

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
BRENDA TRIM

# LEVEES LOST CROWNS & LOA

TWISTED  
SISTERS  
MIDLIFE  
MAELSTROM



# LEVEES, LOST CROWNS, & LOA

TWISTED SISTERS MIDLIFE MAELSTROM BOOK #9



BRENDA TRIM

# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[EXCERPT FROM MUD BUGS & CHERISHED HUGS BOOK #10](#)

[AUTHOR'S NOTE](#)

[Also by Brenda Trim](#)

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*“Being sisters means you always have backup.” – Unknown.*

# CHAPTER 1





## DAKOTA

Placing my hand on my aching back, I wondered if I could conjure a new joint. I wasn't sure if the increased pain in my right knee was thanks to aging. Or perhaps it was all the running for my life I've done over the past few months. I popped an ibuprofen and swallowed it with some water. We had far bigger problems. The levee freaking broke a few days after the largest hurricane ever recorded dissipated right as it hit landfall.

"They're wasting their time coming up with all the things done wrong. Something magical messed with the mechanics of the barrier. I hate that they're bashing the workers that fixed the levee after Katrina." I grimaced when I saw the long line of cars trying to leave the affected areas. Being stuck in evacuation traffic was my worst nightmare. "How long before we're called to deal with this mess?"

Lia pulled her cell out of her pocket. "We can't handle water like a Fae. I'm going to text Cyran and see if his people can help deal with this."

Dani nodded in agreement. "Great idea. There were so many deaths during Katrina. It would be nice to avoid that now."

A scowl formed on my face as I watched the reporter talk about the number of people fleeing their homes for the second-biggest evacuation in New Orleans history. "Not to mention the people that will be displaced and homeless because of this. Nearby parishes aren't equipped to handle this many people, which means emergency shelters will be set up in other cities."

Dre jolted when her phone started ringing in her back pocket. "It's Xinar." She thumbed the screen and returned her gaze to the television we'd been watching. "Hey, Xin. What's up? You okay? If you've been evacuated, you can come to the plantation."

"I'll take you up on the offer of a place to stay. My place is currently underwater. But that isn't why I called. It's complete fucking chaos down here, and I need the six of you to come examine the area," Xinar replied, his voice coming through the tiny speaker.

Dre sucked in a breath and shook her head despite the fact that Xinar couldn't see her. "Why do you need us? Kota is convinced there's a magical reason behind the disaster."

It sounded like Xinar was in a wind tunnel for a second. “I’m afraid Kota is correct. I was out hunting the skinwalker when I felt a major magical pulse. I raced toward the origin and encountered numerous people running away, including several Fae and a couple of shifters. None of them paid me any attention, and I discovered why a second later when I saw the water pouring down the street.”

“Were there people in the houses next to the levee?” Dani blurted. “Please tell me they got out.”

Xinar sucked in a breath. “There was nothing I could do. They had no warning, and by the time I got closer, the water made it impossible to reach the houses. Mundie authorities have set up nearby and are talking about rescue efforts. I’m afraid of what they might encounter. It’s impossible to identify a particular energy signature. There’s still too much in the area, which is why I need you guys.”

I quirked an eyebrow and leaned closer to the phone. “You know you could call Kaitlyn. She’s the head witch and has a coven full of witches at her disposal.”

Xinar chuckled. “True. But she’s not you. And I plan on submitting the services to the council so you get payment. Speaking of which, did you broach the subject of me joining the council officially?”

Dre shook her head from side to side as the corners of her mouth turned down. “I submitted the request to the council members so we can discuss it. I will let you know about the next meeting so you can be there. Being part of it means you will have to collect a tax from your kind, and I don’t think demons will have any money. But this flooding is far more important at the moment. Can you tell us any more about the power you felt?”

“You would be surprised what I gather from demons’ lairs. How do you think we can afford the house, clothes, and cars? Gathering anything of value is one reason I hunt down where they’ve holed up. Contributing won’t be a problem for me.” That was interesting. I kept thinking about the demons we’ve fought and killed. Them having money or other items of value didn’t fit in my mind. I pictured them huddling in a sewer somewhere, eating pieces of a dead body.

Xinar continued to shatter preconceived notions about how demons lived. “All I can tell you about the energy is that it was powerful and old. I know you’ve heard that a lot since the storm. Samedi really did disturb so many things.”

“As much as we would like to help, I can’t see how we can get down there,” Phi interjected. “All of the roads are blocked for evacuation. Driving won’t be possible.”

Xinar growled. “Do you think Kaveh will bring you over here, given the emergency situation?”

Lia held up her phone. “I’ve already asked him and Kaitlyn to come over.”

I lifted a finger when I felt like I was being buffeted by a dry wind. The energy was familiar. “Hello, Kaveh. Thanks for joining us.” That would have been much cooler if I was looking at him when he appeared. My cheeks flushed as I turned around with a smile.

Kaveh was alone and smiling when he appeared. “Are we ready to discuss the Djinn Mixer? I was thinking we would do a barbeque. Ever since your brothers told me about the massive grill Lucas owns, I’ve wanted to see it cooking meat.”

My jaw dropped open. Was this guy serious? That was the last thing on my mind. “We kinda have bigger problems right now. In case you haven’t heard, one of the levees broke, and there is massive flooding.”

“It was caused by something magical,” Xinar called out of the phone.

Phi waved her iPad in the air. “But we can talk about the Mixer after we’ve looked into this disaster. I have it on the calendar for the end of the week.”

Kaveh nodded as his gaze was focused on the television. “I hadn’t heard. Kaitlyn and I have been...shit, this is bad. I need to let her know. Some of her coven members will be affected. And I will need to check in with my djinn.”

Dre placed a hand on his arm. “We hate to ask this, but can you teleport us to Xinar’s location? We need to look into whatever is behind this and ensure no further damage occurs.”

“First, we should discuss if we will owe you a favor. You spoiled us with your teleporting, and we would not be asking now. We would never take advantage, but this is an emergency. The last thing any of us wants is some old magical being traipsing around destroying shit around town,” Lia interjected.

Kaveh’s happy smile was replaced with a concerned expression as he had yet to look away from the TV. “Will this be like the damage after Katrina? I watched the coverage and wished I could have done something to help.”

I lifted a shoulder and gestured to the screen. “There is no wind and rain

to add to the problem, so I doubt it will be as extensive. Lia has reached out to Cyran about helping avert the water. At least we're hoping he can do that. Fae can manipulate the elements, so we assume they can make the water flow into a safer passage to the river and ocean."

"I'll take you guys. No favor. But I will need to come back for you once you are finished. I need to ensure Kaitlyn is awake to deal with the fallout. Where am I going?"

I sent my husband a text letting him know what we were doing while Xinar told Kaveh where to take us. By the time I was done typing, he was ready to go. I snagged my purse and Lia's cross-shoulder bag before we had to go. I said a silent prayer that there were potions in the leather bag. I felt like a fizzy soda when we traveled with Kaveh. Lia said she felt like she was floating and disconnected. It was my excitement over moving across town instantaneously that impacted my point of view, which made me realize shit really did change based on someone's perspective.

Dre stumbled and clutched my arm as we reappeared on a roof. Xinar lifted a hand in greeting and talked to me while I was trying to orient myself. There was an emergency station set up half a block ahead of us in a parking lot. It included police, firefighters, EMTs, and other professionals under several ten-by-ten canopies. We were on the roof of a home. It was that had likely been a mansion for a single family at one point in history.

My hand flew to my heart when I saw the water flowing over the cement and through a crack in the wall. "Holy shit. I could see people trying to climb out of their second-story windows and onto their roofs. The professionals registered as they got into boats and started heading to the homes to rescue survivors. "This is Katrina all over again."

"This could become very bad fast. I need to go to Kaitlyn. She will never forgive me if I allow her to sleep through this. Call me when you are done," Kaveh said and disappeared a second later.

Dre walked to the edge of the roof when Lia's phone rang. She answered it and put it on speaker. "Cyran, please tell me you can help." Dre moved closer to Lia, as did the rest of us.

Cyran's sigh echoed through the speaker. "Saida and I are on the west edge of the flooding and driving the water toward the river. Where are you? With your Fae heritage, you might be able to help, as well."

My eyes flew open. "This is not the time for us to experiment with powers we don't understand. What if we made it worse?"

Xinar shot me a grim expression. “Unless you make it rain, it’s not possible to make this situation worse. It’s worth a try.”

“Xinar is right,” Cyran called out. “Focus on the water and think about the particles and where you want them to go. You can add wind to help the movement along. You should triangulate the direction to the river before trying to do anything.”

I gave Dre a disbelieving look. She lifted a shoulder. “They’re right. It’s worth a try.”

Shaking my head, I tried to sense anything magical while also seeing if I could feel the water. Shouldn’t I be able to sense it somehow? I felt dumb because I didn’t understand how this was supposed to work. It was frustrating. I didn’t go to college or nursing school like my sisters. I stopped after high school to raise my kids. It was moments like this that made me feel less than.

*“This is going to be a difficult ability to master,” Adèle said in my head. My gaze swung to Dre, who had wide eyes. She’d heard our familiar, too. “It’s going to take time. You all have constraints on your thinking that are getting in your way. Don’t think in terms of trying to push it aside. Picture the elements and tell them to flow to the left for two and a half miles before shifting to the right for another three miles, where it will dump into the Mississippi.”*

“You make it sound easy,” I griped. “Just tell it to flow in a different direction.”

*“Remember, intent is everything. Your power will force the water to comply.”*

“I know it’s frustrating, Dakota. And I promise to work more with you all as soon as we handle this. It’s going to take a lot of Fae and many hours. Individually, we cannot move much water.” Cyran had clearly heard my response and didn’t know I was talking to our familiar.

“Thanks, Cyran. We will be in touch,” Lia called out before she ended the call. “Ready to try this? Focusing our intent like we do when casting spells should make it easier.”

Nodding, I wiped my hands down my thighs and shoved my thoughts aside. I replayed Adèle’s instructions in my mind while keeping the picture of the water gushing through the crack in the front of my mind. Within seconds, I felt power ripple out of me and move toward the water. Excitement filled me when a small wave washed back over the wall.

Dre gasped and pointed in the direction of the damage. “Let’s move closer and see if we can actually do more.”

“Do you feel the energy? The magic at play?” Xinar led the way to a door in the side of the attic.

“I don’t feel much,” Lia admitted. The rest of us nodded in agreement.

“For me, it’s the crisis in front of us. I can hardly think about anything else.” I couldn’t ignore the people shouting for help as the boats made their way through the streets. “At least we’re in a better position this time. The response teams are small right now but they didn’t have to wait until the rain and wind stopped.”

Warmth slapped me in the face when we went inside the house. I hadn’t realized until then that I was shivering. We passed upscale décor that made the place look haughty. It was not my cup of tea. It would look better if they rearranged some of the stuff.

“Whose house are we inside? And how did you get permission?” Dani asked Xinar as she looked over a cabinet in the dining room. “This would look perfect in the entry of Sunwhisper Sanctum.”

Dre slapped at Dani’s hand. “The stuff in here isn’t for sale, sestra. Focus on the flooding.”

Xinar chuckled. “The house belongs to Hades. He has a staff that keeps it up but he’s rarely here, so I figured he wouldn’t mind me using it to watch what was happening.”

I shook my head as I digested what he’d said. We were walking through a home owned by Hades while hoping to find the magical cause of the flooding and move the water to the river to avoid further damage. “If we can’t move the water, perhaps we can do more good by trying to contain it somehow.”

Dre looked at me sideways. “That’s actually a great idea. Let’s cast a spell to keep the water in a confined channel that leads in the direction Adèle suggested.”

Dani looked at us over her shoulder. “Sounds good. Use *canalicula*?”

My nerves turned my stomach into a mess of jumping beans. Had I been standing still, my foot would have bounced non-stop. A fine mist hit me in the face as we walked outside. Closer to the location of the problem, I could feel the energy Xinar was talking about. Determined to get this water a bit more under control before we did anything else, I reached for Dea’s hand. Together, the six of us cast the corridor spell for the water.

Our magic flew out of us and went straight for the problem. A magical

zap hit me in the chest, sending me backward before I knew what was happening, and knocked me on my ass. Good thing I carried some extra cushion. Lia and Phi might crack a tailbone from the impact. I don't know what was worse. The anger comes from the magical backlash or the landing.

Xinar rushed to our side, his magic bristling beneath his skin. I heard exclamations from the police and EMTs about the six of us being knocked down. Dre grabbed Dani's arm and leaned toward the rest of us. "We need to cast an aversion spell now."

That spell was an easy one for us. We'd had to do it a lot last week thanks to Madame Delphine's sick games on Royal Street. We cast the spell, and the people headed in our direction stopped, looked at one another, then went back to the group to help those being brought in via boat.

I accepted Xinar's hand and let him help me up. "Whatever is behind this bullshit is pissed. Do we try that again?"

Lia pursed her lips as she scanned the water gushing over the wall and through the crack. It was hitting the section in waves. It reminded me of one of those wave pools at water parks where a motor generated the waves. Something dark purple darted over the wall and back again so fast I wondered if I was seeing things.

Dani cocked her head to the side. "We should definitely try again. We can't leave it like this."

Lia extended her hands to Dea and Phi. "We should keep our magic blind to the old power behind this. That way, we might be able to pull it off."

Joining hands, I focused my intent, adding the hidden element. The second our spell left our lips, I was flying through the air. It was disorienting because I felt a push and pull at the same time. Unsure what was happening, I bit back my scream and flailed as I tried to latch onto any of my sisters. I landed on my side, this time in muddy water that was quickly rising.

I rolled with a groan and pushed myself to my feet. I was standing calf-deep in nasty flood waters. It was a challenge to move through the sludge. Xinar ran into the fray and picked me up, carrying me to the dry sidewalk. He retrieved Dre, and by the time he went back for the others, they were already at our sides.

"Maybe you guys should give this up? Clearly, we need to gather more information about what is behind this." Xinar's concern was nice, but now I was pissed.

"We try again," I barked, my tone shaper than I intended. "Getting

information will be a challenge if no one can get close enough to get a good read on the thing.”

My sisters all shared looks before Dre lifted a shoulder. “Kota’s right. Walking away now leaves us in no better place than before.”

The six of us tried casting variations on the spell three more times before we finally stopped. Nothing had worked. Each attempt we made was rebuffed by whatever was in there, causing trouble. I rubbed my aching backside, dreaming of a long, hot shower. I had gunk down my pants that I did not want to think about.

“Anyone have any idea what we are facing this time?” Lia asked.

Defeat was etched into my expression as I considered her question. “I thought I saw something dark purple, but I couldn’t be sure.” I wasn’t going to say anything but decided it could mean something.

Xinar nodded in agreement, making my heart jump into my throat. “I saw the same thing. I swear it was an arm.”

Dani lifted one of her eyebrows as she looked at the demigod and UIS agent who had become a close friend. “Do any of the gods or goddesses have purple skin? Or are we looking at an alien from outer space?”

Dre snorted and shook her head. “You read too many science fiction novels, sestra.”

Lia gave Dre her are-you-f’in-kidding-me-I’ve-saved-our-asses-with-the-information-I-read-in-those-books look. “We live in a magical world, and you doubt there are beings that live on other planets in the solar system?”

Xinar chuckled. “I don’t know about aliens, but I do know the gods and goddesses. And none of them have purple skin.”

My mud-covered eyelashes clouded my vision. My heart sank as I considered the corner we were backed into this time. “We start researching like we have with countless other cases.” There was no other option open to us. I wiped the dirt off with the back of my arm, smearing it all over my face. I was filthy from head to toe and the water was starting to smell like an outhouse as countless sewer and septic systems backed up from the flooding.

Dre squeezed muck from her hair. “You’re right, sestra. The Twisted Sisters don’t let shit like this make us quit.”

Lia flicked dirty water from her arms like she was angry. “Maybe we should. We’re blind once again. I don’t know why I’m surprised or pissed. It’s par for the course, but it is getting really old.”

*“You are not alone anymore. I am here. Whatever you are facing this time*



*has power over the water. It's a place to start,"* Adèle said. My heart leaped in my chest. Maybe it would be nice to have a familiar. And we had the Oathkeeper. The book gifted to us by the goddess Athena had not given us much of an answer before. With this information, perhaps it would give us something useful this time.

# CHAPTER 2



## DAHLIA

“Do we really think Oathkeeper is going to give us the answers this time?” Kota asked as she took a seat in one of the chairs we’d discovered in the attic.

When Athena gifted us the book, we decided keeping it hidden in the attic was the best place for it. The door to this section remained locked when none of us were inside, so there was little chance of a mundie coming across it during a tour of the plantation.

Dre grabbed the book from its hiding spot and paused. “We can’t give up on the thing. We need to get used to the answers it gives so we learn how to interpret the them.”

“That’s a good point, Dre.” I gestured back to the door that led to the bedrooms on the third floor, where Dani and I stayed when Lucas and Noah weren’t with us. “We should take it to my bed so we all have a place to sit. I will never be able to get up if I sit on the floor.”

Phi turned around and climbed on the end of the bed. “I’ve been thinking about the information we’ve gotten from the book. The language is cryptic and vague and reminds me of the type of premonitions in books about the oracles of Delphi.”

I sat on the side of the bed and was surrounded by my five sisters. For one second, I was taken back to our childhood when we would all sleep in the same room on Christmas Eve. Those were some of the best times we had growing up.

We formed a tight circle around the ancient tome as Dre and sat in the middle of the mattress. Frustration and worry etched across our faces as we gazed upon the weathered leather cover.

“Do you think manifestation works with this?” Dre asked as she flipped the book open. “Can we will this to give us the answer we need?”

A snort left me. “If only the magical world was that simple.”

I placed the fingers of one hand on the page, and my sisters followed suit. “What caused the levee to break? And how can we stop it?” I asked in a clear voice.

The script appeared on the page a second later. “Old magic unbound, no

silence this time; a prophecy unfolds, destiny's climb," Phi read.

Kota's face screwed up in a scowl. "What in the hell is 'old magic unbound'?"

"That's what we needed answered. It's the crucial information we're missing," Dani added, her brows furrowing in thought.

"Maybe the book's trying to test us. Didn't Phoebe mention the gods are all clamoring for middle-aged witches of their own now? Perhaps Athena is trying to prove hers are better than Artemis's or Hades's," Dea chimed in.

My gaze moved to Dea. "Don't let Phoebe hear you refer to her as belonging to Hades. She might skin you alive for that one."

Dea winced and shot panicked eyes around the room. "I didn't mean it like that. It's just how Phoebe didn't have a say in getting pregnant."

Phi lifted one shoulder before shifting her focus to the tome in the middle of us and tapping the page. "Come on, Oathkeeper, we need you now more than ever. Please tell us the answer. We're trying to avert disaster. Homes have already been lost. If we can't gain control, lives will be next."

Dre looked at the book as if she was willing it to cough up the answers. "There must be a reason it's being cryptic. Perhaps it's in the way we're asking. Let's keep trying. Maybe it'll give us more."

Dea's expression filled with a mix of frustration and determination as she raised her voice and addressed the book. "Oathkeeper, we really need your help. Any information about what broke the levee would be appreciated. What is this 'old magic unbound' that won't be quieted this time?"

The pages of the ancient tome rustled softly as if it were contemplating the answers to our questions. Words began to materialize, ink flowing across the parchment as the goddess's energy filled the air around us.

"Beneath the moon's pale light, the waters surged with ancient might,  
Old magic unbound, awake from slumber, seeks to claim its right.

A force once dormant now runs wild. The levee's strength, it defied,

To quell the storm and mend the breach, the sisters' gifts must be allied."

The words swirled before us, making my heart leap in my chest. Unfortunately, their meaning was not immediately apparent. We exchanged puzzled glances, trying to decipher the cryptic verse.

"What does it mean, Oathkeeper?" Dani demanded. I wasn't sure that was the tone to take if we were hoping for more clarity. To my surprise, the pages turned again, revealing another piece of the puzzle.

"Six forces aligned, entwined with fate, must rise to face the trial,

The sisters' bond, their strengths combined, can tame the magic's wild.  
In unity, their powers bloom with wisdom, heart, and art,  
To mend the tear, protect the realm, the magic to restart.”

I took a deep breath, trying to absorb the task now ahead of us. “Six forces aligned... that's us,” I said, looking at each of my sisters as I talked through what made sense. “And the next part obviously means we have to work together. It sounds like there’s a tear in the magic we need to fix.”

“But how?” Dre asked, her voice tinged with wariness.

“That’s the million-dollar question,” Dani snarked. “One I don’t see us getting an answer to from Oathkeeper.”

Dre inclined her head. “That might be the case, but we can take solace in knowing we can do this together. Our bond, our strengths, and our unique talents are what make us the Six Twisted Sisters. We already know that if we combine them, we can face whatever challenges come our way.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Dre's comment brought up an old issue for me. “Have you noticed how, even in the magical world, people underestimate the power of our bond? I was used to our friends telling us we were too nice to each other, that it all seemed fake. I didn’t expect the same sentiment in the magical world.”

Dea laughed at that. “That’s because they didn’t see the ups and downs that we went through before we reached the middle of our lives. I remember when you and Kota didn’t talk to each other for over a year.”

There were countless stories of us fighting and not getting along when we were younger. We’d always been close in some respects because our parents didn’t have much money, and all we had a lot of the time was each other.

“There are still times we get annoyed with each other for a perceived slight. We just know better than to let it eat away at our relationships. For me, losing Mama brought me closer to you guys and helped me get over shit and not let it get to me too much,” I added.

Kota lifted a shoulder as a look of hurt crossed her face. “I just wish you guys would call me more to do things. I’m always here to help, you know.”

I squeezed her hand. “We know you are, sestra. There have been times we haven’t had the time to call you, but I promise to do better...” A knock on the door made me jump and press my hand over my heart.

Cami lifted a hand. “Sorry to disturb you guys, but Kaveh is here for his meeting.”

I slid off the bed and flipped Oathkeeper closed, leaving it in the middle

of my bed. I'd put it away later. It wouldn't do to keep our friend and leader of the djinn waiting. Kaveh had done a lot for us during the magical hurricane, and in the end, we managed to banish the loa Baron Samedi and stop his plot to take over our city.

The sun was setting, casting a warm golden glow over Willowberry Plantation as we met Kaveh at the bottom of the grand staircases. I loved our home and venue. Quitting my job as a social worker had been a big risk, but it was worth it in the end. It took all of us to pull off these events and make them shine. We rented it out for magical parties and events more often than mundie ones at this point. And tonight, we were discussing Kaveh's Djinn Mixer. He hadn't hesitated to ask us to host it on our beautiful estate shortly after we met him.

"Hey, Kaveh. How's it going?" I asked as I hugged him.

Kaveh's smile was dimmer than usual. "My people are up in arms. They think I have led them into the lion's den with all the problems in this fair city."

Dre shook her head sadly as she let go of him and gestured to the hall leading to the kitchen inside the house. "There is no shortage of those lately. I hope you reminded them that the six of us have taken on the brunt of the bullshit and been beaten and battered for our efforts."

"I've shared with them that we're lucky to live in a city where there are six such talented women willing to fight the battles they don't want to face," Kaveh replied as we stopped near Dre and Kota, who had paused at the entrance to the kitchen.

Kota gestured to the exit at the end of the hall. "We're going to grab drinks. We can chat outside. And for the record, trouble is brewing everywhere. Your people wouldn't necessarily be any safer outside of New Orleans."

I clapped him on the back when his gaze hopped back and forth, and he looked a little lost. "We have connections all over the globe. We've had friends from England traveling to Greece, Egypt, Spain, and Rome to handle problems. Not to mention Phoebe and Nylah here in the US."

Dani held the back door open. "But that's not why you came to see us. What did you have in mind for the event? Do you still want to do it here?"

Kaveh chuckled, his dark eyes gleaming mischievously. "Absolutely! Willowberry Plantation is the perfect setting, and the atmosphere you created last time was just what we djinn love."

Phi chimed in, “Well, if you liked the baby shower, just wait until you hear the idea we have for the Djinn Mixer.”

Kaveh took a seat next to me and leaned across the table. “I never cared for parties. They were always too much work for me. Now, I find myself looking for reasons to drop by when I know you’re hosting an event just to see what you’ve come up with and soak in the fun atmosphere. Part of what makes your events so fantastic is your ability to create an elegant setting that is inviting and welcoming. Which brings me to your idea for the mixer.”

Dani nodded enthusiastically, a smile creasing her visage. I could see the joy etched on her face hearing his compliments. “We’re thinking of an Outlaw-themed party, celebrating the time when djinn were banned from the city. It adds an intriguing twist, don’t you think?”

Kaveh’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. It was hard to tell if it was good or bad. “An Outlaw theme? I’m not so sure about how my people will feel about that.”

Dani shot me a frantic look. I dipped my head and smiled at Kaveh. “The idea behind it is to highlight how the supernaturals of the city always wanted you here. You know that after Marie Leveau’s stranglehold over this city was yanked from her grasp, people started speaking up.”

Kaveh’s expression lightened, and he nodded his head. “I should have known better than to doubt your ideas. They will love this.”

“Do you think they’d be willing to come here for a photo shoot? We want to have a group picture of every djinn living in New Orleans taken outside the plantation house for the invitations,” Phi added.

Just as we were about to delve deeper into party ideas, Dre and Kota came out holding trays of drinks along with Adèle, our feline familiar. Adèle padded gracefully towards us and jumped into the seat next to Dea.

Kaveh took a beer from the tray and popped the top off. “There might be a few who will be nervous about having their picture taken, but most of them would be more than happy to come. And I love this idea. I’ve been trying to get my people more invested in the event. They’re nervous about it happening.”

*“Their fear is understandable,” Adèle began, her voice echoing inside my mind. “But it’s important not to forget the importance of celebrating change and progress. That’s hard to do if the atmosphere stays the same as the one that allowed Marie to take control in the first place.”*

I cocked my head to the side and looked at Adèle’s blue eyes. “What do

you mean? That's the entire reason Kaveh wants to have this mixer."

Adèle met my gaze across the table before looking at Kaveh. *"It is vital that you host this event with an open atmosphere. That's the only way you can prove to the city's supernaturals that you are open to being part of the new order."*

Dre tilted her head, a thoughtful expression on her face. "How can we accomplish that, Adèle?"

The feline's tail swished gracefully behind her. *"You start by including everyone. You cannot exclude others who have historically, been at odds with you or the djinn. Vampires and demons, for instance. I'm not talking about anyone who harbors hatred in their hearts, but that isn't something you need to concern yourself with as you hand out invitations. Your wards can keep them away from the event. It's crucial to set the right precedence."*

Kaveh drained the rest of his beer and set the empty bottle down. "Adèle makes a good point. We want this to be about unity and acceptance. However, I don't like the idea of having vampires there."

Phi stopped typing into her tablet and looked up. "Is there a way we can enhance the protections in place? I'd like that extra reassurance, too."

"We can definitely add to the spells guarding Willowberry." I took a sip of the raspberry lemonade I'd chosen. "We've wanted to beef up our wards anyway. We will just have to find time to do that before the Djinn Mixer, so it is a celebration of unity and free of discord. Will that make you feel better about inviting the vampires, Kaveh?"

Kaveh frowned. "In my experience, vampires are a tricky bunch. But I'm fine with it if you have wards that will keep out anyone with so much as a desire to feed from them. That'll help with sex demons, as well."

