Promise accepted and returned. I love you, Mav.”

I brought my little witch in closer and began to plan our future together. “Do you want to go away somewhere?” I asked playfully. “I’ve got more than a few vacation days up my sleeve. Maybe you and I could go find an island somewhere and make up for lost time?”

She laughed gently. “You read my mind. My parents are somewhere sunny at the moment, actually. Australia, remember? Maybe we could go visit them?”

I nodded. “That sounds like the perfect plan.”

Amongst the pumpkins and candy, and the music, we danced and planned and kissed the night away. I could hardly believe it. I was finally with my beautiful little witch—the incredible potions queen who still wore my promise ring and had stolen my heart when we were just seventeen.



Epilogue

Pansy

A year later.

I entered the last of the Halloween purchases into my computer and rubbed my little pot belly with a contented sigh. “How are you hanging in there, pumpkin?” I asked.

Donna and Hannah, my awesome shop assistants, came running up to me. “Everything’s done, Pansy!”

“Thank you both, so much,” I said, grinning at them. “I can’t believe I used to do this month all by myself. You two have been lifesavers, and not

just recently, but all year.”

I’d hired these two over the Christmas holidays and they’d both ended up staying on, doing shifts after school and on weekends. They got to make some extra pocket money, and I got to have the occasional day off. It was fantastic. Not that I needed to work, Maverick always reminded me, but I loved it. And I wasn’t letting anyone take my shop away from me. It was a part of who I was and would always be.

The girls I’d just praised gushed and grabbed their cell phones and purses.

“Here’s your holiday bonus.” I pushed two envelopes toward them where I’d stashed some extra cash as well as a special crystal necklace for each of them.

“Oh, thanks Pansy,” Hannah said, tucking her envelope into her bag. “See you on Saturday!”

“Thank you, Pansy! Bye.” Donna took her envelope and waved, heading out the door just as my beautiful husband walked in.

“Hey girls. Thanks for all the help,” he said.

They giggled and waved as they left.

Maverick locked the door behind him, closing the shop. “Have you done the official tally?”

“Yes!” I exclaimed, happily announcing, “You were right. This was my most profitable Halloween season ever—even with Hannah’s and Donna’s wages.”

Maverick sauntered up to the desk dressed in his black suit. “And you’re not dead on your feet every night.”

I walked around the desk to greet him, lifting my face for his kiss.

His hand went to my growing belly. “How’s our princess, today?”

“Growing well,” I said, pushing a hand into my aching lower back. “But it’s definitely time for a day off.”

We’d found out early that we were having a little girl and Maverick’s mother pitched a fit. Many of the High Warlock families lamented having

daughters in their blood lines.

“Yeah? Where do you want to go?” he asked.

“Oh....” I let my imagination run wild. “Egypt, maybe?”

Maverick wrinkled his nose in distaste. “Too sandy.”

“Vegas, maybe?”

“Too loud!”

I laughed and went back to close off the cash register. “Then where do you want to go, spoil sport?”

“How about the outskirts of London to visit my aunt and uncle for a few days?”

I breathed a sigh of happiness. “Oh, that would be awesome. I’ve missed Veronica.”

Veronica was the daughter of a High Warlock, who’d married the son of another High Warlock—my grandfather, to be exact. Her parents gave me hope that my daughter would have a wonderful and bright future, too.

My powerful husband wriggled his fingers. “So, do you want to go right now?”

I blinked at him and did a quick calculation. “Ah... I’ll need some clothes and we should probably clean out the refrigerator before we go anywhere.”

Maverick clicked his fingers. “Done,” he said with an impish grin.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, pressing as close as I could without squashing my baby bump. “I love you.”

“As I love you,” he said.

I closed my eyes and the wind of Maverick’s powerful magic whirled around me until the air around us had changed. I opened my eyes once more and we were standing in a beautiful bedroom, the fire crackling in the grate. We were in the guest bedroom, our bedroom technically since we visited so often.

The scent of cinnamon buns lingered in the air, which meant Veronica was baking. “Should we go downstairs?” I asked.

Maverick slid his hands down to my ass and gripped my flesh. “In a while, maybe.”

I chuckled as I lifted my chin. “You’re insatiable, Maverick MacCready.”
“For you, Pansy?” he asked. “*Always.*”

THE END.