Kota made a face of disgust. "This should prove to be an interesting event. Having so many different groups here will frighten others, too. I'm going to look into individual protective charms we can offer people so they feel safer."

"That sounds like a fantastic plan. Count me in for any assistance you may need in organizing and ensuring a smooth event," Kaveh offered.

I couldn't shake thoughts about Kaveh's people. "Do you think charms and enhanced wards will be enough to make your people feel safer? You mentioned many are worried." It was understandable. The ban on djinn from the city had created a distance between them for so long.

"I appreciate your question, Lia," Kaveh said with a grateful smile. "My



people truly enjoyed that baby shower you all hosted, which is the only reason they didn't call for my head immediately. But only the council was present at that event, not the entire paranormal community. I'm ashamed to say that many on both sides still hold biases given the history of the ban. The paranormals in New Orleans grew up with stories about avoiding our kind."

I nodded, understanding his point. The Djinn Mixer was not just about partying. It was about bridging gaps and breaking down prejudices that had been ingrained over generations. "What else can we do to overcome the reservations people might have about attending the event? Charms and wards aren't going to be the only answer."

"Getting over these things is the precise reason to have this mixer. I don't have an answer about how to further settle anxieties. But I know that this will show them who the djinn truly are and create an opportunity for understanding."

"We might need to do more than one mixer. There might not be a big turnout for this one. However, once word gets out about how it went, it will grow legs of its own and start to change minds. It could build friendships, and unite our community," Kota pointed out.

Kaveh's eyes softened as he looked around the table. "You all are truly remarkable. Not just for your magical abilities but for your open hearts and minds. What if we hold quarterly mixers?"

I couldn't help but smile at his words. "I like the way you think, Kaveh. We believe in the power of celebration and unity. I'm hoping we will get a good number of people wanting to come, if only out of curiosity about both the Djinn and the 'Twisted Sisters.' We can use that curiosity to overcome the fear."

"Exactly," Dani chimed in. "We will show our community that we can coexist peacefully. That we can embrace diversity, and overcome the barriers of the past."

"What about the timing of the event? Should we wait, considering everything that's happened with the levee and the mysterious magic?" Kota asked, her voice filled with uncertainty.

I shook my head firmly. "No, we can't afford to wait. Yes, there are crises, and it seems as if they'll never stop. But we need something positive to focus on. A new fear has settled in our city, and we have the power to change that."

Kaveh sucked in a breath. "I hadn't thought about that. I'd like the Djinn

Mixer to be a beacon of hope and unity, reminding everyone that we're stronger together. I want the cloud my kind has lived under to be lifted.”

Dani nodded in agreement. “We can't let fear paralyze us. Going through with this will show the community that, despite the challenges, we're here to support one another.”

“I'd like it to happen as soon as possible,” Kaveh said. “But I understand if it needs to wait a bit because of this new crisis.”

I shared a look of frustration with Dani. “The problem is, we have no idea what we are facing this time. All we have is vague information about an old magic that refuses to be leashed again.”

Dani sighed as she leaned over to Phi and opened the calendar. “Let's pencil something in so we can get prepared. But be ready to push it back if we find ourselves underwater.”

“Literally,” Phi quipped.

As Phi typed the mixer into the calendar, the conversation shifted, and we began speculating about what we might be facing this time. We named several possibilities, but the most obvious finger seemed to point at Marie. None of us trusted the complete reversal she seemed to have made.

“Marie's been causing trouble for us since we got our magic,” Dre pointed out, her eyes narrowing. “I bet anything she's involved in this.”

Dani added, “She's had a vendetta against us for months, and she was helping Samedi with the magical hurricane. She may be behind the levee breaking and the old magic resurfacing.”

Kaveh raised a hand. “I understand why you might think that. I have every reason to hate Marie, but something feels different this time. The energy has shifted since the storm. I sense different enemies at play.”

He had a point. We had to consider the possibility that there might be other forces involved, ones that we hadn't encountered before. I nodded thoughtfully. “Kaveh's right. We can't just focus on the obvious. We need to think outside the box and consider all possibilities.”

Kota leaned forward and reached for another tea. “We'll need to do some investigating and gather as much information as we can. It wasn't safe to look for clues before, so we will need to go back.”

“Agreed,” Dea said. “We can also reach out to our contacts.”

Phi jerked her chin in the direction of the house. “We should also explore ancient texts. Maybe Cami's family grimoire has information about this old magic.”

“You know, it could be the skinwalker behind all of this,” Kaveh said with a somber tone. “It’s been elusive, and we still haven’t located that asshole.”

The mention of the skinwalker made my heart race and my stomach cramp. The shape-shifting creature had been a constant source of anxiety for us. We were all painfully aware that it was always lurking in the shadows, waiting to strike when we least expected it. Its cunning and ability to deceive made it a formidable foe we hadn’t been able to catch despite our best efforts.

My mind raced with the possibilities. The idea of this being the skinwalker was enough to make me sick. “Do you think it knows our weaknesses and fears? Because if it does, it wouldn’t hesitate to exploit them.”

“I can’t even begin to fathom the consequences of that creature knowing so much about us,” Dre said, her voice tinged with unease. “The skinwalker has caused us enough harm as it is.”

Dani nodded in agreement and her jaw set with determination. “There is no way to know right now. And as much as I’d like to ignore this and walk away, leaving it to someone else. I know that’s not possible. The six of us must work together on this, so we must be cautious. The skinwalker is cunning and won’t give us any chances.”

Phi added, “And we can’t let fear cloud our judgment. We need to be strategic and calculated in our approach.”

My eyes held a steely resolve. “We’ll be vigilant, that’s for certain. But we also can’t let it paralyze us. We can call Xinar and ask him about the skinwalker’s powers and if it can pull this off.”

Kaveh reached out and placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “Xinar isn’t the only one you have in your corner. I’ll start an investigation of my own. After all, we need to work together to overcome the evils that threaten our city.” His words brought a measure of comfort.

Taking a deep breath, I nodded, my determination rising. “We will get started on some design ideas for the mixer, and Dani will ask her daughter Genevieve to schedule the photoshoot. Keep us posted with any information you discover.”

We would face the skinwalker, the mysterious old magic, and any other adversaries that came our way. As the Twisted Sisters, we’d remain united, resilient, and relentless in our pursuit of the truth. No matter what lay ahead, we’d never stop fighting for our city’s safety and our magical community’s

well-being.

# CHAPTER 3



## DANIELLE

We all gathered around the dinner table to do one of the things we did best. Enjoy a delicious meal together. I wasn't one of the cooks in the family, but I appreciated those that were. They'd helped me expand my diet beyond the few favorites I have. Laughter and conversation filled the air as we caught up on each other's lives and shared stories from our day. We didn't always get along with each other, but that didn't matter. I could always count on my sisters for laughter and support.

As I took a bite of the savory dish in front of me, my thoughts drifted back to what Lia had said earlier about her trusting Lucas. Lia had surprised us all by agreeing to mate with him. Lia hadn't dated much in the years since her husband was killed, and now, she was making a lifelong commitment to her sexy wolf shifter. Her reasoning weighed heavily on my mind. Lucas's wolf would go insane if they didn't complete the mating process, and Lia was saving him from that fate. The same applied to Noah, the shifter I was falling for. But I wasn't sure I could do the same for him. I just wasn't sure I could trust myself.

"Dani, is something bothering you?" Dre asked, her perceptive eyes locking onto mine.

I hesitated for a moment, then decided to share my feelings. My sisters might judge me silently and talk about it among themselves, but they supported me in every way that mattered without making me feel bad about myself. "You know, I've been thinking about what Lia said earlier about trusting Lucas and giving him what he needs with the mating. Noah will suffer if I continue denying him, but I can't imagine making that commitment to him. I mean, I care about Noah deeply. The problem is I can't help but feel nervous."

Kota nodded understandingly. "It's completely normal to have doubts, especially regarding matters of the heart when you've already been hurt."

Lia said, "But remember, Dani, you have to trust your instincts. If you connect with him, don't let fear hold you back. It's important to honor yourself."

I sighed, my mind swirling with conflicting emotions. "I want to believe

in Noah and I, but I'm afraid of getting hurt again. You all know I've had bad experiences with men in the past.”

Dea placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. “We know, Dani, but not everyone is the same. Noah cares about you, and he's shown that he's different.”

Phi popped a shrimp into her mouth and chewed as she nodded. “And we'll be here for you, no matter your decision. We'll support you if you feel he's worth the risk.”

“*You can't let past hurt prevent you from finding happiness in the present. Trust yourself, Dani,*” Adèle said as she looked up from the chair next to me. It still surprised me when our shared familiar spoke within my mind.

Regardless, their words were reassuring. It reminded me how lucky I was to have sisters like this. They could usually make me feel better and always supported me, even in times of uncertainty.

Dre grinned as she sipped her cocktail. “You don't have to worry about deciding everything now, either. Noah isn't going to go off the deep end in the next couple of weeks. You have time. Think about it, but don't beat yourself up about it.”

“Dre's right,” Lia said. “Allowing it to overwhelm you makes the fun and excitement of your relationship become a burden. We have the Djinn Mixer to plan and this levee situation to figure out, so you'll have enough to distract you.”

Dea bumped my shoulder. “Not to mention a chance for us all to have fun together.”

“I'm excited about this mixer. We will get a chance to meet supernaturals that we haven't yet,” Kota said with an excited gleam in her eyes. “You need to make this decision for yourself, Dani. We aren't in your shoes. I for one, can't imagine not giving Jeff what he needs. But I also couldn't imagine being with anyone else. It's been so long since I dated anyone else that I don't remember what it's like to be with someone other than Jeff.”

My heart felt lighter as the conversation shifted toward the upcoming Djinn Mixer. I didn't have to have everything figured out now...and that was alright. I'd started the process. I planned to take things one step at a time and trust that the right path would unfold before me.

Lia got a text and held up her phone. “This is the mock-up Mack created as one way to let the general magical population know.”

Phi turned her sparkling blue eyes my way. “This is brilliant. Doing a

Wanted Poster with the pictures Genevieve will be taking off the djinn is perfect. We can have Brezok put them up in Final Swallow. It would be fun to do posters of individual djinn with a fun twist, like 'Wanted for Spreading Good Vibes' or 'Wanted for Being the Life of the Party.'”

Lia held up a glass she had created with a star in the middle of a circle. “Besides doing the Texas star for the Texas Rangers, we could do a simpler version of the individual poster on glasses.”

I liked doing the poster on the glasses better. “Why do the Texas star at all? We could stick to the individual posters.”

Lia’s brow furrowed as she traced the image etched into the glass. “Because it symbolizes protection and unity, something we definitely want for the event.”

“Well, you should have led with that. I definitely like the symbolism of it. Intent is key in magic. And, with the variety of people coming, we could use all the unity possible.” Her idea inspired more ideas, and within seconds, my mind was churning out new details. “We should use stars as part of the decor, hanging them from the trees and ceilings, adding a magical touch to them. People who are unified are less likely to come to blows.”

Dre inclined her head. “We can use that new water laser to cut some out of metal. Steve has wanted to play around with that since we got it last week. As for the individual posters, we should send a list of attributes to Kaveh and have him assign them to his people.”

Dea chuckled. “How about signs with silly reasons like 'Wanted for Dancing Like No One's Watching' or 'Wanted for Making Everyone Smile'?”

Kota laughed, nodding in approval. “I like the silly reasons more. It’ll add a sense of lightheartedness to the event.”

“We could have a special area with photo booths where guests can take pictures with fun props and share them on social media,” I added. “You know, like handlebar mustaches, cowboy hats, handkerchiefs, fake guns, and horseshoes. As well as a frame with Wanted on the top and Dead or Alive on the bottom.”

Dea bounced in her seat. “We have that large square of cowhide from Mateo’s bedroom that we could use as the backdrop.”

As we continued to bounce ideas off each other, Adèle joined the conversation. “*Don't forget to incorporate some djinn history and traditions. It'll make the event more meaningful.*”

“I hadn’t thought of that. It’d be nice to educate others about the djinn to



dispel the false information they've been taught," I agreed, grateful for Adèle's guidance. "We could have a display showcasing djinn artifacts and historical items."

Phi, diligently taking notes, added, "And what about djinn-themed games and activities, like a djinn scavenger hunt or a magic lamp decorating station as a way to poke fun at the idea mundies spread about them?"

I grimaced as my gut told me the lamp idea might go over their heads. "Let's check with Kaveh and ask if he thinks the lamp station could be used as a way to teach others they don't live in them. Only mundies might understand the spoof."

Dre tapped the side of her glass. "We need to create a special 'Wanted' cocktail menu, with magical drinks named after djinn legends or famous outlaws."

As the ideas flowed, the atmosphere became electric with creativity. It was why I'd wanted to open Willowberry Plantation with my sisters. This was the kind of atmosphere I thrived on. It was also what made our events magical and memorable.

Kota raised her glass, a smile on her face. "Here's to making this the best Djinn Mixer ever!"

We all joined in, clinking our glasses together. The vision for the event was coming together, and I knew that with our collective talents and Adèle's wisdom, it was going to be a night to remember. My phone rang as we sat there laughing and going off into the absurd in our planning. It was Ashton, my son. My heart skipped a beat as I answered the call. I wasn't sure why, but I was consumed as a sense of worry gnawed at me.

"Mom," Ashton choked out, "I don't know how to say this, but...Dad is gone. He was killed a couple of hours ago by a drunk driver."

Time seemed to stand still as those words echoed in my ears. My first husband, Mike, the father of my children, had been taken from us. A wave of shock and grief washed over me, threatening to drown me. And I had no idea what emotions were taking me over. Sorrow, disbelief, anger, regret.

I couldn't lose it. I'd been divorced from Mike for years, but he was my children's father. I had to be strong for Genevieve, Ashton, and Ava. They were going to need me. "Oh, my gods! Where are you? I'll be right there."

"I'm at home. The police just got here," Ashton replied.

Every one of my five sisters was on their feet and watching me as I promised to get there right away. Lia clasped one of my shaking hands.

“What is it?”

I lifted tear-filled eyes to my sister. “Mike was killed in an accident.” I tuned out the flurry of curses and disbelief as someone grabbed our purses, and I was ushered to Lia’s SUV.

There was no hesitation as my sisters stepped up to the plate to get me to my kids. The ride over was solemn and silent. I knew my sisters’ hearts ached as much as mine as we entered the home I once shared with Mike.

My eyes gaped open as I looked around. The house was a time capsule of our life together, frozen in the past. The familiar furniture, the family photos, and the mementos of our adventures told the story of a life we had once lived together.

As we stepped into the living room, we found Genevieve, Ashton, and Ava huddled together, tears streaming down their faces. My sisters and I encircled them, creating a cocoon of love and support as they cried. They needed to know we were there for them, no matter what.

“Let us know what we can do for you,” Lia whispered gently. “You three are going to be asked to do a lot of things you never imagined having to face. We’re here to help in any way we can.” Lia had been through this with her husband and knew better than anyone what was required at a time like this.

I cleared my throat. “Did the police say what happened?”

Ashton told us how his father was sitting at a stop light when an intoxicated man slammed into him from behind, going well over the speed limit. I was too stunned to say much else then, so I let the kids cling to me. I hoped they found strength in our embrace. The gods knew the pain was overwhelming.

Amid our grief, there was a knock on the door. As Dre went to answer it, we all moved with her and found a man standing there, a mix of sadness and gratitude in his eyes. “I’m sorry to bother you at a time like this,” he began, his voice thick with emotion, “but I saw the accident on the news and had to stop by and tell you how your father saved my life.”

Dre moved aside, so the kids and I came forward. I looked at the visitor, confused and curious. “Saved your life?”

He nodded, a tear rolling down his cheek. “I was lost in the depths of addiction, drowning in alcohol. But Mike reached out to me when no one else would. He helped me get into AA, supported me through the toughest times, and he never gave up on me. He saved my life, and I’ll be forever grateful for him.”

As I listened to the man's heartfelt words, I felt a mix of emotions. That wasn't the Mike I knew. He was an abusive jerk to me, and it had driven me away. In all the time we'd separated, I hadn't realized Mike's impact on others. It was both confusing and heart-wrenching for me to hear how much he had touched this man's life.

Later, as we all gathered in the living room, the kids shared their feelings. Ava wiped away her tears. "I can't believe this has happened. It feels like a nightmare."

Genevieve wrapped an arm around her sister. "Yeah, it does. I can't believe that guy came here to tell us how Dad helped him. Did you know he was so influential? I thought he just went to AA meetings as a way to get out of the house. He'd been sober for so long that it seemed as if he had control over his alcoholism."

Ashton lifted a shoulder. "Yeah, Dad always tried to help people. And he had his own struggles, but he persevered. It makes me proud to be his son."

I nodded, a lump in my throat. "Your dad loved you all so much. Never forget that." Mike had his faults, but I never wondered if he cared for our kids. He was there for all of their events, cheering them on.

The hours that followed were some of the hardest I'd ever experienced. More people stopped by to share stories about Mike and how he had helped them. It was surreal to hear. What was even weirder was how I couldn't shake the feeling that Mike was there, watching everything.

I pulled Dea to the side. "Is Mike here? I feel like he's here, and it's making me crazy."

Dea's expression filled with empathy as she shook her head from side to side. "No, he's not. From what I'm learning, the first several days after death are extremely confusing for the newly departed. That doesn't mean he will be around later. Not all who die become ghosts. It has to do with unfinished business."

My lower lip trembled. I wasn't sure if I wanted him to be around or not. For the kids' sake, I did. But not for mine. "Will you tell me if he returns?"

"Right away," Dea agreed as we rejoined the others.

We found seats on the couch and put Ava and Genevieve between us while Ashton went into Mike's room and closed the door. It didn't take long before everyone fell asleep, and I was sitting in the quiet of the house. That was when I was overwhelmed with a flood of emotions. My mind was a whirlwind of conflicting thoughts.

For years, all I could see was that my marriage to Mike was toxic. Mike had been abusive and controlling. I had left to protect myself and our children from what I believed was an unhealthy environment. But now, hearing stories about him from others, stories that painted him in a completely different light. I couldn't help but question my own perceptions.

How had I missed this side of him? How could I have been so blind to the man he apparently was? The weight of guilt and confusion settled heavily on my shoulders.

I had always seen Mike as someone who caused pain and took control of every aspect of my life. But now, hearing about how he had been a wonderful teacher and spent almost three decades sober and helping others through AA was like a tidal wave of conflicting memories crashing down on me.

I stared at a family photo on the wall, feeling a lump forming in my throat. I remember Mike had yelled at me shortly before the picture was taken, making it tainted by the memories of arguments and hurtful words. I just couldn't reconcile the two versions of the man I had known, the man I had thought I knew.

As tears filled my eyes, I realized how much I wanted only to remember the stories about Mike's kindness and the lives he had touched through his sobriety. A part of me found solace in the idea that he wasn't only the abusive asshole that had pulled a gun on me.

Adèle padded into the room and jumped onto my lap, sensing my distress. She purred softly, providing a comforting presence in my moment of turmoil. My fingers stroked over her soft grey fur.

"I don't understand, Adèle," I whispered, my voice trembling. "How could he have been so different in his private life? Was it me that brought out the worst in him?" I'd grown bitter and angry during our marriage and became combative, yelling back and standing up for myself when he tried to tear me down with his words.

Adèle nuzzled against my hand, her blue eyes gazing up at me with understanding. *"Your doubt is understandable. It's easy to put someone on a pedestal after they've died. People naturally shy away from thinking badly about the dead. But what happened to Mike doesn't change who he was. Relationships take two people, and you both are responsible for what you said and how that affected your marriage. You are no more to blame for him belittling you and making nasty comments about what he perceived as your faults than you are for the person who chose to get behind the wheel after he*

*became intoxicated.”*

Sleep remained elusive for me as the hours passed. And I found myself revisiting my memories, trying to find the truth within them. It was a difficult journey, confronting my own biases and insecurities. I knew that accepting a different perspective of Mike didn't invalidate the pain I had experienced, but it did challenge me.

In the end, I realized that people were complex, and sometimes, their actions and behaviors could be shaped by different circumstances and struggles. Mike, like all of us, had flaws and virtues. I could still work through the pain of the past while acknowledging that there might have been more to him than I had initially seen.

I may never fully understand the complexities of our marriage or Mike's character. But I knew that healing would come from allowing myself to explore these emotions honestly. That was something I could count on my sisters to help me come to terms with. The question was whether or not I was trying to find a path toward peace and forgiveness.

# CHAPTER 4



## DAKOTA

“*I* don’t envy Dani what she has to do today with the kids,” I said as Lia drove across town to the area where the levee initially broke. We were looking for anyone who could tell us what had happened.

Dre scowled as her fingers curled into fists. “I can’t believe that asshole was going over a hundred and high on top of being drunk.”

I rubbed the ache that had set up in my chest. Of all the family, I’d known Mike the best because he used to drop the kids off at my house so they could walk to school with me. On his weeks, he would also pick them up from my place after he got off work. The guy wasn’t a great husband, but he loved his kids deeply.

Lia’s grip on the steering wheel tightened. “I’m just glad Dea and Phi are with Dani and the kids. It’s going to be rough on them having to identify their father, let alone begin to make funeral plans for him. Perhaps we should push this back and meet them at the morgue.”

I clasped Lia’s shoulder as she turned left onto the street that was closed up ahead, thanks to flooding. “We can’t put this off. The longer this old magic is free to cause problems, the more we will have to clean up. Not to mention there are countless people still stuck in their houses. And it’s not going to get better until we can help stop this.”

We had responsibilities we couldn’t ignore. The mere thought excited me. I’d never had anything like this in my life. I wasn’t so sure about buying a venue with my sisters. I’d been a stay-at-home mom most of my life. I didn’t go to college or trade school, and I didn’t have a career, so this was all foreign to me.

Lia sucked in a deep breath and pulled into the parking lot of a strip mall. “You’re right. I shouldn’t have even mentioned it again. We already hashed this out.”

Dre got out first and waited for us in front of Lia’s car. “Where do we start? We can’t walk up to mundies and ask them what they experienced.”

I hadn’t taken two steps when the heat surrounded me, making sweat roll down my spine and drip between my butt cheeks. It was one of the things I hated about the summer months. “We need to find some paranormals to talk

to, but I haven't honed the ability to detect the subtle hum of a supernatural. Have you?"

Lia wiped the back of her hand across her forehead. "I've gotten better at it, but I doubt I'll be able to pick up on anything, given the magic all around us."

Dre started heading to the barricades. "We'd better hope we find someone with horns or pointed ears or webbed hands."

We laughed as we moved through the parking lot. There were police sending people away from the area, citing the danger because the authorities hadn't yet fixed the levee.

I grabbed Dre and Lia's hands. "Let's cast an aversion spell so the mundies don't focus on us."

That suggestion turned out to be what saved us. Two women in the house just beyond the barricade must have felt our power because they charged out their front door and headed in our direction.

The woman on the right had short blonde hair and fire dancing in her eyes. "Are you the witches causing the problems with the levee? You're killing people, you know." Her friend had long, brown hair and odd-colored orange eyes and was nodding in agreement.

I gaped at her and held my hands up. "No! We're here to try and fix it. We were averting certain eyes from us as we went looking for a paranormal to talk to."

Dre gestured to the dark storefronts. "Can we chat away from prying eyes and ears? Our spell didn't cover you two, and those cops have noticed."

The blonde cocked her head to the side. "Why are you down here trying to fix this without your coven? Witches don't take on this kind of work without Kaitlyn directing them."

"They do if they're the Six Twisted Sisters," Lia said and then introduced the three of us by name. "We really can't talk about this right here."

The two women's eyes widened when Lia mentioned who we were and pointed to their house. It was about fifteen feet from the water. "I'm Melinda," the blonde said. "And this is Amy. Let's talk in our house. We were wondering if you guys would show up. Are the rest of your sisters on their way?"

Dre shook her head as she looked in the direction of the cops and back. "Not today. There has been a death in the family, and they are dealing with that. We're here to gather some information so we know what we're dealing



with.”

Melinda opened the front door and we entered behind Amy, following her into their cozy living room. “We don’t know much, but we’re happy to share what we know.”

I smiled at Melinda. “Can I ask what you are? Forgive me if that’s rude, but I’m trying to learn the vibes of the various supernatural species.”

Amy and Melinda shared a look before they pulled their hair away from the side of their head, revealing their pointed ears. “We’re Light Fae,” Amy said. “Can we get you anything to drink or eat?”

Dre smiled at the Fae woman. “No, thank you. Can you tell us what you saw, felt, and experienced around the time the levee broke? Our sources told us old magic caused the damage and that it refuses to be contained again. We need to know more to develop an effective approach.”

Melinda’s eyes grew wide, and if I didn’t know better, I’d say she was both afraid and excited about what she had witnessed. “We saw a group of guys sneaking around near the levee.”

Amy nodded and jumped in her seat when someone outside spoke on a bullhorn. We got up and crossed to the big picture window, and all looked outside. Amy looked up at Dre as she spoke, “They were acting suspiciously, so we decided to keep an eye on them.”

“Yeah,” Melinda chimed in, “they were digging around near the section of the wall where the system broke, right by the water’s edge. They unearthed something.

“It looked like an ancient crown,” Amy added as she watched the small boats drive around the flooded sections of the neighborhood.

My heart skipped a beat at the mention of an ancient crown. It had to hold significance. I exchanged a quick glance with Lia and Dre, both of whom were just as intrigued.

Melinda continued, “As they were about to take the crown, we saw it...a dark purple tentacle rising from the water, reaching for them. It was like something out of a nightmare.”

Dreya leaned forward, her eyes intense. “Did you get a good look at the crown? Can you describe it?”

Both Fae tilted their head from shoulder to shoulder. Amy pursed her lips as she recalled the details. “We didn’t get a clear view, but it had a unique design. It had several triangular spears at the top, and it emitted a faint teal glow.”

“It was powerful,” Melinda added, shivering at the memory. “Although, I couldn’t feel it before they unearthed it.”

“The energy around that crown was intense.” Amy grimaced and wrapped her arms around her waist. “We were about to storm out the door to confront them when the purple appendage snapped out. It was then that we knew we had to stay hidden.”

“What happened next?” Dahlia asked, clearly as caught up in the story as I was.

“The moment the thieves saw the tentacle, they dropped the crown and ran,” Melinda explained. “We were scared too but didn’t think too much about it because we fled too when we heard a loud cracking sound coming from the levee. It’s a sound you know when you live this close. We weren’t surprised when it broke before we got to my car.”

I leaned in, curious about the possible connection between the crown and the levee. “Do you think the crown had something to do with the levee breaking?”

Amy and Melinda exchanged uncertain glances. “It’s possible. The crown seemed to hold some ancient power, and the timing of the break was too coincidental for my liking.”

Lia cocked her head to the side and gestured out the window. “Or do you think it was whatever purple monster lashed out over the wall?”

Both Fae women shrugged and said, “It’s possible,” simultaneously.

Dre’s forehead furrowed. “Could you tell if the purple tentacle had power?”

Both women shook their heads from side to side. Lia placed a hand on Melinda’s shoulder. “Regardless, we need to find out more about both the crown and the monster. There’s no doubt one or both are connected to the levee’s break, and information will be crucial in understanding what’s happening.”

Dre agreed, adding, “And we should investigate if there’s any history of dark magic or curses associated with the crown. The energy here doesn’t feel Light.”

Amy and Melinda nodded in agreement and shot us worried but determined glances. Melinda shuddered and said, “Be careful. Whoever is behind this will not take kindly to you meddling in their affairs.”

“We always are,” I assured them.

Lia wrapped an arm through mine. “We’ve got each other and some

powerful allies. But the best way we can protect ourselves is with information. Can you describe everything about the crown and tentacle?" We needed every scrap of information we could get to be successful in facing off with whatever was out here causing problems. Gathering details was vital to our investigation.

We were magical investigators. It was a role I never in a million years would have imagined us becoming. Witch hybrids were another thing I couldn't have predicted. Facing off with a mysterious monster that had caused the levee to break was the stuff of fantasy novels. Only this was our real lives.

"Can you draw both for us?" Dre interjected.

Melinda yanked her hands behind her back. "No damn way. I'm afraid to even describe what I saw. Doing either could attract attention to us, and we live right here; feet away from where the monster lives and the crown was last seen."

Dreya leaned forward, her eyes shining with determination. "Could you try to describe it to us again? Maybe we can draw it together."

Amy and Melinda hesitated for a moment before agreeing. They provided more details about the creature's appearance. Its large size, dark purple color, and the width of the elongated tentacle that reached out from the water.

Lia picked up a notepad and a pencil from a side table, trying her best to put the description into a drawing. However, her artistic attempts resulted in the line drawing of a worm that covered the entire page.

Amy burst out laughing. "There's no risk of your likeness calling out to the monster. That bears little resemblance to the thing."

I chuckled softly, realizing that none of us were great artists. "If only Mack were here. I'm not sure I can do much better, but I'm willing to give it a shot," I said, taking the pencil from Lia. Remembering the dips and curves the Fae described, I did my best with the tentacle. After a few seconds, I held it out.

Amy and Melinda both beamed at me. "Color that in purple, and it's pretty damn close. Closer than what Lia did."

Dre flipped the paper up. "Now, try to draw the basic shape of the crown."

As I sketched the crown's outline, the Fae shook their heads. Melinda pointed to one of the tips on the page. "Not quite. The points at the top are right, but the spears get wider at the bottom. I only saw three on the one

side.”

Amy moved her finger in a circle beneath the pointed sections. “And there were diamonds in the band, but they weren’t in a row. From our vantage, the placement seemed random, but I know better. There were reasons for why two were higher and another lower. I’ll dot in the pattern I remember.”

I handed her the sheet and pencil after I drew the bottom ring. Amy put dots all over the band and then handed it back. The image screamed powerfully to me. It was unnerving as hell.

Lia smiled. The relief was clear in her expression. “Thank you for your patience. This information is essential. We’ll do our best to protect the city.”

Dre chimed in, “We’re setting up a hotline where people can report any sightings or information about the creature. We’ll have a big announcement on the NOLA PARANORMALS Facebook page when it’s operational.”

“We’ll keep an eye out, and if we see anything, we’ll let you know,” Melinda promised.

With that, we thanked the Light Fae women for their cooperation and headed outside.

“We should try to move some of this into the natural waterways around here,” Dre suggested.

Lia moved to the end of the yard and paused on the sidewalk. “That’s not a bad idea. If we can reroute the water safely, we can save some houses and lives.”

I pointed to the boats moving slowly through the area while calling out on the bullhorns they held. “What about getting people safely out of their houses?”

The wind whipped my hair into a flurry as Lia moved her hands. She stopped, and I noticed the water rushed back in our direction. She’d been moving it away from us. “We can coax them out as we are able. But first, let’s start the water receding along the right path.”

Lifting a shoulder, I called on my elemental powers and felt for the natural waterways. Gently, I pushed the liquid all around us to move along them. We didn’t move much, but even a few inches revealed the extent of the damage that was going to be left in its wake.

Dreya sighed as she looked around. “Spencer and Steve will be busy again. At least this time, it’ll be far away from the touristy areas.”

I nodded, hoping that the recovery efforts would go more smoothly here

than they did in the Quarter. “Maybe they won't have as many problems with paranormals acting out as we did,” I said optimistically.

Concern for those in need outweighed any relief we felt for the lowering water levels. There were still people out there in desperate situations. Lia pulled out her cell phone. “We should call Cyran to see if he has heard anything. Water nymphs are more likely to know where and how we can help,” Lia pointed out.

I lifted a finger. “Or they might know more about the crown and the monster.”

Lia’s phone rang. When she answered, I winced with sympathy when I heard Cyran’s exhaustion. Lia didn’t let that deter her as she asked if he had anything that could help us.

“No, I haven't heard anything unusual,” Cyran replied. “Saida and I have been working non-stop to help deal with the water. We've been focused on the heavily populated areas first to save homes.”

Dre leaned toward the phone Lia held out. “Alright. We’re going to help clear out the areas near the damaged section before we head out. Keep us posted if you hear anything.”

Lia hung up, and we walked through the neighborhood. My heart swelled with pride as we saw families helping one another, using boats to retrieve survivors trapped in their homes. It would have been nice to have a boat and be able to get closer.

“They’re calling out to people possibly hiding in their attics. We should do something to help coax them out,” Lia suggested as we watched.

With our magical abilities, we cast spells to get people to climb out onto their roofs where rescue could reach them. Dre grabbed one of my hands and one of Lia’s. “It’s working. Can we help the boats get there safely? We can’t cut off the enchantment, sending the water away. It needs to clear the area, but it’s causing dangerous wakes against houses for the small crafts.”

My eyes watched the activity, and I saw what she was talking about. I had an idea of what needed to be done, but I wanted to check it out. I wasn’t book-smart like my sisters, and I didn’t want to get this wrong, especially when lives were on the line. “So, we attach a spell to the boats, ensuring they get close to the house without crashing into the walls, right?”

Lia nodded. “Add a stabilization once they’re in place, and I think that’s perfect.”

As we walked further along the sidewalk, the damage became more

evident. Homes were partially submerged, debris scattered everywhere, and fallen trees blocked roads. The destruction was heartbreaking, and I felt a mixture of sorrow and determination to make a difference.

We walked as far as we could, doing our part to assist those in need and ensure their safety. The recovery process would take time, and there were still many challenges ahead. The resilience of the community was evident as families came together to help one another in any way they could.

Right as we were turning back to go home, I felt a sudden surge of panic inside me. “Do you feel that?” I asked my sisters.

Lia looked around slowly. “Someone is in trouble, but I don’t know where.”

“Let’s cast a beacon and see if anyone responds,” Dre suggested. “If we are picking up on this, whoever is sending it out is a supernatural. None of us are empaths like Dea.”

“How do we do that?” I couldn’t wrap my head around what she was suggesting.

Dre shrugged her shoulders. “Send out a signal encouraging whoever is in trouble to stick their head outside so we can send help their way.”

Nodding, I kept that thought at the front of my mind and cast when my sisters did. My eyes scanned the area furiously, looking for any sign of trouble. It seemed as if we’d been wrong when a woman stuck her head out of her third-floor window, waving desperately.

“There! Someone’s up there!” I called out, and my heart was leaping with hope.

We rushed toward the building where the woman was stranded. When we got closer, I saw that she had an elderly woman with her. My heart sank as I saw their predicament. They were trapped on the third floor, surrounded by the rising waters.

“Get the attention of the boats,” Dre told us. “I’m going to use my telekinesis to create a platform that will get them out of the house.”

“Are you crazy?” I practically screeched as I looked around, relaxing when I noticed there was no one focused on that building.

I hurried after Lia traipsed into the water and called out to a boat nearby. From the corner of my eye, I noticed as Dre lifted the two women safely out of the window and onto a raft made out of various debris. Relief washed over me as Dakota managed to get the attention of one of the boats. It sped over and pulled the women onto their vessel. It was moments like these that

reminded me of the power we possessed, the power to help and protect those in need.

But as we continued through the devastated neighborhood, my heart couldn't help but feel heavy. The destruction caused by the magical world was immense. It felt worse because the mundies believed it was nature lashing out like it had several times before. Only this time, it was old magic, something straight out of myths and legends.

I thought about the ancient crown and the creature that had caused the levee to break. I searched for any sign of either in the water. And, of course, my eyes were playing tricks on me, imagining the ripple of purple flesh or the glint of gold.

It was no use to search for a needle in a haystack. We had to focus on the present. On helping those in need, and stopping this mythical monster and finding this lost crown. As we continued to assist in the rescue efforts, I couldn't shake the urgency riding me. Even though it was rewarding to be helping people one person at a time.

The magical world was a double-edged sword, capable of great beauty and of great destruction. Somehow, it had become our responsibility to use our powers for good and protect those who couldn't protect themselves.

As the sun began to set, casting an orange glow over the wreckage, I felt a sense of determination settling within me. We may not have been able to prevent the disaster, but we could work tirelessly to bring hope and healing to our city.

# CHAPTER 5





## DANIELLE

I spun around, taking deep breaths - in through my nose and out through my mouth - fighting the bile that burned the back of my throat. It'd been like that for the past thirty hours since Ashton called me and told me their father had been killed.

Phi put a hand on my shoulder. "Are you alright?" Her voice was low, so my kids didn't hear her.

I lifted my gaze to hers and opened my mouth to respond. "Honestly, no, but I will be. I have to be for them."

Phi gave me an understanding smile. "Take your time. I've got the kids." With that, she went over to my girls, who were emptying their father's things from what was left of his vehicle.

The air hung heavy with sorrow as we all got a glimpse at another piece of the puzzle. The sight before us was gut-wrenching. The car was badly damaged from the accident that had taken their father's life. There was no backend left of the sedan. It was nothing more than a crumpled mess. Tears welled up in my eyes as I watched my children try to process the reality of their loss. I knew they were thinking the same thing I was about Mike not standing a chance of surviving.

Having to see Mike's body yesterday had been horrendous enough, but seeing this crushed tin can brought his injuries into vivid focus in my mind. And I knew it was far worse for my children. It was hard to see them suffer and not be able to do much to make them feel better.

Genevieve, our eldest, clenched her fists at her sides. "This isn't fair. An arrest for driving while intoxicated isn't enough," she said, her voice trembling with emotion.

I placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, struggling to find the right words to console her. "I know, sweetheart. It's unfair, but we have to trust that the law will do what it can to bring justice. And we will not stop pushing for the DA to add the appropriate charges."

Ava wiped her tears away with the back of her hand. "The highest charges possible aren't going to be enough, Mom. The guy responsible needs to pay for what he did. I can make sure he pays with my magic."

Phi and I exchanged worried glances, knowing their pain and anger were justified, but we couldn't condone using magic for revenge. "I understand how you feel, Ava," Phi said gently, "but using our magic for something like that wouldn't be right. No one has the right to take matters into their own hands."

Ashton, Ava's twin, looked furious. His anger was palpable and reminded me of his father's. "Why? That asshole deserves to suffer like we're suffering," he spat out, his eyes blazing with a dark intensity.

Before we could respond, Ashton's emotions manifested into something far more alarming. Dark red flames flickered to life in his hands. There was a risk of him losing control of his witch fire. If that happened, there was nothing we could do to stop it from reducing the entire building to ashes. I heard Phi cast a spell to keep the fire alarm system from being activated. I wasn't sure the open warehouse had one, but I appreciated her effort.

I tried to recall what Phoebe had told us about wizards and their power. Something about needing a lodestone to keep them from giving in to the urge to steal power from another, which would make them become Tainted. I'd have to ask Adèle more about it later.

"Dani, what do we do?" Phi whispered, her eyes wide with concern.

Ashton's eyes narrowed on Phi, and his witch fire shot out and engulfed a vehicle next to where we were standing. My heart started racing as thick. Black smoke started choking us as his red flames consumed the wrecked vehicle. My gaze flew around the room, praying none of the mundie police came running. We were standing in the middle of the police warehouse where they stored cars involved in criminal accidents.

Me freaking out wasn't going to help matters. I needed to get my son to stop this. I took a deep breath, trying to remain calm despite my worry. "Ashton, please try to calm down," I pleaded. "There are mundies here that cannot see this. Not to mention, if you lose control innocents could be killed. Lashing out is not the right way to deal with this."

Ava stepped forward, her voice steady as she addressed her twin. "Ashton, we need to find another way to cope with our feelings. Hurting someone else won't make our pain go away."

Phi started waving her hands as she sent the smoke out the large open doors. I heard hurried footsteps, which only made my heart race faster. I grabbed Phi's hand, squeezing it hard as I tried to think of how we could get out of this mess when the police discovered the magical fire.

Ashton's flames finally flickered for a moment longer before he extinguished them. I joined Lia's efforts to manipulate the air currents to whisk the smoke away. Ava's words seemed to get through to Ashton. He took a deep breath, visibly trying to regain control as several police officers ran into the warehouse.

"Is everything alright? We thought we smelled a fire." One of the officers asked as he approached us. The other two split up and started looking around the warehouse. As he got closer, I noted the badge on his shirt read 'Paltridge.'

"There's no fire in here." Phi shook her head. "And it's not okay. This feels like a nightmare that will never end. The fact that there is only so much the jerk who did this can be charged with feels wrong. And none of us understand it."

My heart skipped a beat when one of the other cops headed to the vehicle that was now a burned-out shell. The thing would burn her if she laid a hand on it. How the hell did we cover this up? My forehead wrinkled as the cop moved away before getting close to it. I'd sensed Phi's magic. When I looked at my sister, she dipped her head. I sighed with relief. At least we wouldn't have to worry about them noticing and questioning us about it.

Paltridge's forehead furrowed as he scanned the rest of the warehouse before looking back at us. "Your frustration is understandable and something we hear often. The detectives can help you put pressure on the DA to get the maximum. I recommend talking to the one assigned to your case."

Genevieve wiped at the tears running down her face. "Would it help if the community reached out, too? My father was a popular teacher and was a huge advocate in AA who saved hundreds of lives over the years. We can bombard the detective and DA with demands for justice." Genevieve wasn't exaggerating, either. As we'd come to discover, Mike had touched more lives than I ever dreamed possible.

Paltridge whistled as he gave Genevieve an appreciative look. "Your father deserves every advocate willing to speak up for him. The loudest voices get the attention. I've seen the DA change course and get creative with the right pressure. I can't guarantee that you will get what you want, but at least you'll know you tried everything possible."

Ashton crossed his arms over his chest. "Can I ask you something?" I shot my son a look, wondering what he wanted to know.

Paltridge nodded. "Of course. I can't guarantee I'll have the answer."

“Why did they tell us our dad died instantly when he called nine-one-one after he was hit? Do they think it makes us feel better thinking he didn’t feel anything?” Ashton asked.

I sucked in a startled breath. I hadn’t realized Mike had called for help. Looking at the wreckage, I couldn’t imagine how he’d survived that impact long enough. Paltridge kept his expression neutral. “It wasn’t your father that made the call. iPhones have a built-in feature that dials when they sense a serious car crash, and that’s what happened in your father’s case.”

“I didn’t know the phones did that,” I said.

Paltridge lifted a shoulder. “Not many do unless they’ve experienced it or had it call emergency services while on a roller coaster. That’s happened more than anyone anticipated.”

We thanked Paltridge, gathered the rest of Mike’s belongings, and headed out of the warehouse. I wrapped my arms around my girls. “We’ll figure this out together,” I said, trying to reassure them. “For now, let’s go talk to the detective about the charges. And then Lia and I need to visit Marie Leveau about the broken levee.”

As we made our way to the police station, I couldn’t help but worry about the implications of my children’s magical abilities when they were consumed with so much grief. I was terrified that something like what happened with Ashton’s witch fire would happen again.

After a conversation with the detective where he promised he would advocate for filing the maximum charges, Lia and I dropped the kids off at Willowberry with Dre and their cousins and then picked up Kota. Lia sent Marie Leveau a text message asking to meet at Sunwhisper Sanctum because it was a neutral location. To my surprise, she refused to meet at the Sanctum but agreed to meet us at one of the most popular tourist spots in the French Quarter.

“How did the appointment at the warehouse go?” Kota asked as she climbed into the passenger seat.

Lia and I recounted the events, including the incident with Ashton’s witch fire. Lia parked in Ricky’s lot, and we made our way to the meeting spot. “How are we going to have a candid conversation with Marie at Café Du Monde?” I asked as we crossed a street and wound our way through throngs of people.

Lia wrinkled her forehead. “We will have to cast a bubble around us that will keep what we say from the ears of mundies.”

Kota looked between us. “Why do you think she wanted to meet in such a public place?”

I made a face as I considered Marie’s motives. “Who knows? But I don’t trust her as far as I can throw her.”

Lia gestured to the beautiful woman who sat eating the fried treat Café Du Monde was known for. “We will find out soon enough.”

The scent of freshly made beignets filled the air as we sat across from Marie Leveau at a small table in the corner of the open-air café. Being with the Queen of Voodoo made me uneasy. She’d been trying to remove us from this planet since the day we met her. To be with her, in a setting with mundies bustling around us, made the feeling even worse.

Kota, Lia, and I cast a spell to keep our conversation secret. I clutched the crown drawing in my hands, eager to hear what the voodoo queen had to say about it. “We came to talk to you about the levee breaking and what you know about it.”

Marie bit into a beignet without getting any of the powdered sugar on the black top she was wearing. “You cannot blame me for that. It happened hours after Samedi’s storm ended. It’s not my fault.”

Lia scowled at Marie as she leaned across the tiny white laminate table. “Magic caused the breach and is keeping the mundie authorities from fixing the problem. You helped Samedi with the hurricane. Of course, this is your fault.” Lia straightened, and I saw the white sugar across her boobs. How the hell did that happen when Marie was pristine?

Marie’s eyes gleamed with anger. “I did no such thing. The magic behind the levee is old and isn’t something I can access.”

“So, you know something about it,” I interjected, holding out the crown sketch. “We know individuals were digging at the base of the levee right before it broke, and they dug this crown up. What can you tell us about it?”

Marie’s eyes widened as she studied the sketch before her. “This is old magic indeed. This is the symbol of Oshun,” she said, her voice carrying a mix of reverence and mystery.

“Oshun?” I repeated, intrigued by the name. The edge was gone from the conversation, making me twitchy. We didn’t sit and have pleasant conversations with the Queen of Voodoo. She hated us for taking away her control over the city.

Marie nodded. “That’s what I said. Oshun is a powerful loa as a goddess connected to rivers, streams, and water. Oshun is a symbol of beauty and

sexuality, as well as love and pleasure. She is deeply tied to the Yoruba and loa belief systems, and her followers leave offerings at river banks to honor her.”

My mind whirled with this newfound knowledge. The connection to water and rivers made sense, given the events surrounding the broken levee and the ancient magic at play.

Kota picked up a beignet from a plate that had appeared in front of her at some point. Had she conjured them? “Don’t you mean you and your mambos leave these offerings? And I ordered them from the waitress,” Kota told me as I looked around to see if anyone saw her use her magic. I nodded in understanding.

“No, I do not mean me and my mambos. Oshun is also associated with wealth,” Marie continued, her eyes locking with mine. “Those who seek her assistance can find themselves blessed with bounty and abundance.”

The mention of wealth intrigued me. I could see it tying into the crown's power and the creature that had caused the destruction. But the question still lingered in my mind: what did all of this mean? How and why was Oshun's symbol connected to the creature and the ancient magic?

Marie leaned forward, her gaze intense. “Be cautious, Twisted Sisters. Oshun's power is not to be taken lightly. She is both benevolent and fierce. To seek her favor, one must approach with respect and sincerity.”

“We aren't seeking Oshun's favor. We're trying to understand the connection between the would-be thieves, the crown, and the purple creature protecting it,” Lia told Marie. “Who would be stupid enough to go after something belonging to a powerful loa like that?”

Marie sighed. “I cannot tell you who would cross a powerful being like that. I know better. But I will keep my ears peeled for word on who did it and how they knew where to look. It’s difficult to find anything with the magic swirling through the city right now.”

Kota wiped her fingers off. “What else can you tell us about Oshun?”

Marie offered more insight into the ancient goddess and her significance in the magical world. She shared how Oshun was considered a patroness of artists, musicians, and dancers reflecting her connection to creativity and the arts. The more Marie spoke, the more I realized the immense depth of the supernatural forces we were dealing with.

Marie's words hung in the air, weaving a mystique and ancient wisdom tapestry. She spoke of Oshun's colors and how each represented facets of the

loa's divine essence. The mention of fresh cinnamon, honey, and pumpkins as offerings intrigued me. It wasn't what I was expecting. The only loa we'd ever had contact with was given people as an offering. This made Oshun seem harmless. In contrast, I didn't trust the notion one bit.

"Most of Oshun's followers keep altars in their bedrooms," Marie continued, making my mind shift directions. I couldn't help but wonder about the significance of this intimate connection. It seemed that Oshun's influence extended beyond just physical elements and rituals.

Lia narrowed her eyes. "You seem to know a lot about Oshun for someone who claims not to be one of her followers. I bet you had some poor hapless souls try to steal the crown that you knew was near the levee because you assumed the hurricane sent the monster protecting it far away."

Marie clenched her hands into fists on the table. She was being accused of setting the events in motion. It wasn't a huge leap to connect the ancient magic and the broken levee to her. She'd done far worse.

Marie's eyes flashed with a mix of frustration and conviction. "I am bound to Baron Samedi and Papa Legba," she asserted in a firm voice. "But Samedi alone sought a way to be on Earth whenever he pleased. I had nothing to do with the ancient magic or the creature that unleashed chaos upon your city."

My heart raced as I absorbed her words. If not Marie, then who was behind the unleashing of the ancient magic? And what was their motive?

Marie continued, speaking of the hierarchy of the loa and how they answered to Bondye, the creator god in the Voodoo religion. Bondye's existence was beyond human comprehension, and he didn't meddle in the affairs of mortals. Instead, the loa served as intermediaries between man and Bondye, guiding and assisting those who sought their aid.

As the weight of her words settled in, I couldn't help but feel a mix of relief and confusion. If Marie wasn't involved in the events that had unfolded, then the responsibility lay with a different force entirely.

"I believe you," I said, meeting Marie's gaze with a newfound sense of trust. "But we need to find out who or what is behind this. Our city is suffering, and innocent lives are at stake."

Marie nodded solemnly, understanding the urgency of our quest. "I will assist you in any way I can," she offered. "But be careful. The ancient magic and the loa hold secrets that even I do not fully comprehend."

Lia shook her head. "I don't believe you. I'm sorry, but you've done too

much.”

Malevolent energy rolled off of Marie as she returned Lia’s snarl with one of her own. “I will prove it to you. Come with me.” Marie stood up, leaving us to follow in her wake.

Kota and I jumped up before Lia. We hurried after Marie as she walked across to Jackson Square, and my emotions were all jumbled. I was filled with awe at the power of Oshun, curiosity about the crown's true significance, and concern for the city and its people amidst the ancient magic's chaos. I was in shock that Marie had shared so openly with us and didn't notice she'd led us into a hidden room.

The air was tense as Marie shut the door behind us. Memories of my sisters being kidnapped and tortured by this awful woman made my heart start racing. She wasn’t a safe person to be in a room alone.

Marie held up her hands. “You’ve wondered why my position has changed so drastically since Samedi was sent back to his realm. That’s because Bondye was livid over Baron Samedi's actions. The creator god's wrath is not to be taken lightly. Even the powerful loa have their limits. I have never seen Bondye so furious,” Marie said, her voice tinged with concern. “He is deeply disappointed in Samedi for what he has done.”

“What do you think will happen when he discovers another of his loa is involved in problems here? Even if it is tangentially,” Lia asked.

Marie grimaced. “I fear for Bondye’s wrath.”

I exchanged worried glances with my sisters, realizing that the repercussions of the unleashed ancient magic were far greater than we had imagined. Stopping the storm was only the beginning. There were other forces at play that we hadn't fully comprehended.

Marie continued, “You may have stopped the storm, but you've awakened more than just the spirit of Lalaurie. This ancient magic has stirred up much, and I fear we have little control over what might come next.”

My heart sank at the thought of what could lie ahead. We had assumed that stopping the storm would bring an end to the chaos, but we had only scratched the surface of a much larger problem.

“*Marie is being honest. Her fear is genuine,*” Adèle said in my head. One look at my sisters and I could see they were surprised to hear Adèle speak to us and in Marie's defense.

“What else was awakened?” I asked Marie, my curiosity and concern driving me to seek answers.



Marie looked troubled as she replied, "I have no idea. I learned my lesson from the past and have stayed far away from anything related to that ancient magic. I can't risk being accused of wrongdoing again."

It was clear that Marie was genuinely afraid of the repercussions of meddling with such powerful forces. The change in her demeanor was significant, and it was genuine. It left me wondering just how dire the situation was.

When we asked her if she would help investigate and fix the damage caused by the awakened magic, Marie refused. Her fear of retribution from the loa outweighed any desire to assist.

As my thoughts raced, I couldn't help but agree with Lia's previous assessment. Something significant had occurred to make Marie change her stance so drastically. The consequences of Baron Samedi's actions reached far beyond what we had initially anticipated.

"We need to be careful," I said to Lia, my voice low with concern. "There's more to this than meets the eye."

Lia nodded in agreement, understanding the gravity of the situation. We had barely scratched the surface of this world of ancient powers and its consequences. The stakes were higher than ever, and we needed to approach every decision with caution and wisdom.

As we left Marie's presence, I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. The puzzle pieces were falling into place, but the picture they formed was far more complex and daunting than we could have imagined. We needed to tread carefully, for the consequences of our actions would ripple through the magical world. We had yet to learn who was watching us or what they would do in return.

# CHAPTER 6



## DAKOTA

Marie's words echoed in my head as Cami and I huddled over the old book. The others were off dealing with either the details of Mike's funeral or the Djinn Mixer. I'd urged Dani and Lia not to react until we'd done some research of our own into the matter. And I'd never expected me to be the one sitting here looking through books with Cami.

I hadn't gone to college and didn't think my sisters trusted me to do an adequate job with something like this. Determined to prove I could, I turned back to the pages that were yellowed with age. And filled with voodoo symbols that we struggled to decipher.

"Okay, so according to this book, Marie was right. Oshun is a powerful loa associated with rivers, beauty, and abundance," Cami read aloud, her brows furrowed in concentration.

"That's consistent with what Marie told us." My fingers traced over the intricate voodoo symbols on the page. "And the crown is connected to her, but in what way?" I asked, trying to connect the dots.

We continued to flip through the book, searching for any information that could give us a clue. And then, there it was, a drawing of the crown.

"Listen to this," Cami said, excitement tinged in her voice. "It's an entry about a mambo who worked with one of my ancestors. They buried and magically sealed, the crown and the loa away."

My eyes widened with interest as I absorbed that little revelation. "What in the hell? Oshun sounded like a benevolent loa. Does it say why they wanted to lock her away?"

Cami chewed on her lower lip as she scanned the page. "There isn't an indication here. Just that it was necessary to save the world."

"And was this your mother's side? Or your father's? Perhaps your mom might know more."

Cami cocked her head to the side. "This is the grimoire for my mother's familial magic. My father wasn't a magical being. His family believed in the voodoo religion but weren't practitioners."

I got up. "We need to find your mom and ask her about this."

"Do you really think that's necessary?"

“Yes! It’ll help us understand if we should be hunting down a loa in addition to the crown. That purple monster could have been the loa for all we know. But really, what we need to understand is the danger Oshun poses to us and how to counter her magic. That might give us the power to break whatever spell is on the levee right now.”

Cami shivered as she picked up the book. “Alright. Let’s go find her. She likes to hang out on the third floor since that’s where my bedroom is.”

The old plantation house was silent and eerie as Cami and I ventured up the stairs. I was never there when it was so quiet. Between the six of us, the events we hosted, public tours of the house and family stopping by. It was rarely, if ever like this. I wanted to go outside and sit by the pool, waiting for everyone to return home.

I shook off my disconcertion and continued on our mission to speak with the ghost of Cami's mother. Mary Alice was the one who had cast the curse on the plantation that put us in a position to be able to purchase it in the first place. Luckily, we’d broken the curse before it kicked in and we lost everything we invested in the place.

Mary Alice always talked about how she held their family's deepest secrets. I hoped that included the story of why one of their ancestors had worked with one of the previous Marie Leveau's mambos to lock away the ancient crown and the powerful loa, Oshun.

“Cami, are you sure about this?” I asked hesitantly as we made our way through the dimly lit hallway.

Cami chuckled as mirth danced in her eyes. “This was your idea to begin with, Kota. And you were right to suggest it. This could be helpful information for us to have. Besides, I’d like to know if there's a connection between my family and the crown.”

Ghosts gave me the creeps. Spirits were Dea’s domain, not mine. Manifestation was my gig, and I couldn’t be more grateful Fate didn’t saddle me with a power that would make my skin crawl like this. Taking a deep breath, we entered Cami's room but didn’t see her.

“Mom? Are you around here? We need to talk,” Cami called out as she shut her door.

The air seemed to grow colder as Mary Alice’s apparition materialized before us. “Cami, child,” her ethereal voice echoed, “you didn’t have to come all the way up here to call out to me. I’ll come whenever you call.”

“Boy, she was serious when she said she wanted to prove to you that she

wanted to make up for how she allowed William Henry to treat you,” I muttered under my breath. Both Cami and Mary Alice shot me a glare. I winced and pulled my lips between my teeth to keep from saying anything else.

A mixture of emotions washed over Cami's face as she turned back to her mother. “I... we have important questions about our family's past.” Cami had come a long way from wanting nothing to do with her mother.

“What would you like to know?” Mary Alice moved toward the stairs. “Shall we retire to the Lady’s Parlor for this conversation? It’ll be more comfortable for you.”

Cami sighed as she descended behind her mother. “We want to know about the Oshun and her crown. I saw mention in the grimoire that one of our ancestors helped lock them away.”

Mary Alice nodded knowingly. “Ah, the tale of the crown and Oshun. It is a story that stretches back many generations. Nothing that applies to today.”

“Tell us, please,” I implored, my heart racing with anticipation, or maybe it was from going up and down so many stairs in such a short time. “Things are happening in the city right now, which could be key to helping us avert a disaster.”

Mary Alice's ghostly figure settled into a chair in the parlor, and she began to recount the age-old tale. “Long ago, our family was blessed with immense power. Because of that, my great-great-grandmother was given a gift. She was given the knowledge of the ancient crown's power and the presence of Oshun. But with this information came great responsibility.”

“I don’t understand. What was she responsible for, Mama?” Cami asked, her eyes wide with curiosity.

Mary Alice’s form brightened when her daughter used the term of endearment. Her joy made her smile wide. I’d never seen the ghost smile before. “For ensuring destruction didn’t ensue. Oshun's influence was potent and could sway the hearts of mortals,” Mary Alice explained. “In the wrong hands, the crown and thus the loa could bring both blessings and chaos to the world. It was a delicate balance. Our ancestors knew that they had to protect the world from the potential harm.”

Cami and I leaned in closer, hanging on to every word. “What happened?”

“A witch with an avarice for more power got her hands on the crown and

summoned Oshun. Her enemies started dying while the witch gained more power and money. The balance in the city was thrown, and the ripples were starting to be felt throughout the paranormal population and the mundie one. So, with the help of one of Marie Leveau's mambos," Mary Alice continued, "our ancestor devised a plan to lock away the crown and put Oshun in a realm where her powers would be contained and their influence limited."

"How did they manage that?" I inquired as my curiosity was piqued.

Mary Alice smiled knowingly. "They crafted a powerful spell. One that required immense sacrifice and strength. The mambo used her connection to the loa to call upon Oshun herself. Our ancestor, armed with the ancient crown, bound the loa to a realm between worlds away from the reach of mortals."

"And the crown?" Cami asked.

"It was infused with a protection spell," Mary Alice revealed. "A lock so intricate that it would remain dormant. It waited for the right time to be awakened before it was buried beneath the city."

Mary Alice's spirit sighed, and her form flickered slightly. "It was a task that weighed heavily on our ancestors, but it was necessary. For the safety of the world and the sanctity of the loa. Oshun didn't make the witch evil, but they couldn't risk her influencing others."

Cami nodded, her eyes filled with both understanding and concern. "How do you think this affected the loa? Was that part of the story?"

Mary Alice lifted a shoulder. "That was not part of the story. I imagine Oshun wasn't very happy about being shut off from her followers like that."

I had to agree with that sentiment. I bet Oshun wouldn't be happy about being cut off from one of her artifacts, either. "What about the purple tentacle? Was a monster part of protecting the crown?"

Mary Alice frowned at me. "No, that was never part of my mother's story. Are you certain there was a creature?"

"According to witnesses, a large purple tentacle snatched the crown from the thieves and smashed it against the levee wall," I said.

"Oshun is the loa over water. It's possible the hurricane weakened the barrier between realms." Mary Alice gave her daughter a gentle smile as her ghost began to fade. "Always remember, my child, the importance of protecting the balance between the mortal world and the realm of the loa."

Cami and I shared a look as the room returned to its quiet darkness. We had learned the reason behind the ancient lock. Although I wasn't sure how

that would help us lock down the power that had gotten out and reverse the damage.

“Does your book say anything else about Oshun and the crown?”

“The containment allowed her to sense those that worship her,” Cami explained. “It sounds like even though she couldn't move freely between realms, she could still work her powers on people.”

“That's why people leave offerings at riverbanks,” I chimed in, making the connection. “They seek her blessings and abundance.”

Cami nodded in agreement, her eyes scanning the pages of the diary. “Exactly. It seems that the power of the crown and Oshun is deeply tied to the belief and devotion of her followers. Do you think that they somehow conjured the lake monster to protect the crown?”

I lifted a shoulder. “It seems the most likely scenario. We need to find some of these followers and ask.”

Cami nodded, and we continued to read. We needed to find out more to understand how the crown was connected to the creature that had caused the destruction and chaos in our city. And to do that we needed to locate those who worshiped Oshun.

My mind raced with possibilities as I considered how to approach this problem. “We can use a locator spell to find the crown and Oshun.”

Cami nodded, a smile spreading over her face. “I was thinking the same thing. We need to find the source of the ancient magic and put an end to it. I'll get the map and crystal.”

The weight of our task settled heavily upon me as she gathered what we would need for the locator spell. Cami returned, and we sat cross-legged on the floor with the map of the city spread out before us. In the center, Cami placed a shimmering crystal. The facets caught the ambient illumination like a miniature star when the light hit it.

“Now we focus on our intent, right?” I asked.

Cami nodded. “We channel our energies and direct our intent into the spell.”

I nodded in understanding as I reached into my core, where I accessed my magic. The room seemed to hum with anticipation as the magical energy surged around us, intertwining our power like threads of light. I closed my eyes, letting the power flow through my fingertips and into the crystal, imbuing it with my intention to locate the crown.

At that moment, it felt like I was touching the very essence of the ancient

powers we were seeking to understand. The air crackled with electricity, and a sense of ancient wisdom enveloped me. It almost terrified me out of my trance. This was next-level and unnerving as hell. It made me feel miniscule and insignificant in comparison.

Wanting to have an answer for my sisters, I refocused my mind on the purpose of the spell. I opened my eyes, and the crystal began to glow with an ethereal light. It was a beacon of our combined magical strength.

The map beneath the crystal started to shimmer and distorted like ripples in a pond. Lines of energy pulsed across the map, seeking out the location of the crown. It was as if the ancient magic within us was guiding the crystal toward the source of the chaos. Time seemed to stand still for a moment as I held my breath, waiting for the spell to take hold. Then, the crystal settled on a specific point on the map, its light intensifying as it marked the spot.

"We've found it," Cami whispered, her voice tinged with awe and excitement.

The map revealed a location on the city's outskirts, near a dense swamp. Cami and I were deeply engrossed in our locator spell for the ancient crown when Lia entered the room, her eyes alight with curiosity. "What are you guys doing?" she asked as her gaze was drawn to the crystal and the map.

"We're trying to locate the crown." I gestured towards the book on the coffee table. "We learned more about the crown and Oshun but haven't been able to unravel the connection between the two."

"Oh no!" Cami cried out.

My head spun around as my heart started racing. "What is it? What happened?"

"I lost it," Cami admitted with a frown.

"We can do the locator spell again. No worries. It'll be better if we get the others to help," I told her.

Lia sat on the edge of the chair Mary Alice had occupied earlier. "Before we do that, we need to come up with a plan that keeps Ashton from burning down the county jail and exposing the magical world."

Cami gaped at Lia. "What do you mean? What happened?"

Lia explained about Ashton losing control of his witch fire at the police warehouse and setting fire to one of the cars there. A scowl crossed Cami's face. "I'm not surprised he lost control like that. But if others find out how close that was, they could call for his head."

Lia grimaced as she gave me a worried look. "I don't think they do that



anymore. At least, I hope they don't. None of these kids deserve to be punished for being upset about their dad."

My eyes widened when she mentioned the others. "You think Ava and Genevieve might lose it too?" I hated the thought of them suffering like that. They'd practically grown up at my house, so I was close to them.

Just then, Dani and Dre joined our gathering, their faces somber with grief. Dani stood there with us, and I could feel the weight of loss weighing heavily upon her. "We have no idea what powers they have, if any. The emotions of the moment could cause all sorts of problems for them. They are devastated about losing their father."

Adèle prowled into the room and wound herself around Dani's legs. "*Emotions have a profound impact on magical powers. We should test the kids to see what kinds of magic they possess. They may have other talents, given your mixed heritage.*"

The ringing of Dre's phone interrupted the conversation. "It's Kaitlyn."

She answered, and the head witch's frantic voice filled the room. "Dre. I hope you're there with your sisters because you won't believe what I'm hearing." That got everyone's attention.

"What's happening now?" Dre asked.

"There have been sightings of a creature in the lake. It's spreading across the magical world right now, but it's only a matter of time before mundies get word."

My heart skipped a beat at the revelation. "Did they say if it has purple tentacles? This could be the one that stopped those guys from stealing the crown."

Kaitlyn made a sound on her end. "I have no idea. That's not part of the information that's being shared with me."

"We'll look into the lake monster," Dre assured Kaitlyn, "but in return, can you help Adèle assess the kids, starting with Dani's? We need to be sure they're safe and can control their powers, especially right now after losing their father."

Kaitlyn agreed wholeheartedly. There was a glimmer of relief knowing that our familiar would watch over our children as we dealt with the unfolding crisis - and that Kaitlyn would help.

"The lake monster is probably connected to the creature that tried to steal the crown back," Lia said after Dre hung up the phone.

I pondered the situation. I didn't want to go rushing into the situation

blind. “Before we take any action, we need more information. What if it's something different like the Loch Ness monster, disturbed by the breaking levee?”

Everyone nodded in agreement. We'd been told the storm stirred up a lot of things. We couldn't act rashly, especially with so many unknowns at play. As we prepared to face the lake monster and delve deeper into the potential magical abilities of our children, I silently cursed our luck. I wanted to have a relaxing afternoon with my sisters while we started making shit for our next party. Was that really too much to ask.

# CHAPTER 7



## DAHLIA

“**S**hit,” Kota blurted as I took the exit leading to one of the beaches on the lake.

“What?” I asked as I looked over at her from behind the wheel.

Kota waved her phone at me. “Kaitlyn just said Cyran called and told her that a pair of water nymphs followed the monster's energy from the lake to the river.”

Dre stuck her head between the seats. “So, it’s not in Pontchartrain anymore?”

Kota shook her head. “Nope. It’s in the river now. We need to head over there.”

“How the hell did it get over to the river without being seen? Do we have any other information? Like if it’s the same monster with the crown?” I asked as I made a U-turn and got on the freeway, going in the opposite direction.

The Facebook group for the magical world in New Orleans didn’t have any information on the sightings. That was one of the bad things about our new world being so secretive. No one was keen on posting much on social media platforms.

“Does it matter? We need to face a big, slimy lake monster either way,” Kota quipped.

I lifted a shoulder. “It would be nice to know if we needed to search for a crown while fighting it.”

Dre sighed from the backseat. “We should be prepared for anything, like usual. The bigger issue is how we keep something this big off of mundie radar.”

A snort escaped me as I pulled off the freeway, turned down Canal Street, and made my way to the parking lot owned by Ricky, one of the members of Lucas’s pack. “Good point. It will be dark soon, but I still think we should cast an aversion spell just in case there are mundies around.” Tourism had taken a hit when the fluke storm headed our way a week ago and hadn’t recovered, so the area shouldn’t be too crowded, but it wouldn’t be empty.

Kota scrunched her face up and scowled at the sky out the windshield. “Why does this shit always happen around meal times? If this takes too long,

I'll be hangry. That won't end well for the lake monster."

Dre chuckled. "You and me both, sestra. I have some shrimp creole in the crock pot that I was looking forward to."

My stomach rumbled at the mention of one of my favorite dishes. "That monster won't know what hit it if it gives us a hard time," I quipped as I turned into the parking lot.

Ricky lifted a hand as I pulled in and parked next to his tiny office. "What brings you three down here at this time of day?"

I locked the car and handed him the keys to free my hands. "We're hunting the creature that moved from the lake to the river."

Ricky's eyes widened, and his gaze turned toward the body of water we were seeking. "Ah, hell. I didn't know the thing moved. You guys need to figure it out before the boating activity ramps up again in the morning. Tourism is down because of the hurricane and levee, but the shipping vessels will still be coming through."

I rolled my eyes. "We'll get right on that." I headed for the river and then paused. "It'll be easier if we approach the water from Woldenberg Park, but there will be more mundie witnesses. What do you think?"

Dre wound her arm through Kota's, then mine, and continued walking in my direction. "There isn't an easy approach to the water from the area across from Jackson Square, whereas here we have the beach of rocks. We will cast the aversion spell to keep mundies back.

The three of us ventured out to the riverbank near Woldenberg Park. Dani, Phi, and Dea stayed behind to help Dani's kids handle the arrangements after their father's passing. They needed to write an obituary and create a program for the service. And then pick what the funeral home would put on him for the viewing.

I shoved those depressing thoughts aside so I didn't go down that rabbit hole. It would lead to thoughts of my late husband, Leo, and I needed to get my head in the game. It was impossible to ignore the vibe of the residents as we walked. The city was still reeling from the aftermath of the storm and the break of the levee, and it was obvious. The air felt like a heavy blanket.

We stopped on the foot of grass above the rocks that made up the shore. Standing on the riverbank, we exchanged concerned glances. Their expressions reflected what I was thinking. How in the hell did we coax the creature out?

"This is going to be impossible. Think of how difficult it has been for

people to get pictures of Loch Ness. Some people have been trying for decades,” Kota mused, breaking the silence. “If this is anything similar, we will need to be creative to draw it out.”

Dre thrust her hands on her hips as her blue eyes narrowed on the murky brown water. “We can try using some sort of sonar-like spell to send out vibrations into the water. That might pique its curiosity and draw it closer to the surface.”

“Damn. That’s a great idea,” I said, impressed by Dre's quick thinking. “We could combine it with a spell to create a gentle current that guides it towards us.”

Kota's eyes brightened with excitement. “Yes! And we can set up some kind of illusionary bait that the sea monster might find irresistible.”

“What would a sea monster find irresistible?” Dre wondered aloud. “I don’t know anything about them. But first, let’s do the aversion spell.”

We’d cast this enchantment several times, so it was easier for us and didn’t take long to focus our intent. Our arms were already linked, so we chanted the spell, and the energy rippled out of us and spread like fog rolling in on an autumn morning.

Satisfied we’d cast the spell successfully, I returned to the discussion about attracting the monster. “Obviously, we need to use a lure that mimics the natural prey of sea monsters,” I said. “Maybe something like a school of fish swimming together.”

Dre grinned and nudged me with her shoulder. “And we could imbue it with a faint magical essence to make it even more appealing to the creature.”

As we continued brainstorming, the river's gentle current sparkled under the setting sun, reminding us of the beauty and power of nature. “We need to be careful, though,” I warned, assuming we were dealing with the creature from the levee. “The creature might be agitated after the levee incident. We don't want to provoke it further.”

Kota nodded in agreement. “You're right. We'll have to be cautious. Is it possible to approach it respectfully if we’re luring it out of hiding?”

Dre lifted a shoulder and released us, then shook her shoulders out. “The idea seems preposterous, but just in case, we need to ensure our intent is gentle and not threatening. We should test it to see if we can even do this.”

Nodding in agreement, I shifted my focus and intent. Drawing on our combined magical skills, we crafted a spell that would send out gentle vibrations and create an illusionary bait to entice the sea monster. The air

around us hummed with energy as we channeled our powers, seeking to draw out the ancient creature from the river's depths.

The chiming of Kota's phone interrupted our casting, and we cut off our energy. She pulled her phone from her backpack purse. "It's a text from Kaitlyn, alerting us to some videos that have been posted online by mundies."

Intrigued, Dre and I moved closer and watched over Kota's shoulder as she searched for the videos. My jaw dropped open when dark purple tentacles emerged from the flood waters.

"Well, that answers that," Dre said.

They appeared in several places along the route as the water flowed to the lake. "That's not good. How do we cover something this big up?"

Kota pointed to the bottom of the screen. "I don't know if we will have to do anything. The bright color makes the thing look fake, and people don't believe it's real." I read through several comments on the post and noted that most were filled with skepticism. People dismissed it as a hoax or an attempt to profit from the recent flooding.

"Thank the gods they don't believe it's a real sea monster," Dre commented, her voice tinged with relief.

Kota nodded in agreement. "That's true. The last thing we need is panic spreading among the mundies."

A gentle voice interrupted our thoughts as we continued to ponder the videos and the possible explanations behind the sightings. Turning towards the river, we saw a graceful figure emerge from the water. It had to be a water nymph. Her luminous blue eyes sparkled with curiosity as she regarded us.

"Are you the ones who have been making waves in the magical community?" The nymph asked, her voice as soothing as the river's gentle flow.

I exchanged glances with my sisters, wondering what she was referring to. "Yes, we are trying to help the lake monster find a home away from mundie eyes. We didn't mean to bother you. You're a water nymph, right?"

The nymph laughed, making an enchanting sound. "I am Naiara, the river nymph. And while your power lured me here, I came because I hoped the Twisted Sisters would change life in our wonderful city for all paranormals."

I was surprised that Naiara was aware of our actions. She lived in the river. It didn't seem like she would hear about us. "We are the Twisted Sisters," I replied, cautiously stepping forward, "and we've been doing our best to protect and change the city for the better. And right now, that means

containing the creature that escaped the levee when it broke.”

Naiara's smile grew wider. “I knew it was you guys. I don’t spend much time on the surface and couldn't resist meeting the ones shaping the fate of this place.”

“We're honored,” Kota said, her voice humble yet determined. “But we can't take all the credit. We're just doing what we can, and we usually have help from others.”

Naiara 's eyes sparkled with admiration. “Even so, your efforts have not gone unnoticed. You have brought hope and change to the magical beings of this city.”

As we conversed with Naiara, we learned that she had been residing in the river for centuries, watching over its waters and the living creatures. However, ever since the storm, something had stirred in the depths, causing chaos and distress among the river's inhabitants.

“An ancient power has been awakened,” Naiara said, sharing what others had already told us. “It's like a power out of myths and legends. And it's affecting the balance of the magical world.”

“We've been trying to figure out more about this ancient power,” Dre said. “Do you have any idea what this ancient power could be?”

Naiara hesitated for a moment before responding. “I'm afraid I don't know the specifics. But I can sense its malevolence, and I fear it seeks to wreak havoc on the world.”

“Shit. Do you think it could be afraid? We have reason to believe it was in charge of a powerful artifact that was stolen,” Kota said firmly, her eyes burning with determination.

Naiara nodded in agreement. “The energy doesn’t feel afraid. It’s out for blood.” As we listened to Naiara's words, concern etched on our faces. The ancient power that had been awoken seemed to have disturbed the world on land and the peaceful existence of creatures like her who had lived in harmony with the river for centuries.

“Something has been lurking in the waters since the storm?” Kota asked, her brows furrowed in thought.

Naiara nodded, her eyes clouded with worry. “Yes, it stayed near the levee at first, but then it started venturing further into my domain. It seems agitated, as if searching for something.”

Dre leaned in, her curiosity piqued. “Do you have any idea what it might be looking for?” We assumed it had the crown already. What if it didn’t?



Naiara hesitated, a flicker of fear crossing her features. “My elf friend believes that the creature might be searching for something the Dark Fae stole from it. Whatever it is, it seems to have a strong connection to this ancient power.” Crap. We were wrong in thinking the creature had gotten the crown back. It was in the hands of our enemies as we stood there speaking!

“Why are you staying away from it and spending so much time on land?” I asked gently, sensing her distress and trying not to add to it as my mount.

“I fear the creature's presence,” Naiara confessed, her voice trembling. “It exudes a malevolent energy, and being near it drains me of my magical essence. I have to stay away to protect myself from harm.”

Kota placed a comforting hand on Naiara 's shoulder. “Thank you for sharing this with us. We'll do everything we can to find out what the Dark Fae took and return it to the sea monster. In the meantime, we need you to go somewhere safe until we deal with the creature.”

Naiara nodded and dove back into the water, and disappeared. Dre, Kota, and I stood at the water's edge. With a synchronized gesture, we began to channel our magic, drawing upon the elemental forces that flowed through our veins. We sent out a mental call to the lake monster, asking it to talk to us. It didn't take long this time. The water responded, swirling and churning, a low rumble emanating from the depths below.

I braced myself for the unknown while trying to project an attitude of peace. None of us knew if this creature was peaceful or if it was violent. It appeared violent, but I was okay with it if we didn't have to kill it.

As if rising from the shadows, the lake monster emerged. Its massive form breached the surface, water cascading off its sleek scales. The sight was both awe-inspiring and chilling, a reminder of the ancient power that dwelled within the depths. I hastily widened the aversion spell so no mundies caught this on camera, as purple tentacles snaked out from the water, reaching towards us with almost sinister intent.

“Use your magic!” Dre shouted, her voice cutting through the tension.

With a surge of adrenaline, we unleashed our powers. I created a barrier of energy to repel the tentacles. The air crackled with the clash of magic as we fought to keep the creature at bay. Kota threw a ball of light pink flames at the monster. Somehow, the fire rolled right off it and floated on the water's surface.

The three of us tossed spells at the creature, barely making a dent while dodging those long, purple appendages. My gut clenched as we tried to fight

the thing. It felt wrong to be hurting it while it was doing its job. It had lived peacefully in the levee until some Dark Fae jackass stole the crown. I glanced at my sisters and noted their expressions reflected the same debate.

“We have to talk to it!” Dre's voice rang out again, a note of urgency in her tone.

I nodded and ducked to avoid being struck in the chest. “How do we communicate with it?” We had to understand the creature's motives. Continuing to attack just because it was on edge was wrong. I dropped my offensive spells and changed to defensive ones.

*“Let me handle this,” Adèle's voice resonated in our minds. “I'll be the intermediary between you and the lake monster.”*

With her guidance, we established a mental connection with the creature. Through Adèle, we conveyed our intentions, assuring the monster that we sought the lost crown to prevent it from falling into the wrong hands.

The lake monster's response came as a series of images and emotions, a complex mix of ancient wisdom and apprehension. It revealed its deep concern for the artifact and its fear of the power it contained being misused.

“We promise,” I murmured, my voice carrying the weight of our sincerity. “We won't let it be abused. We'll keep it safe and hidden, far away from those who would exploit its power.”

The lake monster's form shifted, its demeanor softening. It was a moment of understanding, a bridge forged between us and this enigmatic creature of the water. In that shared connection, we sensed a mutual determination to protect the balance of the magical world.

With a final ripple, the lake monster submerged beneath the surface once more, the waters calming as its presence receded. We stood there, the echoes of our encounter lingering in the air, a reminder of the responsibilities we bore and the alliances we had forged.

We were about to turn away when the water rippled again. My heart skipped a beat as I wondered if I had lost my ability to gauge people. When Naiara emerged, I breathed a sigh of relief. The water nymph was looking at us in awe. “Is it safe for us now?”

Dre lifted one shoulder. “Honestly, I can't say with certainty. We hope we relayed that we were only trying to help the creature, but I cannot guarantee it has calmed the thing down. It would be best to keep a distance for now.”

One of the great things about having my sisters with me on these cases

was how they were almost always on the same page as me. Sure, there were other times I had to bash them over the head to get them to listen. Not really, but there were times I wanted to.

“I understand.” Naiara’s eyes shimmered with gratitude. “I knew I could trust in your abilities to bring balance back to the magical world. Please, be cautious.”

“We will be,” Dre assured her. “And we won’t rest until we’ve solved this mystery and neutralized the threat.”

“We forgot to ask earlier. What’s the name of your friend?” I asked, knowing we needed to find her immediately to hunt down the crown. Knowing we’d been wrong about who had possession of the artifact was like a punch to the gut. We needed to lure the lake monster to us, but it would only lash out if we didn’t have what it wanted.

“Her name is Eowyn,” Naiara replied. “She resides in the city’s heart, near the supernatural bars and clubs.”

Kota nodded in appreciation. “Thank you for sharing that with us. We’ll seek her out and see if she can shed some light on the Dark Fae. By the way, this is what I was talking about when I mentioned we had the help of others.”

“Yep. You’re making it possible for us to resolve this situation.” I smiled at her, and then she gave us directions, and we left.

With Naiara’s directions in mind, we set off to find Eowyn. As we approached the bustling area of the city known for its magical gatherings, we kept our senses sharp scanning the crowd for any signs of the elf. There weren’t many out, so getting a good look at people was easy.

“Is that her?” Dre asked, pointing towards a striking figure with an ethereal beauty. Her pointed ears peeked out beneath her silvery-white hair, cascading in soft waves down her back. Her eyes were the color of the clearest emeralds, and she was wearing a t-shirt with the logo for a nursery with a flower and butterfly beneath the name. That’s how Naiara said we would know her.

“Eowyn?” I called out.

Eowyn stopped and watched us warily. “Who are you?”

I introduced the three of us by name and then added that we were one-half of the Twisted Sisters. That made her relax and offer us a friendly smile. “I’m honored to meet you. What brings you to this part of the city?”

“We’ve been investigating the recent disturbances caused by the sea monster,” Kota explained. “Naiara mentioned that you might have some

insights into the situation.”

Eowyn's expression turned serious, and she nodded. “Ah, yes. The sea monster and its stolen artifact. I heard whispers about it from some of my contacts.”

My heart sank as it seemed like she didn't have enough information for us to follow up on. “Can you tell us anything about what was taken and why it's so important to the sea monster? I believe Naiara mentioned some Dark Fae were responsible.”

Eowyn took a moment to gather her thoughts before responding. “From what I gathered the Dark Fae stole an ancient artifact. It was a powerful crown that belonged to the sea monster. The crown seems to have some sort of connection to the creature, like a homing beacon. Which is why it was drawn to the city after the storm.”

Dre frowned. “What would the Dark Fae want with an ancient artifact like that?” We would need to change what people had heard if they were aware of the true powers of the crown. We didn't want people hunting for it.

Eowyn shrugged. “Dark Fae are known for their greed and desire for power. Perhaps they believe that possessing the crown will grant them some form of control over the sea monster or give them access to its abilities.” I almost sighed in relief that the dangerous information wasn't floating around.

Kota crossed her arms over her chest. “We've seen what happens when Dark Fae try to gather power. We need to find that crown and return it to the sea monster. It's the key to ending this chaos.”

Eowyn nodded in agreement. “I couldn't agree more. The sea monster is a guardian of the waters, and we must respect its ancient bond with the crown.”

“We'll do everything we can to locate the crown and neutralize the threat,” I said firmly. “Who are these Dark Fae, and do you know where we can find them?”

Eowyn stepped closer to us and looked around nervously. “I heard someone mention his name is Elan. He lives with several other Dark Fae in an old house at the city's edge, near the outskirts of the Enchanted Forest.”

Kota raised an eyebrow in surprise. “The Enchanted Forest? Where exactly is that located? We've never heard of it before.”

Eowyn cocked her head to the side. “The Fae don't discuss it much because we want to keep it pristine. The forest offers a veil of secrecy and protection, which likely attracted Elan to settle near there. But that would disappear if too many moved there, polluting the Fae energy.”

Dre leaned forward, intrigued. “Do you know anything about his motives for stealing the crown? And why would he provoke the sea monster by doing so?”

The elf sighed softly. “Elan has always been known for his ambitious and cunning nature. He desires power and control. I assume he wanted the crown to boost himself. I’ve heard it holds immense magical potential. Undoubtedly, he took it for his own selfish purposes, without considering the consequences of provoking the sea monster and upsetting the balance of power.”

I wrapped my arms around myself to ward off the chill that sent through me. “What else can you tell us?”

“I heard mentioned that Elan’s friend is involved. Her name is Rhyssa,” Eowyn said.

Armed with the descriptions of the Dark Fae and his friend, we thanked Eowyn and took our leave of her. “Why does that name sound familiar?” Dre asked as we walked across the French Quarter to the parking lot.

“I think one of the shifters mentioned Rhyssa’s name. It was after Nihadi took over the Dark Fae,” I shared as we walked. “We can go searching for the Enchanted Forest. But I’d rather see if we can approach Rhyssa somewhere they aren’t as likely to have backup.”

Dre nodded her head. “That would be my preference as well.”

My mind immediately went to Lucas. He would be able to tell me which shifter was after Rhyssa. I took out my phone and dialed his number.

“Hey, Flower. What’s going on?” Lucas’s voice sent ripples of warmth through my body.

“We got credible information on the Dark Fae that stole the crown from the levee, and we need your help in tracking down someone,” I said urgently. I’d much rather flirt and make plans for later tonight, but we needed to take care of this right away.

“You know I’m always ready to help. Who are we looking for?” he asked.

“We’re trying to find a shifter who is interested in a Dark Fae woman named Rhyssa. Word is that she is involved with Elan, another Dark Fae who stole the ancient crown.”

Lucas paused for a moment before responding. “Honestly, I can’t recall who that was off the top of my head. I vaguely recall the conversation because you advised him to be careful with a being known for their Darkness. I’ll start tracking my shifter down and get any information I can on Rhyssa.”

“Thanks, Chief. The faster we can get this solved and get the crown back, the sooner we can take it to the lake monster.”

“It’s the least I can do while you guys are dealing with this on top of the loss of Mike. Will I see you later?”

“We will be home in a bit, but just so you know, Dre, Kota, and I are hangry.”

Lucas laughed, the sound doing all kinds of things to me. “I’ll be sure to have food ready and waiting. Love you.”

“Love you too.” As I ended the call, a sense of hope washed over me. With Lucas's help, we were one step closer to uncovering the truth behind the stolen crown and the Dark Fae's motives.

# CHAPTER 8



## DANIELLE

As we approached the shifter's residence, I wondered if Drew would hate me if I didn't finish the mating ritual with Noah. It would piss me off if someone left one of my brothers or sisters to go insane. The pressure on me to permanently commit to Noah was enough to make me break. I wasn't going to let that be the reason I mated him. It had to be for love or not at all.

I was filled with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension as we approached the front door. The past few days' events had taken a toll on all of us, especially my children. I tried to remain focused on uncovering the truth behind the stolen crown and Elan's motives, but it was next to impossible with the pain my kids were in at the moment.

I prayed that Drew had valuable information on the Dark Fae responsible for the theft. Anything that could aid our investigation. Drew welcomed us with a warm smile into his cozy home. His amber eyes gleamed with kindness, and his presence exuded a sense of strength and resilience.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with us, Drew," I began, trying to keep the conversation casual. "We're curious to know about your encounter with the Dark Fae, Rhyssa."

Drew's expression turned to one of surprise. "There's not much to know. We met at Final Swallow." That wasn't surprising, given it was the city's most popular supernaturally owned bar. "Things seemed to be going well at first, and we connected over our shared interests. But then, the conversation took a dark turn."

He hesitated for a moment before continuing, "Rhyssa started spewing hate about the Twisted Sisters, blaming you for the mess in our city. She accused you guys of killing her leader and causing chaos and destruction."

My heart sank at the revelation. It wasn't the first time we had encountered prejudice and blame, but it still stung to know that some beings saw us as the root of their problems when we worked so hard to protect this city and make life better for everyone.

"What did you say to her?" Dre asked, her voice tinged with curiosity.

"I told her that she was wrong, that the Twisted Sisters were the best thing that had happened to our city. I mentioned the countless lives you've



saved and the balance you've restored. The protection you've provided to both magical and mundane residents.”

Phi smiled appreciatively. “That’s very nice of you to say. I imagine you had to say those things, given that your alpha and beta are mated to two of us. Regardless, it means a lot to us to have your support. Especially when you give it in a setting where others can overhear you.”

Drew shrugged and looked at each of us. “I may be a shifter, but I've seen firsthand your positive impact on our city. I won't stand by and let anyone spread falsehoods about you. And I would do that even if you weren’t part of the pack.”

“Did Rhyssa mention anything about the stolen crown or her motives for taking it?” As the mate to the alpha, Lia was in a better position to get answers than the rest of us.

Drew's brow furrowed as he recalled the conversation. “She didn’t say anything about it the first time, but when I saw her the other day, she mentioned something about a powerful artifact she had acquired. She was vague about what it was. She also didn’t say anything about its nature and purpose. I got the sense that Rhyssa was up to something big, something that could cause serious trouble.”

Dea's eyes narrowed. “This might be difficult for you since you like the woman. But we need to find her and retrieve that crown before she and her cohorts cause more harm.”

Lia nodded in agreement. “Leaving it in her hands could spell trouble for the entire planet. It’s connected to a powerful loa and in the wrong hands can give them the ability to convince others to join their side.”

Drew shuddered as he processed information very few had. “Rhyssa seemed like a perfectly normal and friendly person at first. We hit it off at the bar. We talked about jewelry and how she was adjusting because she had recently moved to the city.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “What about jewelry? Did she ask about the crown before the storm?” Had they known it was hidden somewhere? The Dark Fae had been in the Fae realm until recently, so the only way they’d have known about it was if Marie Leveau told them.

Drew walked into the small office connected to his living room and came back with a wooden box. “She complimented the leather cuff I was wearing and asked where I got it. She was intrigued to discover I made jewelry.”

Kota leaned forward, curious to know more. “How did that change

things?”

Drew picked up a silver chain, and an intricate charm hung from the end. “Her demeanor shifted when I told her how I wanted to sell my creations in the gift shop at Willowberry Plantation. As soon as I mentioned that, she became cold and distant.”

Dea raised an eyebrow. “Did she say anything in response?”

“That was when she started spewing about how you six were evil,” Drew replied. “She seemed pissed at the idea of me partnering with you guys. It was like she was a jealous girlfriend and didn't want me to be involved with Willowberry.”

“That's strange,” I mused, furrowing my brows in thought.

Drew's eyes widened in realization. “You think she might have taken the crown to hurt you guys?”

Kota shrugged. “We can't be sure, but it's a possibility we can't ignore. Many people don't like the changes we have been instigating lately.”

Dea added, “I bet anything that Marie helped Rhyssa and Elan establish housing and identification, so she likely shared her hatred with them.”

“Rhyssa was pretty pissed about her leader and what happened to him. This might not be about Marie,” Drew said.

I sighed, feeling the weight of the situation adding to the burden I was already carrying. “And if Rhyssa feels like that, no doubt Elan does as well. He seems to be the mastermind behind the theft. We can't let Elan get away with whatever he's planning.”

Phi nodded in agreement. “And watch for any clues or evidence that might lead us to the crown.”

As we continued to discuss our next steps, I couldn't help but wonder about Elan's true motives and what he hoped to achieve with the stolen crown. As was usually the case with these matters, there was a sense of urgency in the air; knowing that the fate of our city and its magical inhabitants hung in the balance.

“Tell me why you haven't approached us about your jewelry before, Drew?” Dre asked with a warm smile. “We're always here to help our fellow supernaturals, including businesses like this.”

Lia nodded in agreement. “Absolutely. You're part of our family, and we look out for each other.”

Drew's face softened, and a hint of pink filled his cheeks. “Thank you. I've heard about your reputation and the good you've done for our city. I've

been preparing some samples to show you as I develop my pitch.”

I peeked into the wooden box and looked over the pieces in there. There was a wide, silver cuff with a gorgeous dragonfly etched into the surface, dangly earrings with hearts, and numerous rings with precious stones. “These are stunning. I know visitors would love a chance to pick up a one-of-a-kind creation. There’s no reason to come up with a formal proposal.”

Phi picked up a ring with rose quartz. “I’d like this for my daughter. We only need you to consider the percentage you’re willing to give the shop. It will go towards paying the salary of the clerks and improvements to the structure in the future.”

“You’d be paying some of your fellow shifters since that’s who is running the place for us,” I said. “Back to Rhyssa and Elan. Can you tell us everything you know about her and the Dark Fae?”

Kota leaned forward and looked at the jewelry. “Did Rhyssa say where she was living?”

Drew nodded. “Specific questions are easier to answer. She mentioned a temporary house they were staying in near a forest. But she also mentioned they were planning to move soon.” That was interesting. I was glad we hadn’t rushed right for the Enchanted Forest when Dre, Kota, and Lia came home and told us about it.

Dea raised an eyebrow. “Where are they planning to move to?”

“Elan wanted to live in the Garden District,” Drew replied. “But Rhyssa’s best friend insisted on Gentilly because they could get a house there for less money, and they could fix it up.”

“That’s interesting,” Phi remarked, “Gentilly isn’t far from here.”

Lia turned to me, concern in her eyes. “Dani, this could be a lead. If they’re moving soon, we might be able to catch them before they go.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. “We need to act quickly. Drew, do you know anything else about Rhyssa and her friends?”

Drew furrowed his brows in thought. “Not much, unfortunately. She didn’t reveal many personal details, and I didn’t understand that she was entirely trustworthy. It’s why I have avoided her ever since I saw her last. I heard what you guys said about being cautious and not being fooled.”

Dre nodded. “That’s understandable. It sounds like she might be keeping her true intentions hidden.”

Kota put one of the rings on her first finger. “We’ll need to be cautious when we approach them. If Elan has the crown, he might be more powerful

and dangerous by now.”

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Lia added. “But we can't let that stop us from finding out the truth and neutralizing the power of the stolen crown.”

I nodded, feeling a mixture of determination and concern. “We'll need to plan carefully and act swiftly. Drew, thank you for sharing this information with us. It's incredibly valuable.”

Drew smiled gratefully. “I'm just glad I could help. Please don't hesitate to ask if there's anything else I can do.”

“Trust me, we won't. We know better than to try and do this on our own,” I said, feeling a sense of camaraderie with this brave shifter who had come forward to assist us. “We appreciate your courage in sharing with us. Many would have remained quiet or given little information.”

With plans to have Drew bring his jewelry to the plantation, we left. As we got into Lia's SUV, the atmosphere was tense, with a mix of determination and concern hanging in the air. We were all contemplating our next move in the search for the stolen crown and the elusive Dark Fae, Elan, and Rhyssa.

“Drew's information about Rhyssa and her friend seems legitimate,” Lia said, breaking the silence that had settled over us. “The fact that they plan to move to Gentilly might be significant.”

I nodded, my mind racing with possibilities. “It does make sense. After all, we found the previous Dark Fae in Gentilly. There could be some connection.”

Dre said, “It's like they're drawn to the area for a reason. We need to find out what that reason is.”

Phi added, “We also need to be prepared for any surprises. If Elan is the one with the stolen crown, she could turn us to her side before we ever set eyes on them.”

“Then it sounds like we need to create some charms to protect against the old magic.” Kota nodded in agreement. “We can't underestimate her. We have to be careful and strategic in our approach.”

Dea's eyes held determination as she spoke, “And we need to move quickly. If they're planning to move soon, we need to find them before they can establish their power in the new place.”

I took a deep breath, my heart heavy with the weight of everything lately. “I agree. The safety of our city and its magical inhabitants is at stake. We can't afford to let this situation escalate.”

As we sat there, each of us lost in our thoughts, I couldn't help but feel a surge of emotion. I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer, hoping that we could find the crown soon and neutralize its power. I prayed that we would have the strength and wisdom to confront Elan and put an end to his dangerous schemes.

“We need to be united and strong,” I said, my voice filled with determination. “This is a challenge we face together, as sisters. Using our powers and our bond to protect our city and its people has to be a blessing from Mama.”

Dre placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. “We've faced tough situations before, Dani. And we've always come out stronger on the other side, and I know it's because of Mama.”

“You're right,” I said, finding comfort in her words. “We've overcome obstacles and adversaries together. This will be no different.”

Lia nodded and had a determined glint in her eyes. “We'll find the crown, Dani. And we'll do whatever it takes to stop Elan from causing more harm.”

# CHAPTER 9



## DAKOTA

“*L*ia, we have to find those thieves and the stolen crown,” I said, my voice filled with exasperation. It felt like over the past twenty-four hours, we’d jumped from one lead to the next without ever getting anywhere. “The longer we wait, the more danger it poses to our city and its people.”

Lia and I sat side by side in the quiet library at Willowberry Plantation, surrounded by ancient tomes and magical artifacts. In the center of it all lay Oathkeeper, the book gifted to us by the goddess Athena herself. Its pages were filled with endless wisdom and secrets that only revealed themselves when the book’s magic deemed fit.

Lia nodded, her eyes focused on Oathkeeper. “You’re right. We can’t afford to waste any more time. We need to know where to start looking. I’m not a fan of the cryptic answers Oathkeeper keeps giving us, though.”

Taking a deep breath, I opened the book. The pages came to life, swirling with energy as the book connected to our minds. I hesitated and looked around the house for our mischievous little familiar.

“*I am here and ready to help you interpret what the book gives you.*” Adèle ran into the room carrying a string in her mouth, flopped onto her side, and started playing tug of war with the thing in her mouth.

Lia and I chuckled and then reached out to scratch behind her ear. I waited for the scratching of claws on the wood floors to signal our Frenchies were in hot pursuit of the soft grey kitten. I had three Frenchies, Lia had two, Dani had one. All six dogs loved chasing Adèle.

Lifting a shoulder when they didn’t follow, I figured they were sleeping somewhere in the massive house. We moved them to Dre’s house or outside when we had tours running. Otherwise, visitors would be bombarded by cuteness and gas. The noxious odor the six of them could put out was often enough to peel paint. We were just beginning to make enough money on the tours to finish the gift shop. None of us wanted to lose that momentum.

“Oathkeeper, we seek your guidance,” Lia said, her voice steady and clear. It felt silly being so formal, but it’s what came naturally to us when using the powerful tome. “Tell us where we can find the thieves who stole the crown.”

The book responded with black ink appearing across the blank page it had stopped on. “The path to the truth lies in a thorough search. Seek out every clue, every lead, and follow them diligently.”

I exchanged a glance with Lia and barely resisted rolling my eyes. This was precisely the kind of bullshit we’d been getting from the book. Personally, I was tempted to call Athena back and ask why her book gave us such crappy answers. Dre had told us that if the goddess started giving us plain answers, we would get lazy. Begrudgingly, I could admit she was right. But would it be so bad? Having a place to start would mean that we could handle the crises before they got out of hand.

*“If you had been given the location of the crown right away, you would have missed information on Oshun and discovering the reason behind Marie’s change of heart. Taking the shortcut leaves you with half of a picture, which can lead to even more problems.”* Adèle’s voice spoke into our heads while she continued playing with her string.

“Were you thinking about why the book gives us vague responses, too?” Lia asked.

“Yeah. It’s frustrating. And I know what Dre and Adèle have said is true. So where does that leave us?”

Lia picked up the end of the string and started moving it back and forth for Adèle. “That’s the problem we needed help with. We still don’t know where to begin. There are so many potential leads.”

I shook my head as I shoved my annoyance aside. “Not true. We’ll have to start with what we know. Drew mentioned Rhyssa and her friend. We know they are moving to Gentilly and that they used to live in the Enchanted Forest.”

Lia’s shoulders lifted to her ears. “You’re right. We should also speak to the Fae who saw the thieves from their house. We never asked if they knew anything about the culprits after they said the thieves took off. They might have more information that could lead us to them.”

As we made a list of all the potential leads, I felt a mix of anxiety and excitement. We were on the cusp of something big, and I knew that our every move could make a difference. But all I wanted to do right then was curl up with my dogs and watch a TV show. I missed the simplicity of those days, but I wouldn’t change a thing about my life now.

“That’s not a bad idea. We should pay them another visit if we can’t find anything in Gentilly. The question is, do we drive or walk?” I held my breath,



hoping she would believe we could do this from the car.

“Walk. It’ll be hard to pick up on Dark Fae energy from a moving vehicle,” Lia said as she smiled at me. “I’ll grab one of the reveal potions we have to see past their glamours.”

I made a face at her as I closed the book. I picked it up to take it back upstairs, noting that its pages were still glowing with magical energy. I let Lia take it from me and run it up the right staircase to put away while I grabbed our purses and waited downstairs for her. She was back within no time, and we were climbing into her SUV.

I gestured to a famous coffee shop on the border of the Gentilly neighborhood. “Let’s park here and grab an iced tea.” I pulled out my phone and added my drink into the app while Lia turned in and found a spot. She added a lemonade, and I placed the order.

Lia and I grabbed our cold beverages and started walking through the streets of Gentilly. It didn’t take long before I noticed the air of tension that hung in the atmosphere. The aftermath of the storm and the flooding had left its mark on the neighborhood, and the residents were still reeling from the devastation. I could sense the unease and fear in the air, like a palpable energy that enveloped the area.

“Do you feel that?” Lia asked, her voice low and contemplative as she looked around.

A frown tugged at the corners of my lips. “The sensation as if the entire neighborhood is holding its breath, waiting for something to happen?”

She sighed, her eyes scanning the surroundings. “Yeah. I can't shake the feeling that something more is happening here. Something beyond the flood and the storm and the missing crown.”

“I know what you mean,” I replied, my senses on high alert as we continued to walk. “It's like there's an undercurrent of energy beneath it all, something powerful and mysterious.”

Lia's gaze continuously scanned the street around us. “I think you're right. We know that the storm awakened something, and now it's stirring, restless. But it isn’t the lake monster or the missing crown.”

Nothing else needed to be said after that. Worrying about everything else that might have been disturbed or unearthed was pointless when we already had an urgent matter. We walked in silence for a moment, each lost in our thoughts. I couldn't shake the feeling that there was more at play here and we were missing something.

“Maybe this is connected to the stolen crown and the Dark Fae,” Lia mused, her eyes narrowing in concentration.

“That’s possible,” I agreed, my mind racing with possibilities. “The gods only know what was disrupted and what this ancient, long-dormant power is capable of.”

Lia sipped her drink, finishing the last of it as she considered her response. “That magical storm has created a whole new slew of problems that we must solve as they rear their ugly heads.”

I snorted as I tossed my empty cup in a trash can we passed. “We need to find a way to discover more before myriad problems inundate us at once.”

“Don’t say that. Don’t even think it,” Lia snapped. “You’re going to curse us and this city.”

As we continued our walk through the neighborhood, the sense of urgency riding me only got worse. There was something dark and dangerous lurking in the shadows. Nothing jumped out at me as we walked up and down each side of the streets in a thorough search so we didn’t miss anything.

The energies we felt as we walked the streets of Gentilly only reinforced my belief that this was just beginning. The storm of darkness and ancient powers was just emerging. “Does it feel like whatever is out there is gathering energy for you?”

Lia cocked her head to the side and wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. “Not at all. It might be because I’m distracted. I keep praying for one of my smell-o-visions to show me where these Dark Fae assholes are moving to. Or maybe it’s a skill only you have. What exactly are you sensing?”

I shut my eyes for a second and took in several deep breaths as I tried to grasp the sensations. “I can’t say precisely. It’s too ephemeral. I can’t get anything more substantial. It might be nothing.”

Lia wound her arm through mine. “This might be something you need to practice. Or maybe whatever you’re picking up on is waking slowly and doesn’t have enough power yet. Or maybe you just need to rest. Let’s stop and get some lunch.”

“I could go for a good muffuletta and some fruit.” I hadn’t thought about food during our long trek through the neighborhood, which wasn’t like me, given that it was lunchtime. I didn’t skip meals, ever. More than anything, that proved how much I was consumed with trying to pick up what was happening around us.

As we sat down at a quaint café, we tried to push our worries aside for a moment and engage in light conversation. We talked about our families, our kids, and the challenges they faced now that they were adults. It was a bittersweet topic, as we were both proud of our children but worried about the dangers they might face in the magical world.

“I can't believe they have magic,” Lia said, her eyes filled with both pride and concern. “We don't know much about their powers yet, but I can't shake the desire to protect them from all the darkness out there. It doesn't help that they're young adults that barely know how to navigate the mundie world.”

I nodded in agreement, sipping on my coffee. “I know what you mean. It's a constant struggle between wanting them to be strong and independent and wanting to shield them from harm.”

“True that,” Lia said as we munched on fresh fruit and delicious sandwiches.

After finishing our food, we continued our walk through the neighborhood. Lia had grabbed one of the reveal potions, hoping it would help us see the Dark Fae we were looking for, but we hadn't taken it yet.

Lia left cash on the table for the tip after we'd paid and got up to leave. I sidled up to her and leaned closer to her. “We should take that potion before we go back out there. I know we hoped we could find them before they got set up and hidden, but we shouldn't take that chance when we have a way to see through their spells.”

Lia stuffed her hand into her purse. “I forgot we'd even brought it with us.” She handed me a vial and downed the other one.

I tipped back the bitter liquid with a shudder. We continued down the street as the potion took effect. It would allow us to see past the Dark Fae enchantment that they used to hide their presence.

An hour later, we hadn't run across any Dark Fae, hidden or otherwise. Lia ran a hand through her platinum blonde hair and breathed. “That was a waste of a potion. We're walking in circles out here. How else can we find Rhyssa and Elan?”

“What about calling their new leader Nihadi?” I suggested as I manifested a hand-held fan so I could cool down. “She seemed nice enough. I liked that she wasn't all sunshine and rainbows and refused to take the alliance Marie had offered her. I have to respect a woman who stands on her own.”

Lia frowned at me. “You could have wished for one of those for me too. And Nihadi is a great idea. As the Dark Fae leader, she has to know where

her people are, right?”

I rolled my eyes and manifested a hand fan for Lia, then handed it to her as she grabbed her cell phone and called Nihadi, putting it on speaker. My heart raced at the thought of talking to the Dark Fae leader out in the open like this.

“Hello, Dahlia,” Nihadi greeted in a cultured tone.

Lia smiled and leaned toward the phone. “Hello, Nihadi. I’m here with Kota, and we hope to discuss something with you immediately. Do you have time to come by Willowberry Plantation?” I let out my breath and sagged as Lia said that.

“I can be there in ten minutes. See you then.” The line went dead without her waiting for Lia to respond.

Lia lifted a shoulder and turned us down a street that would take us back to the coffee shop and her car. “That woman is odd, but I’m glad she can meet with us. I just wish the others were going to be back.”

I shook my head, thinking about everything Dea, Phi, and Dre were helping Dani and her children with today. Planning a funeral and dealing with an estate without a will was a major pain in the ass. Everyone was shocked to discover Mike didn’t have anything documenting what he wanted to be done with his house, pension, and other belongings.

Seeing the coffee shop up ahead, I ordered another round of drinks along with bottles of water. I was covered in sweat when I walked in and grabbed the drinks. Lia and I discussed what we would do if Nihadi couldn’t cross our wards to visit us to the house. If that happened, that meant she wanted to harm us. So I voted to stay far away from here while Lia wanted to call a council meeting and confront her.

I didn’t need to worry about confronting a powerful Dark Fae because she was at the plantation and looking into the gift shop window when we arrived.

A relieved smile spread across Lia’s face as we approached the Dark Fae leader. “Thanks for coming on such short notice. The situation is urgent, or I wouldn’t have asked.”

Nihadi inclined her head. “I assumed as much. Does this have to do with the water creature spreading across social media? It’s not a Dark Fae creature. We had nothing to do with it.”

One of my eyebrows rose to my hairline as my hackles rose. “We didn’t invite you to accuse you of anything. The creature was dormant until the storm and is upset right now because some individuals stole a powerful

artifact that it was responsible for keeping safe.”

Nihadi’s eyes widened, and then her expression hardened. “Let me guess, some Dark Fae carried out the theft, and you think I know something. I shouldn’t be surprised you’re flinging more accusations and biases because of my predecessor.”

I understood her frustration. The actions of one individual should not dictate how we view an entire race or species, but it wasn’t always easy to separate the two.

I held my hands up, palms out. “Look, Nihadi. We're not here to judge you based on your predecessor's actions. You’re right about the identity of the thieves. We just need information about the Dark Fae who stole the crown. Lives are at stake, and we're trying to stop any further harm.”

Nihadi's expression softened slightly, but she remained closed off with her arms crossed over her chest. “I get it, but you have to understand how difficult it is to face prejudice because of the actions of a few constantly.”

Adèle prowled out from the area between the main house and the caterer’s kitchen and looked up at us. “*Lia and Kota mean no offense, Nihadi. They can see how you’ve handled things differently, so they called you to begin with. We just need your help to find the individuals responsible.*”

Lia nodded in agreement and gestured to the tables we kept set up outside. “I would have been clearer over the phone, but we were on a sidewalk in Gentilly and unable to say more. Before we continue, would you like something to drink? We have some Fae punch left over from an event we had not long ago.”

Nihadi dropped her arms and headed for the tables. “Punch would be lovely. I haven’t had any for months.”

I sat down next to Nihadi while Lia went into the caterer’s kitchen and grabbed some drinks. “I imagine your transition into this leadership role has been tough. Your predecessor left you a lot of problems to clean up.”

Nihadi barked out a bitter laugh. “You have no idea. The man always sided with evil people. However, Marie Leveau isn’t what I anticipated, given her previous actions. I don’t know what to make of her yet.”

“Neither do we,” Lia agreed as she set the drinks down and joined us. “We asked you here for help, but I can’t ignore what you must be facing. Is there anything we can do to help you, Nihadi?”

The Dark Fae leader sipped her punch as she watched us for a second. “Knowing you don’t think I'm like Remzyn is enough. It's just... difficult, you

know? My people have faced so much discrimination and fear because of those who came before me. We have a unique ability to tolerate iron, which has often been seen as a threat by others. They fear our strength, see it as darkness, and treat us accordingly. That's what gave my kind our bad reputation centuries ago."

I nodded in understanding, knowing that history and prejudice left deep scars on entire communities.

"I want my people to learn a better way to live," Nihadi said, her voice filled with determination. "To show the world that we can coexist peacefully, that we are not the monsters they believe us to be."

"That's a noble vision," I replied, giving her a reassuring smile. "But I know it won't be easy. Changing centuries of prejudice and fear is a daunting task. You can begin by helping us. I know it will be difficult to turn on one of your own, but the artifact Elan and Rhyssa stole is incredibly powerful and very dangerous."

Nihadi dropped her hands into her lap. "You're right. It's a long and challenging road ahead. And it got worse when our previous leader agreed to work with King Vodor to control the Fae realm. The association with the Evil Fae King only deepened the mistrust towards our kind."

I could see the pain in her eyes, the weight of the past, and the burden of responsibility she carried. "We will do what we can to rehabilitate your reputation here. We can also reach out to friends that oversee the portal to your home realm and let them know not all Dark Fae are evil."

Lia nodded as she picked up Adèle. "If I remember right, Aislinn's mate is the current king's brother. We can start conversations for your kind that could mend fences."

"I will do what I can to find Elan. I'm not privy to a lot of information. Things for my people are up in arms," Nihadi admitted.

Lia's expression held a hint of sympathy as she took a sip of her energy drink. "I imagine there are many who refuse to follow your lead. I just hope that they aren't in the majority."

Nihadi waved a hand as she finished her drink. "They aren't the majority. Most Dark Fae never agreed to follow Remzyn in his support of King Vodor, but they were powerless to do anything about it. Tell me more about what was stolen and how it relates to the lake monster."

Lia and I told her everything about the crown, Oshun, and the influence over others. I was hesitant to share at first but followed Lia's lead. Nihadi

was a member of the council and in a position to help us. Without the proper information, she couldn't do that very effectively.

Nihadi blew out a breath and leaned her elbows on the table. "This is as dire as my instincts were telling me. I lost track of Elan and his cohorts weeks ago, but I will ask around."

Lia frowned at the Dark Fae leader. "Won't that be dangerous for you? We don't want you to be at risk."

Nihadi lifted a shoulder. "If my people find out I'm working with you, they could get pissed. They're wary. I may have my reservations about outsiders, but I also understand the importance of finding that stolen crown. It affects all of us, and I want to see it returned safely."

Lia smiled warmly at Nihadi, her diplomatic nature shining through. "We're grateful for your cooperation. Please let us know if you hear anything about the theft or any other suspicious activities. We're all in this together."

Nihadi nodded again. "I will start looking into this. If anything comes up, you'll be the first to know."

"Thank you. And let us know if there is anything we can do for you," Lia replied.

We said goodbye to Nihadi not long after that, and I couldn't help but feel a mix of emotions. On one hand, I was relieved that she was willing to assist us in our investigation. It was a small step towards building trust and understanding between our different communities.

However, I also knew that our quest to find the stolen crown was far from over. There were still many unanswered questions, and the trail of the Dark Fae and the stolen artifact was getting colder by the day.

# CHAPTER 10





## DAHLIA

My nerves jangled as my sisters and I entered Sunwhisper Sanctum. The rundown building was in the middle of being restored. Dani had spurred the renovations, and now we had a bathroom, a basic kitchen, and room to hold council meetings. There was still a lot to do, but the rest would have to wait until everything settled down.

I turned and smiled at the pixies who were watching through the windows. We'd run into them not long ago on Royal Street when they were under the influence of a spell. More fluttered from the plants in the courtyard where they lived.

The atmosphere was tense with the weight of the recent flooding plaguing our city as the other council members filed in. The water had caused immense damage, as had the lake monster and missing crown. We had to act swiftly to avert any further catastrophe.

Cyran stood at the front as he waited until the vampire leader, Viktor, snuck in through the shadows. "Thank you all for being here," Cyran said. He had called this meeting. "I've been working non-stop with several other Light Fae to redirect the water and prevent any more damage to the homes. It's been a challenging task, but we're making progress. The problem of the lake monster continues to plague us, and we are having a difficult time dismissing the videos as fake."

I listened intently, feeling a sense of relief, knowing that Cyran was doing all he could to help the residents affected by the flooding. His dedication to our city and its people was unwavering, and I knew we were fortunate to have him on our side.

*"Everyone needs to remain vigilant and keep their eyes open,"* Adèle advised. She shared her insights with us. She had been watching through our eyes and heard what Cyran said.

Several people looked around. "Who was that?" Viktor asked with a scowl on his pale face.

My jaw dropped, and I shared a look with my sisters. I didn't think Adèle could talk to others unless she was present in the same room. "That was our familiar Adèle. She spoke to you all?"

Heads moved up and down as Adèle responded. *“Having bonded to more than one witch, I was given expanded communication abilities. I wasn’t aware I was talking to the entire council. Since I have your attention, you should know that the situation is complex. There may be more to it than meets the eye. We should be prepared for any unexpected turns.”*

Based on the facial expressions around me, her words resonated with everyone. They didn’t dismiss that she was reminding us of the importance of staying alert and adaptable in the face of uncertainty. *“Nothing is ever straightforward with the magical world entwined with the mundane. We have to be ready for any hidden challenges,”* Adèle added.

The weight of these issues was evident on everyone’s face—even Marie Leveau, whom I didn’t trust one bit. The stolen crown, the lake monster, and the storm’s aftermath were all pressing issues that demanded our attention. There was no way we were going to contain everything unless we worked together, pooling our strengths and resources, to find a solution that would protect both the magical and human communities.

Dre was the first to speak up, her eyes determined as she addressed the group. *“We need to gather more information about the Dark Fae and the stolen crown. I know Nihadi is already gathering what information she can. It would help if everyone asked around, too. Finding the crown is the best way to stop the lake monster. It’s acting out because of that.”*

Phi cocked her head to the side. *“Do you think we can also use the locator spell to trace the crown’s energy and narrow down its location? I don’t know if that will work over any protections the Dark Fae might place on the artifact.”*

Nihadi pursed her lips as she shook her head. *“They’ll use runes to cloak its presence. I don’t know enough about witchcraft to know if that would be possible.”*

Kaitlyn tapped the table in front of her. *“A witch’s magic works on a different wavelength. Because the six of you have some Fae heritage, it might be possible for you to do it. You would need significant time and energy to see beyond the runes.”*

*“That can be one thing the six of us sisters work on. While we’re doing that, we should also address the lake monster. I can research ancient texts and lore to see if there’s any information on a way to communicate with it so we can let it know.”*

Viktor, the vampire leader, leaned forward. *“I have some contacts in the*

Underworld who might know something about the Dark Fae. I'll reach out to them and see what I can find.”

Cyran, the light Fae leader, nodded in approval. “And I'll continue to work on redirecting the floodwaters away from the city. It's a slow process, but it's making a difference.”

Talindra, the elf leader, spoke next. “I have some knowledge of water magic. I can help strengthen Cyran's efforts and ensure that the water flows where it needs to go.”

Shayla, the demon leader, added her input. “I'll mobilize my fellow demons to keep an eye out for any signs of the Dark Fae. We have contacts in various parts of the city, and we can gather information from Torfimm.” That was the city's seedy underbelly that Xinar had taken Dani, Dre, and me to not long ago.

Kassandra, the gargoyle leader, spoke last. “I can use my abilities to scout the city from above and monitor any suspicious activities. I might be able to spot the Dark Fae or the lake monster from the skies.”

As each leader shared their ideas and strategies, I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride and gratitude. Our diverse group had never come together before my sisters and I had pushed the issue. With this mix of unique strengths and abilities, we formed a formidable team that would keep our city safe.

Kaveh, the djinn leader, stepped forward. He held a packet of information. “In other news, I have the hotline set up. We need to decide how we want to do this.”

I took the papers from Kaveh. “Thanks for doing this, Kaveh. As everyone knows, this hotline will be a great asset for the community to reach us with their concerns, information, and emergencies. It's a big step for keeping everyone on the same page.”

Phi nodded in agreement. “My husband helped me set up a database that can be accessed from various computers so staff can enter call details and the council can look them up.”

“Communication is key in times like these. If we put out a notice to look for the Dark Fae thieves, we might get calls through the hotline, too. But we need to find individuals to staff it around the clock,” Kaveh said.

“It's good to see everyone coming together to tackle this situation. Who has people that might want to answer the phone? I can put my kids to work, but that's a last resort,” Dre said.

I nodded in agreement. “We need someone available during the day to answer calls efficiently. Our kids grew up in the mundie world and would need more training on who to contact when there is an emergency. Perhaps we can have someone stationed at our headquarters for each shift.”

“I say we implement a rotating on-call position. This way, everyone gets a chance to rest and recharge. The last thing we need is our staff burning out,” Cassandra said.

“That sounds fair,” Nihadi agreed. “No one should have to bear the burden alone.”

I considered how this would work for those operating the lines. “After hours, we should redirect calls to staff members' homes. That way, they can respond from a more comfortable and familiar environment. And we can address urgent matters even during off-hours.”

“That's a great idea,” Dea chimed in. “It'll also ensure we stay connected with our community no matter the time.”

“I think it's a good idea for the employees to work from home,” Dea said. “It will ensure their safety and allow us to be more flexible in responding to the calls.”

“Working from home will also help reduce the risk of exposure and ensure we can continue our operations smoothly,” Cyran interjected.

“I have Elle and Hannah, two of my witches, who have volunteered to help with the hotline,” Kaitlyn interjected. “They want to be actively involved in the community after their recent experiences.”

“But how will they know how to handle the calls? It's a delicate task,” Marie Leveau said, her disdain evident in her tone. There was no mistaking that she hadn't really changed.

“I've trained volunteers who advocate for abused children in the past,” I said. “I can adapt the training to fit their situation. It's about active listening, empathy, and providing information or redirecting calls when necessary.” Never thought my Masters' Degree in Social Work would come in handy in the magical world.

“That might work. I just want to ensure that we handle the calls professionally and sensitively.” Marie's chin was lifted haughtily as she spoke.

“Everyone should prepare information I can add to a reference guide for staff.” My mind was already coming up with ways to adjust the books I'd used on the hotlines I used to volunteer for. “That's the best way to ensure

that our volunteers are well-prepared and equipped to handle any situation that comes their way.”

As the council meeting progressed, Nihadi, Kaitlyn, and Cyran shared the names of individuals who desired to participate in our efforts. Nihadi spoke passionately about members of her community who wanted to lend a hand, and Kaitlyn mentioned witches from her coven who were eager to volunteer. Kaveh offered the assistance of some of the djinn who were interested in contributing to the cause.

“We have several volunteers from my community who are ready to step up,” Nihadi said, her eyes alight with determination. “They understand the importance of this work and want to be part of the solution.”

“And I have some djinn who are willing to assist as well,” Kaveh said. “They understand the gravity of the situation and want to support the efforts to protect our city.”

With everyone in agreement, we discussed the logistics of implementing the work-from-home and training arrangements. It was crucial to maintain a high standard of service while also safeguarding the well-being of our team members. We needed a more organized approach to handle the influx of volunteers and the incoming calls.

Talindra’s voice brought me out of my thoughts. “I think having a clear system for escalating urgent matters is important. We can have designated team members for handling emergencies.”

“That’s a good point. Having designated personnel for emergencies will help streamline our responses and keep the Twisted Sisters from being burdened,” Kaveh said. I was all for that. We handled plenty of magical emergencies.

“It’ll help to have a standardized way of handling calls,” Dani replied. “Knowing who to call for what will keep the staff from calling Willowberry.”

“Having a centralized database would help track the information and identify any patterns or areas of concern, so we can add resources where they are needed,” Kassandra pointed out.

I nodded vigorously. “Exactly. We can learn from programs like nine-one-one and the Child Protection hotline. They already use databases to streamline their emergency response efforts, saving us from reinventing the wheel here.”

Phi lifted a hand. “I can have my husband look into suitable programs and technology that could support our needs.”

Our hotline was quickly becoming an essential tool in our efforts to protect the city from magical threats, and we needed to ensure that it operated efficiently and effectively.

As the meeting concluded, I felt a renewed sense of purpose. We hadn't solved the problem of the missing crown and lake monster yet, but we had a plan to start taking emergency calls, giving the magical community an outlet.

# CHAPTER 11



## DANIELLE

Lia lifted her gaze and looked around the room. “We should be out there looking for Elan and Rhyssa. I don’t like sitting around when that lake monster could rear its purple head any second.”

The six of us sat huddled together in the ladies' parlor, frustration and nervousness mixing in the air as we stared at Oathkeeper on the coffee table. After roaming around Gentilly, we decided to take a break to get some food and rest. Cyran and Nihadi were looking into the Enchanted Forest since their presence wouldn't raise any eyebrows. There wasn't much more we could do without some sleep. The past few days had been an emotional roller coaster for me, and I couldn't put one foot in front of the other anymore.

It was the middle of the night, but none of us could sleep, so we decided to seek answers about our children's potential magical abilities. I was hoping I could give my kids something other than their father's death to think about.

I took a deep breath and spoke first. “Oathkeeper, can you tell us if our children have magic?”

The book seemed to hum softly, its pages flickering with an ethereal glow. The answer it gave, however, was enigmatic and cryptic. “They are blessings bestowed upon you, each with unique potential and special abilities.”

I frowned, exchanging puzzled glances with my sisters. “What does that even mean? It's like a Hallmark card response.”

Dre snorted as she ran her fingers over the soft blanket on her lap. “Well, it's clear that they are special in some way, but it doesn't tell us if they have actual magical powers.”

Dea nodded in agreement. “True. Knowing what they should expect and how vigorously we need to start training them would be nice. Most of our kids are grown and out of the house but are still hot-headed sometimes.”

“And prone to losing their shit and inadvertently revealing their magic in a big, splashy way,” Kota said as she leaned her head on the back of the sofa. “Maybe their gifts will manifest over time.”

Phi pursed her lips. “Rachel is about to become a teenager, which makes her even more volatile. It's hard to remain patient and observant when their



lives could be on the line.”

Lia squeezed Phi’s leg. “We’re being too critical of Oathkeeper’s response. It might not be readily apparent, but the book *says that our kids* have magic and we will see their unique abilities in due time. That means we must start thinking about a training regimen for them.”

I watched the pages of Oathkeeper flutter as if preening. If I didn’t know better, I’d swear the book liked Lia defending it. “You know what, sestra? You’re right. We’ve been expecting to be spoon-fed the answers and got so pissed that we couldn’t see the gifts we were given.”

“What would Mama say if she could see us now? Acting as if we haven’t had to work hard for everything we’ve ever gotten in life,” Kota added as a yawn cracked her jaw.

As we discussed precisely what the enigmatic response had given us, I couldn’t help but feel a mixture of excitement and trepidation. Every parent loved their children and thought they were the most extraordinary beings on the planet. Discovering that ours had magical powers left me grappling with pride and concern. We had seen the wonders and dangers of the magical world, and I wanted to ensure that our children were protected and guided in the best possible way.

“We should ask Kaitlyn if she can resume the basic lessons with us so we include the kids,” Dre suggested. “We stopped training with the mounting bullshit we’ve had on our plates. The fact is that we are still newbies to magic, which is why we can’t adequately help our children.”

Kota held up a fist for Dre to bump. “We got cocky. Just because we can turn into dragons doesn’t mean we shouldn’t continue learning the basic tenets of magic. What is the one thing we use several times daily?”

Lia cocked her head to the side and looked at Kota. “Are you talking about focusing our intent?”

Kota nodded. “Exactly! That concept alone has allowed me to cast, I can’t tell you how many spells. We wouldn’t have been so successful without knowing that basic factor.”

“That’s very true, Kota.” Phi picked up her tablet. “I can set up a Google calendar with slots for times that they can choose from if someone asks Kaitlyn for some dates and times.”

Cami returned carrying a tray laden with drinks and snacks. “I couldn’t help but overhear your ideas for training. Can I still join you guys?”

I gratefully accepted the Tall-Boy Cami handed me, along with my

tumbler full of ice. “That goes without saying. You’re family, Cam. And the kids will feel better about participating if you’re there and we can’t make it for some reason.”

Dre’s phone chimed, indicating a text message. Dea shared a commiserating look with Dre. “Isn’t it awful that people think because you once worked nights that they can text you anytime?” I could definitely relate to that. I might not work at the hospital anymore, but I still got texted and called at all hours.

Dre chuckled. “This time, it was me being the pain in the ass. I sent Kaitlyn a message, knowing we would be starting the projects soon. I was hoping she would have some time to work with us today since it’s a Sunday, and most of our children don’t work.”

“What did she say?” Lia asked as she sipped her drink. The sky was beginning to lighten outside. Sunrise was still a couple of hours off. We weren’t sleeping because none of us could, so we were doing the next best thing and lying around the parlor.

“She said she’d be happy to come over later this morning. Phi, can you make that calendar and send invites to the kids and Kaitlyn?” Dre pointed to Phi as she became more animated and less lethargic. “I’ll send my kids a message. Scarlett and Sawyer were already coming over today. I’m sure Sean and Spencer will be able to stop by.”

Each one of us sent our children messages telling them to be at the plantation later, and Phi sent out the calendar. With that done, Kota was the first to drift off. Phi followed suit, and then Lia closed her eyes. Dre, Dea, and I continued looking through some of the magical books that had been hidden in the attic by Cami’s mother.

I must have drifted off at some point too, because when I opened my eyes the sun shone through the window, and the smell of bacon filled the house. Kota was still asleep on one of the couches and woke up when I stood up to stretch. The rest of the sisters were gone.

“Morning,” Kota said. “What time is it?”

I held my phone out to her. “It’s just after eight. Kaitlyn will be here in about two hours.”

Kota got to her feet and folded the blanket she had been using. “Let’s go see about food and coffee.”

The sound of laughter filtered down the hall as we headed to the kitchen. A smile creased my face. I could always count on my sisters for some good

laughs. Lia was standing at the stove holding a pair of tongs as she bent over and crossed her legs. Dre was giggling, and Dea was practically on the floor.

“What’d we miss?” Kota asked as we joined them.

“Not much, just Lia talking about what it would be like if the girls’ shifted their fingers into claws,” Dre began, “and they couldn’t get them to go back so they could pick a wedgie.”

That got us all laughing. I poured out the soda I hadn’t finished, washed my tumbler, and then refreshed my beverage. We shared more stories as we ate. I got up and cleaned up and was surprised to find my kids there when I came down again.

“*Now that everyone is here, we should prepare for Kaitlyn.*” Adèle’s voice echoed in my head, making me look around for the tiny Siamese kitten. Our familiar was a little grey fluff ball whose voice didn’t fit how she looked. She was a tiny kitten but sounded much older.

“What do we need to do? We usually just meet her out in the back forty, and she directs us,” I replied as I bent and scratched her behind the ears.

“*We should have magical implements on hand to assess skills, or in the event Kaitlyn decides she wants to use them for an exercise,*” Adèle said as she headed toward the back door with her tail swishing.

Lia lifted a shoulder and wrapped her arm through her son, Eli’s. “Sounds good to me. Can you grab one of the eight-foot tables from the barn and take it out near the magical kitchen?”

Eli nodded and loped off with my son, Ashton, right behind him. By the time the rest of us made it outside, Dea’s kids were arriving along with Kota’s. When we stopped on the lawn near the small cottages being remodeled in the back forty of our property, there were over twenty-six of us.

Adèle led things as she instructed us to gather herbs, potions, a collection of crystals, and a few other enchanted objects. The table was covered in magical items by the time Kaitlyn arrived.

I approached the head witch and gave her a hug. “Thanks for coming on such short notice.”

Kaitlyn smiled at me and then took in everything around us. “I’m always happy to help. And this gave me a break from scrying for the crown.” That jolted me. I hadn’t realized she was trying to locate the missing artifact. We hadn’t tried scrying because we didn’t know enough about the object to direct a search. Not to mention, I felt like doing so with something created by a powerful loa was pointless. Surely, Oshun would protect it from being hunted

magically.

“That’s understandable. We need to get back to it soon, so how do you want to start?” Lia asked.

Kaitlyn pursed her lips as she scanned the table. *“If I may,”* Adèle interjected, making everyone look down at her.

Kaitlyn inclined her head as she looked at our familiar. “Of course. I would love your opinion.” I wondered if Kaitlyn knew Adèle was supposed to be her familiar, but the cat had changed her mind before arriving in New Orleans and selected the Six Twisted Sisters instead.

*“I was thinking it would be wise to start with an assessment. Having the kids try to do magic will give us an idea where their strengths lie, which will enable us to tailor the lessons to each of them.”* Adèle spoke as if designing over twenty-five different plans was simple.

Adèle’s blue eyes lifted and pinned me in place. *“Just because we assess each individual doesn’t mean everyone will need to focus on a different area. Your magical talents tend to revolve around the elements, and your children should follow suit.”*

My cheeks heated as I nodded in response. “That makes sense. I thought perhaps this was one area in which you might need more experience before you were an expert. Thanks, Adèle.”

Phoebe had explained that Adèle was blessed with the knowledge to assist her witches, but she didn’t necessarily have the experience to know when to offer advice. It was the reason Phoebe and Tarja, Adèle’s mother, were readily accessible to all of the familiars to whom Tarja gave birth.

Kaitlyn held up her hands as she looked at the kids. “Before we start testing your powers, I want to cast a spell to unlock your potential. This will help us get a clearer understanding of your magical abilities.”

I watched as Kaitlyn began to weave her magic, her hands moving gracefully through the air while she chanted softly. A soft glow enveloped each child as the spell took effect. The energy in the air was a lower level of the buzzing my sisters and I experienced the day Phoebe woke our dormant DNA.

Once the spell was complete, Kaitlyn smiled warmly at the children. “Now, let’s see what you’ve got,” she said playfully.

My sisters and I stood off to the side and watched as Kaitlyn lined the kids up in groups and started having them try various tasks. The excitement and curiosity in the air were palpable. We watched with anticipation as each

child took their turn. I held my breath as Ashton went first. There was a scowl on his face despite his eyes seeming filled with wonder.

“Try to connect with the power in the crystal,” Kaitlyn instructed.

Ashton nodded and a second later, laid a finger on the white stone in Kaitlyn’s hand. Nothing happened, and Kaitlyn explained how to wipe his mind of all thoughts before trying again. Ashton looked like he was constipated as he continued trying. I knew he had magic because he started the fire the other day.

Kaitlyn switched crystals a few seconds later and had him try again. She went through several before she got to a piece of citrine. Not long after touching the surface, it began to emit a soft golden glow as he touched it.

"Dani, look, look!" Dea beamed with pride.

“It’s incredible, but I don’t know what it means,” I admitted in a low tone.

*“At least some of Justin’s powers are affiliated with Earth. That element is linked to stones like emerald, jade, and obsidian. These stones resonate with the grounding and nurturing energies of the earth element,”* Adèle informed us.

"And what about fire?" I inquired eagerly, wanting to know about Ashton. Citrine was connected to it.

*“You will find stones like ruby, citrine, and carnelian reacting for fire. These stones possess the fiery energies that symbolize passion and transformation,”* Adèle explained.

"And the air element?" Lia prompted as the kids continued their assessment.

*“An affinity with air powers will be associated with stones like clear quartz, amethyst, and selenite. These stones hold the ethereal energies of the air, promoting clarity and communication,”* Adèle replied.

“What about water?” Dre asked.

*“Genevieve is adept with water since she made the moonstone glow. This element is connected with stones like aquamarine, moonstone, and blue lace agate. These stones embody the calming and intuitive energies of water.”* Adèle was a font of information and wonderful to have. We’d stepped up our game since she joined us in a big way.

Our children listened with keen interest as Adèle shared her knowledge about the magical properties of each stone. It was a fascinating learning experience for all of us. And I couldn't be prouder of our family's connection

to the elements and the mystical world.

I watched as Ava closed her eyes around one of the objects Dea had enchanted to highlight emotions. I could almost feel the waves of emotion emanating from Ava. She accessed the power with such ease it made me think that she had an innate ability to connect with the energies around her.

“Incredible,” I whispered, feeling a mixture of awe and pride.

As I watched my children and my nieces and nephews embrace their magic, I couldn't help but feel a surge of pride and joy. Each showcased their unique abilities. Marcus, Dea's son, demonstrated a natural talent for elemental magic and making small flames dance around his fingertips. Phi's daughter, Rachel, exhibited her affinity for plants and nature; making flowers bloom and vines grow at her touch.

Kota's son, Braxton, displayed his telekinetic abilities; moving small objects with focus and determination. That was the most surprising because it should have been one of Dre's sons. She was the telekinetic in the family.

Dre's daughter, Scarlett, had a mesmerizing talent for illusions, making small objects disappear and reappear before our eyes. Lia's son, Eli, showed incredible control over his water manipulation; creating intricate shapes with splashes of water in the air.

As the assessments continued Adèle and Kaitlyn offered guidance and encouragement, assuring us that our children were not only magical but also gifted with unique talents and potential. They couldn't identify those abilities, which was frustrating for the kids.

Adèle looked at each of my sisters and me. Her blue eyes were far wiser than she appeared in age. *“You have a remarkable group of young witches and wizards here. They will undoubtedly become a force to be reckoned with given proper guidance and training.”* She shifted her feline gaze to the kids. *“But they need to learn patience first and foremost.”*

Kaitlyn nodded in agreement. “Yes, you all have incredible potential. I want you each to practice remaining calm. Your magic will get away from you when you experience strong emotions. You are all steeped in the mundie world. I'm not sure what your mothers have told you, but it is vital that you keep the magical world a secret. There are grave consequences for displaying your powers. Even if it is by accident.”

My sisters and I exchanged knowing glances. Ensuring our kids didn't screw up was one more responsibility on our shoulders. However, I could see their pride reflecting mine. How could it not? Our kids were embarking on

their magical journey.

*“You are correct, Dani. As their parents and mentors, you have a duty to guide and train them to use their magic wisely and responsibly.”* Adèle paused, letting her words sink in before continuing. *“It won't be easy, but you aren't alone. You have each other, Kaitlyn, and me. Together, we can help them harness their potential and grow into the powerful witches and wizards they are meant to be. They will need our support, our guidance, and a firm hand as they navigate this magical world.”*

“They inherited Mama’s strength. They can do this,” Dea said firmly, making me realize Adèle had spoken to all of us.

I liked the thought of Mama giving them a bit of what she had given to us girls. “I’m not gonna lie, sestra,” I said. “I pray that you’re right because sometimes I ask myself where I went wrong with them. They don’t seem to have the work ethic we do.”

Kota snorted. “Very few people have our work ethic.” My sister hit that one on the head.

# CHAPTER 12





## DAHLIA

It felt like I was in a daze as we walked back to the house to start preparations for the Djinn Mixer. Mack had created the Wanted posters and Genevieve was scheduling sessions with Kaveh and his people, but we needed to get a handle on the décor.

*We should be out looking for Elan and Rhyssa. The party can wait. It's not as important as getting that crown back!* I shut down those thoughts before they could take hold of me. If I didn't, I would say something and piss off my family. Or try and go off by myself. Neither was acceptable. I learned the lesson of trying to handle things on my own. And fighting with my sisters was not worth it. They deserved the break. It wasn't that long ago that we stopped searching because we had been at it for so long.

The house was abuzz with activity as we gathered to prepare for the upcoming Djinn Mixer and the funeral for Mike. Dre, Dea, Kota, Phi, Dani, and I worked side by side, each of us taking on different tasks to ensure everything was ready for both events. I grabbed some snacks and brought them to the tables outside the backdoor.

"I figured we needed some Drizzilicious while we worked." I smiled as I placed the bowls with the tiny yet yummy rice cakes on the table.

Kota smiled as she picked up a couple of birthday cake ones. "You read my mind, sestra."

Dani looked up from arranging flowers for the funeral. She had a natural eye for design and created stunning bouquets that would add elegance to the events. "Do you have the salted caramel ones? Those are my favorites."

I pushed a bowl closer to her. "I got the last bag at the store." I grabbed the horseshoes we'd purchased and the paint. We wanted to make them colorful for the mixer.

Braxton, Kota's son, came out of the house with a bag of popcorn and took a seat next to Ashton. "We should have a movie night tonight and watch all the movies Uncle Mike used to watch with us."

Genevieve laughed and nodded. "Yes! Did Noah put that big screen TV in the blue house in the back forty? The TV in here isn't nearly big enough to watch Austin Powers or Monty Python. Or we can watch Crocodile Hunter."

Dani nodded. “Yes. I believe it was put in last week. I’ll send him a message.”

Ashton had a scowl on his face as he sat there with his arms crossed while next to him, Ava was busy putting candles in Styrofoam cups. I cocked my head to the side as I watched her. “Are we going to be holding candles during the ceremony?”

Dani shook her head. “No. I forgot to mention there will be a candlelight vigil tonight for Mike on the corner where he was killed. One of his friends called the kids and asked about holding one. They invited the press.”

“I was thinking about doing one,” Phi admitted. “It’ll be another great way to pressure the cops and DA to charge the guy with...the charges the kids are asking for.”

Ashton’s hands trembled slightly as he sat forward and started peeling stickers off of a sheet and wrapping it around the cup. My sisters and I went quiet as we worked, and the kids shared stories about Uncle Mike. To my surprise, Ashton shared fond stories of his father, his voice cracking with emotion. It was clear that he was grappling with his grief. It was good to see him opening up. He tended to keep to himself. Ava was struggling to come to terms with the loss of her father. She was far more open, but that hadn’t made it any easier to accept what had happened.

I nudged Dani’s shoulder. “Look at the flowers growing. Do you think Rachel knows what she’s doing?”

Phi’s head shot up when she heard her daughter’s name. “Oh shit. She has no idea what she’s doing. She’s upset about Mike, and it’s coming out. Will we have to pull them from their schools until they get control of this?”

Rachel’s wide eyes moved around the room when she heard her mom’s comment. “I didn’t mean to do it.”

Kota shook her head and reached over to squeeze her arm. “You did nothing wrong, but this is a good time to practice calming down so this doesn’t happen.” Rachel nodded and took a couple of deep breaths. “You’re doing great,” Kota told her.

I marveled at how well the children were adjusting to discovering their powers. Each of them was dealing with this like a champ. Ava and Tegan started giving Rachel advice to help her calm down.

“I’m really grateful to have magic,” Genevieve said with a soft smile, her eyes shining with emotion. “It’s going to help me especially connect with Dad. I can feel him around sometimes, guiding me. You know? These powers

make me feel closer to him, even though he's not here anymore.”

On the other hand, Ashton wasn't so appreciative, but I didn't think that had much to do with the magic. As I watched Ashton's struggle, my heart went out to him. I understood the conflicting emotions he was experiencing. His father's absence had left a void in his life, and now, with the awakening of his magical abilities, he was facing a whole new set of challenges.

I could see the frustration in his eyes as he grappled with the weight of his responsibilities as a young warlock. It was a lot for anyone to handle, let alone a teenager who had just lost his father. I wanted to reach out and offer him comfort, telling him it was okay to feel conflicted and unsure. But I knew he needed space to process everything in his way.

“I'm impressed with how you guys are handling all of this,” Dani said, her voice filled with both pride and concern. “But it's a lot for you to process. Losing your father and discovering your magic all at once.”

Phi nodded, understanding the weight of the situation. “We're here to support you and give you the space you need to grieve and grow into your powers.”

Kota scooted her chair over and wrapped an arm around Ava's shoulders. “Don't worry. We'll be there for you every step of the way. You're not alone in this.”

As we continued our work, the conversation shifted to the upcoming Djinn Mixer. We discussed the plans, the themes, and how we hoped it would bring the magical community together fostering a sense of unity and support. And I hoped it would open new avenues to locate Elan if the worst should happen and we hadn't found the crown yet. The more people we had on the hunt, the better.

“Having events like this is important,” Dea said as she helped me paint. “It reminds us that we're not alone and have each other to lean on.”

Dre smiled, nodding in agreement. “And it's a chance for our kids to see the magical world in a positive light, to be part of a community that accepts and embraces them.”

As we worked on the projects, Dani's phone rang. She picked it up, and after a moment, her expression softened and she listened intently to the voice on the other end. With a smile, Dani put the phone on speaker, allowing all of us to listen in. “Hey, Tom. I put you on speaker so Mike's kids could hear what you had to say.” Dani looked at her children. “Tom is one of Mike's former students who wanted to share something with you.”

Tom's voice crackled with emotion as he began to talk. "I remember the first day I walked into Mr. Johnson's class. I was just a lost kid with no direction, struggling to find my place in the world. But he saw something in me, something I couldn't see in myself."

Tom described how Mike had believed in him, even when he didn't believe in himself. "He pushed me to be better, to work harder, and to never give up on my dreams. He encouraged me to continue trying and never gave up on me, even when I wanted to give up on myself."

As Tom spoke, I could see the tears in Dani's eyes. It was no surprise that the same was true for all of us. My sisters and I had spent many years not liking how Mike treated Dani. It was a challenge to set that aside and recognize the impact he had on the world. It was evident in the emotion pouring out of Tom's words.

"He taught me more than just math and science," Tom continued. "He taught me about life, perseverance, and the importance of never losing hope. I owe everything I am today to him. I just wanted to let you know how he affected me before the vigil so you knew how I felt."

After Dani said goodbye to Tom, we finished arranging the flowers and ate dinner before making our way to the candlelight vigil. There were more people than I ever imagined when we arrived in the parking lot near the location of the accident. I handed out candles while the friend of Mike's who had organized the vigil helped. It was a beautiful sight—hundreds of people gathered to honor and remember Mike, their candles illuminating the darkness with a warm and comforting glow.

The atmosphere was filled with a sense of camaraderie and shared grief. People from all walks of life, from former students to colleagues and friends to AA members that he'd helped. All stood together, united in their love for Mike and his impact on their lives.

As the vigil began, different individuals stepped forward to share their memories. They took the microphone one by one and spoke about the man who had touched their hearts and changed their lives. Dani's children, Genevieve, Ashton, and Ava listened intently to the stories about their father. Their young faces reflected a mix of sadness, pride, and disbelief. It was clear that they were learning new facets of their father's life they hadn't known previously. I couldn't help but feel for them as they navigated through the emotions of loss and admiration for the man he was.

As the night wore on, I was surrounded by an overwhelming sense of

community and love. The stories of Mike's impact continued to pour out, creating a tapestry of memories that painted a vivid picture of the man he had been. And it was in direct conflict with what I'd known of the man. I wasn't quite sure how to handle that fact.

As each person approached the microphone, I listened to their memories of Mike. They spoke of his dedication to his students, his unwavering belief in their potential, and the countless lives he had touched and transformed at his school and in AA. They shared stories of how he had taught them academic subjects and imparted valuable life lessons that had stayed with them long after they left his classroom.

I glanced at Dani, my sister, who stood with tears in her eyes and a bittersweet smile on her lips. It was evident that these stories were playing havoc with her emotions. How could we not have known this side of Mike? Did it make me a bad person that I allowed his abuse of my sister to tell me what kind of a man he was? If it was this hard for me, it had to be even harder for her.

At that moment, I realized that I had only seen a small part of who Mike was. I had let my biases and preconceived notions cloud my judgment. I had never looked beyond the incidents and shouting matches I had witnessed or heard about. I had judged him based on a few isolated incidents without considering the countless positive impact he had on others' lives.

As the vigil continued, I found myself reflecting on my own shortcomings. I had always prided myself on being open-minded and fair, but now I saw how easily I had allowed myself to be swayed by negativity. I had allowed one aspect of Mike's personality to overshadow all the other wonderful qualities he possessed. Did I forgive him for how he treated my sister? Never. What he had done to her was wrong on every level, and I am glad she escaped that relationship. But I could see now that wasn't all Mike was.

I turned to Dani and gently squeezed her hand, offering her my silent support. At that moment, I vowed to be more mindful of my judgments and to see people for their entirety, not just the parts that fit my biases.

As the vigil came to a close, we made our way back home, our hearts heavy with both sorrow and newfound understanding. I felt a mix of emotions—regret for not knowing the man Mike truly was and gratitude for the opportunity to witness the impact he had on so many lives.

As we settled in for the night, I couldn't shake the feeling of unease. How

many other people had I misjudged? How often have I let my biases cloud my perception of others?

I made a vow to be more open-minded and compassionate. I would seek to understand people on a deeper level, to see the good in them, and to acknowledge their flaws without judgment. It wasn't my place to say whether or not they were good or bad. Everyone had their complexities, strengths, and weaknesses. I was responsible for seeing them for who they truly were. And yes, some individuals were one hundred percent evil. I just no longer believed Mike was one of them.

I saw the vigil as a turning point in my own growth as a person. It taught me the importance of looking beyond the surface and not allowing one aspect of a person to define them entirely. I learned that true understanding and empathy required a willingness to see people in their entirety, with all their strengths and imperfections.

Reflecting on this newfound wisdom, I couldn't help but wonder how many other opportunities I had missed to truly know and appreciate the people in my life. Moving forward, I was determined to be more open-hearted and accepting. I should embrace the complexity of those around me and celebrate the unique qualities that made them who they were.

# CHAPTER 13



## DAHLIA

I felt like I was going to be sick as I stood with my sisters at the viewing and funeral of Dani's ex-husband, Mike. As we were with most things, our family was united in grief. And it was mostly for my nieces and nephews. I remember our mama telling me how strong I was when I survived Leo's death. At the time, I didn't feel like it. Watching how Ashton, Ava, and Genevieve handled their father's death, I finally got it. They amazed me with how they were dealing with everything.

Lucas wrapped an arm around my waist and tugged me close. Emotions were running high as memories of Mike flooded my mind. There were so many good moments that I hadn't thought about for years. It was a somber occasion, yet the love and admiration for Mike permeated the room and reminded everyone we were there celebrating his life.

As friends and acquaintances paid their respects to Mike, I couldn't help but reflect on our complex history with him. Despite the challenges we faced in the past, I couldn't deny that he had played an important role in Dani's life and also her children's. And in many ways, mine. He and Dani had been there for me when I lost Leo. They'd given up their vacation to be with me at the worst moments of my life, so I wasn't alone.

I jumped when my phone vibrated in my crossbody bag. Dani looked at me crossly, and I silenced the thing before ducking outside. Lucas followed behind me, along with Dre and Kota.

Out in the hall, I answered as I continued hurrying outside. "Hey, Xinar. Now's not a good time. We're at a funeral for Dani's ex-husband."

Dre came alert when she heard his name. I put it on speaker the second we were outside. "I know and am sorry to bother you, Lia. But we've got a situation," Xinar said, his voice tense. I glanced around and hastily cast a silencing spell to keep the conversation private. "Demons have been flocking to the river near Jackson Square, and I suspect the skinwalker is among them. I'm tracking the guy, but I could use some backup."

Xinar's call pulled me back to the reality of our duties as investigators and protectors of the city. It was the absolute worst time for a call like this, and I wanted to tell him he was SOL. We'd dealt with enough. Now was not the



time for us to leave Ashton, Genevieve, and Ava. However, there was no denying the urgency in Xinar's voice. As much as I wanted to deny it, we had to act before the funeral was over. That skinwalker had been haunting us since my scent-o-vision first appeared.

I glanced at Dre and Phi, the concern in their eyes mirroring my own. We couldn't afford to ignore this threat, not when it involved a dangerous being like the skinwalker. We had faced similar foes in the past, and we knew the havoc they could wreak on both the magical and mundie communities.

"I understand. Although, I have to say this is shitty timing. This is one time I want to tell the magical world to go fuck itself," I said.

Dre crossed her arms over her chest and scowled. "We have a couple of hours before the actual service starts. What are the chances of handling this and getting back here for Dani and the kids?"

"I wish I could tell you, Dre," Xinar said. "These things tend to take on a life of their own. You know that. I can try to handle him on my own, but that means leaving half a dozen kappas roaming the streets."

Phi looked back at the door to the funeral home. "We can't let that happen. If they hurt anyone, we would feel guilty forever. The problem is, how do we deal with the guilt of leaving?"

Dani, Kota, and Dea walked out the door, followed by Noah in that second. Dani scowled at us. "What's going on?"

I expanded my silent bubble, and we gave her a condensed version of what was happening. Dani nodded, anger flashing across her face momentarily. Setting that aside, she put on a neutral face. "I don't like this one bit. These problems are taking us away from a funeral. But even if it was Dad, we couldn't let innocent people be put in danger because of these creatures. Dammit. How am I going to explain this to the kids?"

Dre grabbed Dani's shoulders. "You aren't going anywhere. Half of us will stay, and the other will go help Xinar."

I lifted a hand. "I'll go and help."

Phi handed her purse to Dea. "Count me in. We will be back."

"Alright, Xinar. We will be there shortly," I informed the UIS agent.

"Thanks, guys. And I truly am sorry for interrupting. I'm following the demons down the street. I'll send you my location soon so you know where to go." Xinar hung up before he said another word.

"This is bullshit," Dani barked.

"I understand how you feel, Dani," I said, bringing her into a hug. "But

you know as well as I do that we can't turn a blind eye to the dangers in our city. Doing so puts our friends and family in as much danger as it does us.”

“*Lia is right, Dani.*” Adèle’s voice echoed in our heads, making all six of us startle. Our familiar had promised she would be there for us throughout the services. “*Our responsibilities bind us as guardians of this city. But I promise you, I will be watching over all of you. You won't be alone.*”

Dani looked at me with a mixture of gratitude and resignation. “Thank you, Adèle. I know you'll keep them safe, but seeing them go right now is hard. The kids need their aunties.” None of us had yet mastered speaking silently to Adèle, so she spoke aloud.

“*I understand. But you have a strong family here. We will support you through this difficult time. The bond between us is unbreakable. And through you, I can send the children comfort,*” Adèle said.

As we prepared to leave, I could see the concern in Dani's eyes. I wanted to stay and comfort her, but I knew we had to act quickly. We couldn't afford to waste any time when dealing with a threat like the skinwalker.

“We'll be back before you know it, Dani,” I said, offering reassurance. “Just take care of yourself and the kids while we're gone. We'll handle this and be back before you know it.”

With a heavy heart, I hugged my sisters, went on my tiptoes, and pressed my lips to Lucas's. “You're not going without me, Flower.”

Dre turned and strode toward my car. “Let's kick some ass and get back here.”

“Do you have any potions in that bag, Lia?” Phi asked as I unlocked the door.

Lucas took my keys and got behind the wheel as I climbed into the passenger seat. As we made our way to Jackson Square, the memories of Mike and the funeral lingered in the back of my mind. It was a stark reminder of the constant balance we had to maintain between our personal lives and our responsibilities as magical guardians.

The other images churning in my gut were the conflict I could see in Dani's eyes. She was torn between wanting her sisters by her side during this difficult time and understanding the situation's urgency. Her frustration was evident, and I couldn't blame her for feeling that way.

“Do you think Dani will ever forgive us?” I asked.

Dre lifted a shoulder. “Yeah. She has to. She knows that we can't let the skinwalker roam freely, endangering innocent lives.”

Phi let out a sigh. “I’m more worried about whether or not Ava, Genevieve, and Ashton will forgive us. Dani’s upset about Mike, but she’s wrecked for her kids. I just hope they don’t start to resent the magical world for this. They’re part of it now and must embrace it and learn to control their powers. They won’t if they hate them.”

I wanted to rail at the unfairness. Sure, there would come a time when we simply couldn’t respond. But that wasn’t right now. Sucking in a fortifying breath, I inclined my head. “Then it’ll be our job to ensure they see the good. We should make sure they come to the Djinn Mixer. They will meet different people and discover first-hand how the magical world can improve their lives.”

Phi and Dre nodded as my phone pinged, and I sent the directions to the screen in the car. I was surprised to see that Xinar was still close to Jackson Square. Lucas called Ricky, who was waiting on the sidewalk when Lucas parked on the street behind the horse-drawn carriages.

Lucas’s nostrils flared, and instead of going toward the church across the square, he raced through traffic on the busy street and went up the hill toward the water. “Where the hell are you going?” I asked as Dre, Phi, and I ran after him amidst honking horns.

I lifted my hands and shouted apologies as we continued running. Heads started turning our way. I opened my mouth to tell my sisters to cast an aversion spell with me when Phi beat me to it. “Aversion, sestras.”

Dre and I chanted the spell at the same time as Phi and much to my relief, the mundie tourists were no longer focused on us but going about their business. I could hear growls filling the air before we caught up with Lucas and Xinar.

I grabbed Dre’s hand and reached for Phi. “We need to extend that spell to cover the river bank, or we are going to have several demon sightings. The last thing we need is to have that added to posts about our city.”

“Include all of Woldenberg Park. That way, we will have it covered,” Dre replied as we reached the cannon at the top.

Getting my intent right, I nodded and the three of us cast another aversion spell to keep mundies away from the site. My eyes widened when they landed on Lucas, shredding a humanoid frog creature with webbed hands and feet. The kappa typically attacked people in the water, trying to steal the mythical shirikodama organ. I refused to think about how it was located in the anus. I didn’t want to go down with a demon clawing at my ass.

There were easily half a dozen kappas with more joining. I ran forward and threw out a ball of my amber witch fire. Phi's green flames and Dre's magenta joined mine. That fast, the river bank turned into a battlefield. I glanced around, searching for Xinar and didn't see him at first. It wasn't until I reached the melee and extinguished my fire that I noticed his suit about a football field away from us. Xinar was fighting someone I couldn't see from here. I prayed it was the skinwalker.

Sharp claws sliced my forearm open, making me scream out. My fingers immediately became dragon talons, and I returned the favor. The kappa bared sharp teeth at me that glinted in the moonlight. My heart raced as I channeled my magic, calling on the powers of the earth to manipulate the ground beneath our feet. With a swift motion, rocks and stones swirled all around us. Several hit Lucas, who snarled at me. I didn't have time to apologize as I redirected them towards the demons, finally knocking several of them off balance. It gave us a momentary advantage.

"Dre, we need to push them back into the river!" I called out, my voice loud and determined despite the chaos surrounding us. "Maybe we can coax the lake monster into eating them."

Dre nodded, her eyes focused and intense as she used her telekinesis to lift a few of the kappas off the ground. With a powerful surge of energy, she propelled them towards the water where they splashed and thrashed in their attempts to regain their footing. The river's current worked against them, dragging them downstream and away from us.

Phi blasted out a fiery barrier to keep the remaining kappas at bay, the green flames dancing and crackling in the night air. She was a force to be reckoned with, her elemental powers fiercely protecting us from the onslaught of the demons.

But the kappas were relentless and as soon as one was pushed back into the water, another took its place. It was like fighting an endless wave of adversaries, and I could feel the strain of the battle taking its toll on all of us.

"Dre, Phi, we need to find the source of these demons and stop this!" I shouted over the sounds of the roaring river and the snapping jaws of the kappas. I didn't see them leaving the river to fight us and no other obvious place where they were coming from.

They both nodded, and we made a split-second decision to push forward, using our combined powers to forge a path towards the heart of the chaos. The closer we got to the river's edge, the stronger the surge of magical energy

felt. As if some malevolent force was feeding the kappas and drawing them from their watery lair.

“Can either of you sense any magical disturbances?” I asked. “They have to be coming from somewhere.”

“There’s magic all around us. Just can’t stop to concentrate on where it’s coming from,” Dre shouted.

I drew upon my elemental powers of the earth and with a fierce cry, I called something from the dirt. It turned out to be sharp, thorny vines that shot up from the ground. It entangled several demons and restricted their movements. But they were persistent, slashing at the vines with their sharp claws.

As the battle raged on, one of the kappas broke free from the vines and lunged at me. Its sharp teeth sank into my shoulder, making me cry out in pain. Blood seeped from the wound, and I felt my strength draining.

"Dre, watch out!" Phi called out. Her voice was laced with concern.

There was no time to dwell on my pain as I summoned a gust of wind, using it to push the demon away from me. It stumbled backward, giving me a brief moment to catch my breath. I started running toward Phi, who had unleashed a torrent of water, sending it crashing down upon the demons like a tidal wave, and staggered when my energy flagged. Unfortunately, those frog-like creatures were resilient and pushed through the water, undeterred.

Lightning lit up the sky overhead as Lucas fought the kappas with his claws. I yelped when a bolt of white electricity slammed into the ground next to me. The sheepish look on Dre’s face told me she was in charge of the electrifying bolts. She sent some surging through the water Phi had called from the river. The demons hissed and shrieked in pain as the electricity coursed through their bodies, but they refused to back down.

As we fought on, our powers intertwined in a fierce symphony of magic. I could feel the exhaustion settling in. My limbs were heavy, and every movement was a struggle.

"Dre, Phi, I can't keep this up much longer," I gasped, my voice trembling. The injury to my shoulder continued bleeding pretty steadily.

Dre nodded, her breath coming in heavy gasps. “We have to find a way to end this!”

We continued battling, but the spells I was throwing out were weakening. When Phi cried out a few seconds later, my heart skipped a beat. Fear and anger gave me energy, and I slashed dragon talons through a kappa's chest as

I made my way to Phi. Her arm was hanging at her side, and blood was dripping down the slope of her head. Dre and I joined forces when Lucas became a whirlwind of claws.

But just as despair threatened to consume us, Dre unleashed a powerful burst of telekinetic energy flinging the demons into the river with tremendous force. They splashed into the water and vanished from sight. Two massive purple tentacles splashed up and into the air, telling us perhaps the lake monster was having dinner.

“We will get your crown back to you the second we find it!” I called out and winced when Lucas pressed a hand over my bleeding shoulder.

Phi was leaning against Dre as she cradled an arm that was obviously broken. “We need to get back for Dani and the kids. The only bright spot in all of this is that Cyran is dealing with the water from the broken levee.”

Dre chuckled. “Very true. It’s the little things in life.”

Lucas guided me up the incline. “I have Ricky bringing clean clothes so we don’t return looking like we visited a war zone, but we will need to stop and have either Kip or Wynona heal you two. The bleeding hasn’t stopped for either of you, and your arm is broken Phi.”

Dre shook her head and stopped. “I’ve got this.” She gently lifted Phi’s arm in her hands.

“I forget that you developed that skill,” Lucas said with a smile.

“I’m still learning how to use the ability.” Dre looked up at Phi. “This might hurt, sestra. I need to set it and ensure the bone isn’t out of alignment.” Phi nodded and clenched her jaw tight while Dre tended to her. Phi gasped. Her face turned the color of paper before sweat broke out. I moved toward her, but by the time I reached them, Phi’s face softened with gratitude.

“Thanks, Dre,” Phi said, her voice filled with relief.

Dre smiled at her. “Anytime, sestra. Let me get that gash on your head now.” Dre concentrated as her hands lifted to Phi’s skull. It took far longer for Dre to deal with that wound. I could see the toll that had taken on Dre. She was already depleted after the fight.

I was glad Phi’s injuries were taken care of. I tried to brush off my wounds, but Adèle’s voice intruded in my head and likely my sisters, too. “*Lia, let Dre look at that wound on your shoulder.*”

“It’s nothing, really. It’ll heal.” I replied, trying to downplay the injury.

Adèle’s voice remained calm, but I could hear the worry behind it. “*No, Lia. You need to let her heal it. Kappas carry all sorts of bacteria that can*

*make you sick.”*

Reluctantly, I nodded, allowing Dre to use her healing powers as she placed her hands on my shoulder a soothing warmth spread through me. I felt the pain subside, and the laceration started to mend. Dre's healing abilities were like no other. Kip needed to understand how they worked.

But just as the healing process began, I could feel Dre's energy waning. Her normally radiant aura seemed to dim. I knew she was pushing herself beyond her limits.

“Dre, stop,” I urged gently. “You don't have to do this.”

She shook her head, her determination unwavering. “I can do this, Lia. Just a little longer.”

But I could see that she was struggling, and I couldn't bear to see her suffer. “No, Dre, you need to save your strength. We can find another way to heal me.”

“No. There's no time. Dani and the kids need us. Let me finish so we can get back. We haven't missed the service yet,” Dre said as she continued.

Phi stepped up and helped support Dre as she finished. Dre was the strongest of us. Phi and I helped Dre walk as we left in a hurry the second she was finished with me. I tried to push some of my energy into her. We would need to keep an eye on her and make sure she didn't overdo it.

The events of the night were a reminder of the delicate balance we had to maintain as magical guardians. Our powers were a gift, but they had also come with great responsibility and potential risks. We needed to be mindful of our limits and look out for one another, just as we did for the city and its people.

# CHAPTER 14





## DANIELLE

I stood by the window with my arms crossed tightly against my chest, frustration and anger swirling within me like a storm. Too many emotions were warring within me to make any sense of them. Noah was a sexy shifter and the best man I had ever found, but I was afraid to vent with him. I didn't want to scare him away or make him think that I didn't love him anymore. Or that I wanted to be back with Mike. My relationship with Mike had been toxic and abusive. I'd never go back to him. But that didn't change the fact that these emotions started building up inside me when I learned of his death.

Noah tucked hair behind my ear. "Whatever it is, you can tell me, Sunshine. You never have anything to fear from me. Nothing you say could ever make me fall out of love with you."

I tried to smile up at him but didn't manage it. Deciding to trust his word, I sucked in a breath and prepared myself for him to walk away. "This might seem stupid to you. It's just that every time I try to have a somewhat normal life, the magical world always finds a way to mess with it. And now, when my kids need their aunts the most, we must deal with these damn demons!" My voice was laced with frustration and disappointment. The viewing was close to being over, and I know Ava and Genevieve wanted their aunts to come back.

Noah nodded sympathetically. "I know, Dani. It's not fair. And I can't imagine how hard it must be for you and the kids. But Lucas is there doing his best to help them get back here. Sometimes, I forget that you are new to our world. You all have adjusted so well and accepted the roles that Fate dumped in your laps without complaint. I don't think I could have done the same thing."

Tears welled in my eyes, and I blinked them back, not wanting to break down before him. "I just want things to be peaceful, you know? To have a normal life without constantly having to fight off monsters or deal with magical chaos." I felt like a louse for even saying it. The six of us were uniquely positioned to help keep the magical world safe. We had already made life better for the paranormal residents of New Orleans, and here I was

bitching about doing it. I was acting like I hated it, which wasn't the case.

My eyes shot up to his, and I hastily added, "Don't get me wrong. I enjoy solving these cases and putting assholes in their place. I just hate that it seems to have taken over everything." I was surprised I was being so frank with him. His being there with me at Mike's funeral without being asked was a huge factor in my trusting him enough to open up more.

Noah took a step closer, gently pulling me into a hug. "I understand, Dani. I really do. You and your sisters have been given the worst to deal with. But you're not alone in this. You have your sisters, Lucas, me, and the pack. We'll get through this together."

His words were a soothing balm to my soul, and I leaned into his touch, feeling the warmth and comfort he always brought me. "You have no idea how grateful I am for that," I whispered, my voice shaky. "Despite how much I wish things could be different, I would never change meeting Phoebe and becoming a witch. It led me to you."

Noah brushed a strand of hair away from my face, his gaze filled with tenderness. "I love you, Dani. And I'll always be here for you, no matter what."

This man was undoing every ounce of damage my previous husbands had done to me and renewing my belief in myself. I didn't trust men not to hurt me. I'd learned the hard way how cruel they could be. A new rush of emotions surged through me. It was a mixture of affection, gratitude, and a sense of safety that only Noah could provide. "I love you too, Noah," I replied, my voice steadier now. "Thank you for being my rock. You have been my anchor in all of this craziness."

"I'm one of six rocks you have surrounding you." He smiled, his eyes lighting up with tenderness. "Your sisters would do anything for you. I'm honored to be among them. I've seen you drop what you were doing and go running to the hospital. And you can always count on me to support you and the kids."

As I looked into his eyes, knowing I had someone else besides my sisters in this magical world was everything. It was a scary place. Especially for six mundie women turned witches. With Noah, it went beyond that, though. Knowing that I had someone by my side who loved me unconditionally and was willing to stand with me through all the ups and downs made the hand Fate dealt me worth every moment. Even this one. Surprisingly, with Noah's love and support, I felt stronger, ready to face the rest of the viewing and

funeral. I hadn't considered what having someone who believed in me and cherished me would actually be like. It turned out it was pretty freaking fantastic.

Headlights lit up the window as Noah and I returned to the parlor where we were about to start the service. A heavy weight lifted off my shoulders when I saw Lia's car. Noah opened the door for me, and I ran out into Lia's arms. Phi hugged me next, and then Dre.

"You made it. And you changed clothes," I said as I wiped the tears that had fallen from my cheeks. "Are you all okay?"

"We promised we would do our best," Dre said. "The kappas tried to take us down, but they didn't know they were messing with the Six Twisted Sisters. You don't need to worry about us. I healed Lia and Phi, and I'm fine."

I smiled up at them, relieved they were uninjured. "If only everyone were as good as you guys."

We all headed inside. The door had barely shut when Dea and Kota walked toward us, and we met them and then headed inside together. Immediately, Ava and Genevieve rushed over and hugged the three of them. I hadn't told them what was happening because I didn't want them worrying about their aunts, but it seemed they knew anyway.

The funeral attendant started the service a few seconds later. I held onto Noah and Ava while those who loved Mike shared stories about him. It was a fitting service for him, and the dinner afterward served all of his favorites. The day had been emotionally draining, and I was glad when it was over and we all headed home.

The entire family returned to Willowberry, where we talked for a couple more hours before they retired to rooms in the main house or one of the newly renovated homes in the back forty. Needing some time alone, I left Noah in the shared room and then went back downstairs to the ladies' parlor.

*"What's bothering you, Dani?"*

My head swiveled around, searching for our familiar. The tiny Siamese cat entered the room and jumped into my lap. I started scratching behind her ears. "I'm struggling with how much the magical world is taking from my family. If tonight had been for our father or our aunt, Dre, Lia, and Phi would have missed out on saying goodbye to them. As it is, my children lost the support of their aunts when they needed them most."

*"What is it you would want to happen?"*

I lifted a shoulder. "I would like to have Noah and our magic and be left

alone to run our plantation.”

*“You would really give up your role in establishing the Aegis council and establishing an emergency services system that will be adopted around the world? Not everything worthwhile is a bed of roses.”*

I sat with Adèle in the parlor, her words lingering in the air like a gentle breeze. Her empathetic eyes met mine, understanding and wisdom reflected in their depths despite her young age. Half of my sisters had just finished dealing with one of the latest magical crises, and my kids had buried their father. And I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by the constant chaos that seemed to be a part of our lives.

*“Your emotions are understandable,”* Adèle began, her voice soothing. *“I understand your anger and frustration. But you need to remember that no one forced you and your sisters to take on this role. You saw a need in the magical world and stepped up to fill it. Now, the magical community relies on you and your sisters to handle these problems.”*

I sighed, my emotions swirling like a tumultuous sea. “You make me sound like a bitch for even thinking like this. Everything you are saying is correct. The changes that have been made wouldn't have happened if we didn't step up. But sometimes, it feels like we never get a break. It's just one crisis after another, and I worry about how it's affecting my kids.”

Adèle turned her head and looked at me. I swear her expression was compassionate. That didn't seem possible, given she was a cat. Then again, she was a magical one. *“I understand your concern for your children, but you need to remember that you are doing something incredible here. You and your sisters are making a difference in the lives of so many people and creatures. You're kicking ass and solving problems that others wouldn't know how to handle.”*

She was right. I knew that our magical abilities and dedication had saved lives and prevented even more chaos from wreaking havoc in our city. But still, the weight of the responsibility felt heavy at times.

“I just wish it didn't always have to come at the expense of our family life,” I admitted, my voice tinged with sadness.

Adèle's paw landed on my arm. Her touch offered comfort. *“I know it's not easy, Dani. But you have to remember that you and your sisters are special. There are countless things out there that I can sense, and if you weren't here to handle them, who knows what might happen? I don't think this will come as news to you, but there are no others in this city that can*

*handle the problems you six do. And your actions affect far more than just the magical world. Your quick action with the hurricane and the levee breaking saved countless lives. Cyran isn't a bad man, but he would not have stepped up prior to your arrival on the scene. His work is saving mundies even as we speak."*

Her words gave me pause, and I looked at her with renewed understanding. It wasn't just about the magical world needing us. It was about the world needing us. The balance we brought and the problems we solved were essential for the safety and well-being of everyone, magical or not.

"We could walk away if we wanted to, right?" I asked, seeking confirmation.

*"Yes, you could. But I don't think you will. You and your sisters saw a need and stepped up to fulfill it. You've become protectors of this city, and that's not something that can be easily walked away from."*

I took a deep breath as a sense of clarity washed over me. It reaffirmed the purpose I'd felt before. "You're right, Adèle. We can't just walk away. And truly, I don't want to. Our city needs us, and we're not the type to turn our backs on those who need help. I'd just like for it to leave us alone occasionally so we can do things like grieve together. That's all."

Adèle's eyes filled with pride. *"That is precisely why I chose the six of you. You and your sisters are doing something extraordinary, and I wanted to be a part of it. When I chose this assignment, my siblings thought I had lost my mind."*

I chuckled. "That's something you and I have in common. Mine thought I was insane when I told them I wanted to buy this plantation. It had always been a location known for failures. People have lost fortunes here, and my brothers believed we would fall under the same curse. Luckily, my sisters took a chance on the dream I'd built with them."

*"That's because you six were always meant to be here. As was I. You've built a safe haven for the magical world here. More eyes than you know will be on this Djinn Mixer."*

My heart started racing as a million worries raced through my head. "Why? Is someone going to attack?"

*"Nothing like that. Never before has there been a place where so many different factions have gotten together to celebrate. This will be a momentous occasion."* She truly understood the weight of our responsibilities.

Her comment left my mind reeling. The weight of our responsibilities as

city protectors weighed heavily on me. We hadn't solved the most pressing problem, and I felt partially responsible for that. I'd been so busy with Mike's death and the funeral. I couldn't ignore it anymore. I needed answers.

Turning to Adèle, I asked, "What do you sense out there? Can you get a clearer picture of the threats we're facing?"

Adèle curled into a ball as if she was going to sleep, but she placed her head on her front paws and watched the doors intently as she spoke. *"I'm afraid it's not that simple, Dani. There are so many things and energies and beings out there that it's difficult to get a clear picture. It's like trying to see through a fog. The information is there, but it's all jumbled and unclear."*

I frowned, feeling a bit frustrated. "But isn't that what you're here for? To help us navigate this world and protect the city? Or will your answers require deciphering like the ones from Oathkeeper? Because my brain isn't firing on all cylinders right now."

*"Yes, I am here to support and guide you. But the magical world is vast and ever-changing. There are countless creatures and energies, and it's not always easy to pinpoint exactly what we're dealing with. My abilities have their limits, just like anyone else's. I am not being obtuse on purpose. I will give you straightforward answers when possible. There is simply too much out there. And it's gotten worse since the hurricane."*

I sighed, feeling a mix of relief and disappointment. It was comforting to know that Adèle was there to help us, but I still couldn't help but wonder if her inability to provide clear information hindered our efforts.

"We've been given so many extraordinary gifts, yet we're running around unprepared half the time. Having some clear answers would save my sisters from being injured."

Adèle turned her head and gave me a stern look. *"Everyone wants the solutions in life. I wish I could give you what you need to know when you need to know it. But sometimes, there are no easy answers in this world of magic and mystery. We have to rely on our instincts, training, and trust in each other to face the challenges that come our way. And that is where you and your sisters excel over others. I couldn't create an army that works as well together as you guys. You could be mad at each other one second and be fighting seamlessly the next."*

Her words resonated with me, and I nodded slowly. While having clear information would be helpful, it wasn't always possible. Just like I didn't have all the answers for my kids. At least relying on our abilities and intuition

to navigate the magical world had come easy to us. If not, we might not survive this violent world.

“You can thank our mama for that skill. She taught us how important family was. Her death brought us together like nothing else would have.” I admitted. “I’d take my sisters any day over being hand-fed information and ways to solve all of these problems. The laughter and love we share is priceless and can’t be replaced.”

*“Exactly. Never forget that you and your sisters are strong and capable. Together, you can face whatever challenges come your way.”*

I took a deep breath as the rest of my stress melted away, and exhaustion set in. “Thank you, Adèle. I know you were supposed to go to Kaitlyn, but I’m glad you changed your mind. Your support means the world to us, even if you can’t give us all the answers,” I teased. “I know it’s annoying to listen to me whine about the unfairness of being given such wonderful gifts. I irritate myself. I just couldn’t shake the feelings tonight, but I feel much better now.”

Adèle started purring in my lap. *“I’m happy to remind you to pull your head out of your ass anytime you need.”*

A laugh burst from me. She’d never talked to us like that. “You’ve been spending too much time with Dea. You should quote Dre. She’s not such a smart ass.”

As Adèle teased me back, I reminded myself that her presence in our lives was invaluable. The fact of the matter was that when I pulled myself together and got over my bullshit, I could see how much she had actually given us. With my pity party over, I got up and went up the stairs to join Noah in bed. Tomorrow would be there soon, and we had a Dark Fae and a lost crown to hunt down.

# CHAPTER 15





## DAKOTA

As usual, my sisters and I embarked on a mission to finish the transformation that would make the council headquarters into a space that truly reflected our unity and purpose. The air was filled with the sounds of hammers pounding, saws buzzing, and laughter as we worked tirelessly to bring our vision to life.

Dre and Lia were busy installing new shelves along the walls, discussing the best way to display the various magical artifacts and tools that would be needed for our operations. Their voices were animated, and their excitement was contagious as they carefully measured and aligned the shelves.

Phi was focused on setting up the communication center, her fingers dancing across the keyboards as she programmed the hotline number and tested the lines. She glanced up at me. “Do you think passing the same cell from person to person each night will be possible? It’ll be easier and won’t tangle up their personal phones.”

I lifted a shoulder. “The only problem I see with that is it will require them to come in and pick it up. What if we have phones for each person doing the night shift? That will be far easier, and it won’t be another task for the swing shift to take on before they leave.”

“I agree with Kota,” Dea called out. “Have you thought more about the shelter and therapy program, Lia?”

Lia glanced over her shoulder. “I’ve talked to Cyran and Kassandra about searching for a place on the city’s outskirts. That’s going to be a project down the road.”

Dre rolled her eyes. “Really far down the road, sestra. We have enough on our plates.”

Lia waved a hammer around in front of her. “Which is precisely why I am delegating. The magical community has ignored abused women and children for far too long.”

We thought about the types of social services we could adapt from the mundie world to the magical one while we worked. The conversation flowed to other topics, and I finished painting the hall and went to help Dea. She was in charge of organizing the magical library, carefully cataloging each book

and artifact housed there. She was meticulous as she arranged each item, which I appreciated. Everything had to be in its place in my house.

“Shit,” Dani cried out. I dropped the book I was holding and ran to help Dani. She was up on a ladder, painting one of the walls a soothing shade of blue.

“I’ve got you, sestra,” I assured her as I grabbed the ladder and steadied her.

Dani sagged across the top. “Thanks.”

“You have to be careful,” I scolded her.

Dani handed me her paintbrush. “I know. I just got another bout of vertigo. Can you dip this for me?”

As I dipped the paintbrush into the tray, my concentration was broken by the sudden appearance of a figure in the doorway. Startled, I dropped the paintbrush, a splatter of blue paint narrowly missing my clothes.

It was Viktor, the vampire leader, his tall and imposing figure filling the doorway. I exchanged a glance with Dani as she descended the ladder, and we both wiped our hands on rags before approaching him. That was one problem with doing this work in the middle of the night. He didn’t have to stay inside for fear of burning to a crisp. I was now thinking we should have risked walking around Gentilly after all. It would have been better than facing this asshole.

"Viktor, what are you doing here?" Dre asked from the other side of the room.

Viktor's expression was serious as he stepped further into the room. “I have a question for the witches,” he said, his gaze fixed on the six of us.

Lia and Dani exchanged uneasy glances. The tension in the air was palpable. Vampires weren’t exactly warm and fluffy.

Lia tilted her head to the side and looked at him. “What do you want to know?”

Viktor's eyes narrowed. “How did you keep the return of familiars a secret for so long?”

His blunt question shocked me. My heart pounded in my chest as I realized the implications of his question. If word got out about the return of familiars, it would put them all at risk. The Tainted witches, who had once hunted familiars and stolen their power, would start that dark practice again.

Urgency made me want to cast a spell, erasing the vampire's mind. “We can't let this information get out. It's not just about us. It's about the safety of

all magical beings. The disappearance of familiars led to the imbalance in the magical world.”

Lia nodded in agreement. “You can prove you’re better than any other vampire, Viktor. Surely, you want to be the implement of change for your kind. Not to mention, this is about the greater good.”

Viktor remained unmoved. “I can't promise you I'll keep my mouth shut,” he said coldly. “I have people I trust, and they deserve to know.”

My mind raced, trying to think of a way to convince him. “Think about the consequences. If the Tainted witches find out, they could come after us, after all familiars. It could start a war. And you know they won't stop at us. They can steal power from all magical beings.”

Viktor's expression softened slightly, but he didn't back down. “I understand your concerns. But keep in mind, secrets have a way of coming to light eventually.”

Dre walked closer to the head vampire and used telekinesis to lift an empty paint roller to her hand. “That sounds like a threat. You should never forget that the familiars are protected by powerful witches who will not make easy targets. Not to mention that they’ve inherited a few upgrades this time around. They are capable of shit you don't want to be on the receiving end of, so tell your friends that.”

Viktor glared at Dre, who twisted her wrist around and held the point to his chest. The head vampire bared his fangs, making the rest of us rush to our sister's side. Our magic crackled in the air. The vampire lifted a shoulder as if he didn't care and then vanished as if he had never been there.

Before calming down, I breathed heavily for several seconds like I'd run a marathon. “That is not good. What do we do?”

*“We do nothing. Dre is correct. We have extra protections this time and won't make easy targets at all. You guys finish this project and search for the lost crown.”* Adèle's voice startled us.

Dre looked around for our familiar, but she hadn't come with us. “I was making that shit up. Are you saying it's true?”

*“The original seven and their Pleiades combined powers to give us defensive abilities. No one is entirely certain how it will work. But I like to think of myself like a jellyfish.”*

Laughter escaped me. “Oooh. Maybe you're like a viper, and you have venom.”

Dea shook her head. “Let's hope we never have to discover her defenses.”

Let's at least finish this bathroom before we get back to the task we've been avoiding."

Dre glanced at me with a hint of concern. "You know, we've had a lot going on between Mike's funeral and getting started on the Djinn Mixer. But you have a point. We can't ignore the fact that we haven't delved into finding the crown enough." Her voice was tinged with frustration.

Lia thrust her hands on her hips. "How do we ignore the rest of the stuff that's come up? It's not like we've been sitting on our asses. We have to balance things, and the lake monster hasn't been flashing the world lately. Which has been a blessing because we were taken from enough of Mike's funeral as it was."

Dea picked up the light fixture for the bathroom behind me. "Do you think we've been avoiding it because we're unsure of where to go from here? Or could it be the fear of what we might uncover?"

"You forget that we haven't ignored this completely. "We've had people out there searching for the Dark Fae who stole it and any hint of the artifact itself," Phi reminded us. "Just because we aren't doing all of the work doesn't mean we haven't had others looking for it. It is okay to take care of ourselves and our families first. We haven't left the magical world hanging."

As the discussion continued, Dani, who had been lost in her thoughts finally spoke up. "We've been avoiding it because the crown represents so much more than just a magical artifact. A loa made it, and we haven't had the best experience with them. One tried to take over Dea, and we're afraid of what we might face when we find the crown."

We all fell silent for a moment, absorbing Dani's words. She had hit the nail on the head—we had been avoiding the search because of our history with the voodoo gods. The crown represented a source of power and a reminder of our shared destiny and the challenges we had overcome together.

"Perhaps it's time we confront our fears and uncertainties," I said, my voice firm. "We've faced countless obstacles before, and this is no different. We will do whatever it takes to find the crown. Let's put this bathroom together so the council members have a place to pee."

We all converged on the bathroom and stood in the doorway, looking inside. We had already completed the drywall work and were moving on to work on the rest. The first part was difficult. Little did I know the real challenge was still ahead of us. We had to install the tub, toilet, and sink. And we all had no experience with plumbing.

Lia and Dre exchanged bemused glances as we stared at the bathtub and toilet, trying to figure out where even to begin. Wanting to get moving, I broached the subject first. “So...anyone know how to install a toilet?”

Phi snapped her fingers and produced green flames on the ends of them. “I can summon fire and manipulate elements, but plumbing isn't one of my talents.”

Dea shook her head, a rueful smile on her face. “I can treat a patient with a swelling brain, but toilets are another thing altogether.”

Dani let out a laugh, breaking the tension that had settled in the room. “Well, it looks like we've got a new challenge on our hands.” Dani was the one who suggested we do the work on the council building. She loved remodeling homes and was good at it, and it showed in her excitement.

With a collective sigh, we huddled around the bathtub and toilet, consulting various DIY guides and videos on our phones. As we attempted to follow the instructions using magic, we flooded the room more than once. Our magical mishaps only seemed to make things worse. Water splashed and pipes groaned. At one point, the toilet even levitated briefly before dropping.

Amidst the chaos, we couldn't help but burst into fits of laughter. Watching a group of powerful witches struggle with something as mundane as plumbing was a comical sight. Our frustration soon turned into shared amusement as we embraced the situation's absurdity.

Lia wiped away tears of laughter, gasping, “I can't believe we're failing at plumbing, of all things.”

Dre grinned, “Who would have thought our magical talents would be useless in the face of a toilet?”

After a few more failed attempts, we finally managed to install the toilet with a mixture of magic and sheer determination. It may not have been the most conventional method, but it held together.

As we stepped back to admire our handiwork, we exchanged proud glances. I pushed the handle down, flushing the toilet. “It may not be perfect, but at least it's functional.”

Dea nodded in agreement. “And I'm pretty sure we've earned the title of 'magical plumbers' after today.”

Dani held her hand up for Lia to smack. “We rocked it. The next one should be easy in comparison. Dre, can you try to levitate the bathtub into place?” Her telekinesis would come in handy to move the heavy claw-footed tub into place.

“Sure.” Dre frowned, her brow furrowing in concentration as she focused her energy on the bathtub. With a determined look, she waved her hand and the bathtub lifted a few inches off the ground. A second later it wobbled precariously, threatening to crash into the wall.

“Whoa, hold on!” Lia shouted, rushing over to help stabilize the bathtub with a gust of air. The heavy tub fell to the floor and bounced.

Phi watched from where she was putting in a new light fixture. “If you can’t do it, Dre, we can call Cyran and Kaveh to help.”

“Give me a minute. I’m trying!” Dre grunted, beads of sweat forming on her forehead. “It’s heavier than I thought.”

I joined in, using my elemental powers to support the bathtub and keep it from falling. “The rest of us can add air to cushion it while you lift it and move it over.”

With our combined efforts, we managed to get the bathtub into place. It wasn’t the most graceful installation, but at least it was in position without causing any damage. Now that we were left with caulking and final touches on the bathroom, I couldn’t ignore the worry nagging me about the safety of Adèle.

Sighing, I set the caulk gun down and blew the hair out of my face. “Do you guys really think Adèle will be safe if Viktor talks about her existence? Her kind were hunted and killed to the point that familiars became extinct.”

“I’m not entirely sure. I don’t doubt that they were given special powers, but does that mean she will be safe?” Dre asked, her voice tinged with worry. “I’d feel better if we found a way to add another layer of protection around her.”

Lia nodded. “Agreed. The first step is to be careful and make sure that those we trust are aware of the situation without letting it spread beyond our control. We should let Phoebe know as well. She can let the others know of the potential danger.”

Dani nodded in agreement and pulled out her phone. “I’ll call her and ask if she or Tarja have any suggestions for us.”

“Hey, Phoebe,” Dani’s voice carried through the speaker, capturing the attention of all of us. “I need to tell you something important.”

The gravity of the situation hung in the air as we listened to Dani explain the recent discovery made by Viktor, the vampire leader of New Orleans. The tension in the room was almost tangible as Phoebe absorbed the implications of Dani’s words.

“Are you serious? How did Viktor find out?” Phoebe's voice on the other end of the line held a mix of surprise and concern.

“He showed up at council headquarters just now and asked why we hadn't announced it. The important thing is that he knows.”

“That wasn't meant to be an accusation. I'm just concerned with how that information got out. I appreciate your calling and letting me know. I'll pass on the warning to the other witches who have familiars. We all need to be vigilant. Vampires are murderous assholes that can't be trusted,” Phoebe said.

Lia nodded. “We almost didn't include vampires in our council because of your experience with them. In the end, we wanted someone we could hold accountable if they continued causing problems as they did with you. Nevertheless, we can't afford to be complacent. We need to be prepared for anything.”

Phoebe's sigh echoed through the speaker. “The familiars aren't helpless this time, but we don't know exactly their powers. Tarja and I will research the best approach for you to protect Adèle.”

“Thank you,” Dani said as she promised to keep in touch and hung up the phone.

Dre crossed her arms over her chest. “I want to cast a spell that hides Adèle's energy signature when we return home. That will ensure visitors will think she's a regular cat.”

“That's a good place to start,” Lia said. “It'll give us peace of mind while we search for the crown. We can't do more research into ways to help Adèle until the crown is secure. With her having magical defenses and our powers, I think it's a lower priority over the artifact.”

“Agreed,” we said in unison.

Despite the uncertainty that lay ahead, one thing was clear: we were united in our purpose and resolute in our determination to safeguard those we held dear. The challenges may be daunting, but with the strength of our sisterhood and the support of trusted allies like Phoebe and Tarja we were a formidable force to be reckoned with.

# CHAPTER 16





## DANIELLE

As much as I liked the hot water running over my body, it was time to get out so we could get on with our search. I'd lost track of time entirely and had to force myself to get out. Stress was melting away as I stood there.

"You okay, Sunshine?" Noah's voice sent shivers down my spine. I'd been denying him the completion of the mating to protect myself, and he still hadn't told me how it would affect him. He wasn't one of the assholes I'd been with before. He deserved better.

Shoving aside what was running through my head, I turned off the faucet. "I'm great."

He was holding a towel for me when I got out of the shower. I let him wrap it around me before I turned to face him. Without allowing thoughts of the lost crown to stop me, I went to my tiptoes and threw my arms around his neck. His eyes widened, and a smile lifted the corners of his mouth. Before I knew it, he lifted me into his embrace and carried me back to our room.

The feel of his arousal rubbing me with every step sent my desire for him skyrocketing. He swallowed my moan as his lips descended on mine. He kissed me like his life depended on it. I was so lost in his mouth that I was dazed when he broke away several seconds later.

I blinked and noticed we were in our room with the door closed. When had that happened? The question fled when I looked into his green eyes. My heart started racing. "You make me forget everything else in the world. It's easy to ignore the pressing issues we still have to deal with when I'm in your arms."

A sexy smile spread over his face. "That's because nothing else matters outside of being right here with you. Besides, you need time to enjoy yourself and remember the good things in life."

He made doing that so easy. "What good things? I think I need reminding of what those are."

With a growl, his mouth took mine in a rugged, sensual kiss. His lips were insistent and passionate and made me wet faster than a bullet leaving a gun. He always had that effect on me. There was no denying the bond we

shared and how close it made us. He knew me as well as my sisters, if not better than them. And yet, he had never once tried to use that to take advantage of me.

“Mmmm,” I groaned against his mouth.

His hands tightened on my butt cheeks and tugged me against his erection while he moved to the bed. The friction was delicious, and I was arching, moving, and throwing my head back in pleasure.

Noah didn't let that stop his hungry mouth as his lips traveled over to my earlobe and nipped at it. “Are you okay with making your sisters wait for another half an hour?”

My need and desire fogged my brain, but not so much that I couldn't tease him. “I only get a half an hour this time? Are you mad at me?”

His groan had a feral edge and rattled my entire body. “I was trying to be considerate of the others waiting. I can see that was a mistake. I will never deny you what you want.”

I had to stop denying him. I had never been with someone more in tune with me or more willing to give me what I needed. Wanting to move things along, I pulled at the towel wrapped around me and let it fall to the ground. “I like the way you think. But you're wearing too many clothes.”

With one hand holding me, he reached back and pulled his shirt off with the other. My eyes dropped to the muscled planes of his chest. My mate was sexier than any man ever. He had the body of a Greek god. And I could say this with confidence after having met Aidoneus, Phoebe's mate, who was a God of the Underworld.

“Gods, you're sexy,” he said in a husky voice laced with desire.

I'd stopped thinking about my imperfections when he said things like that. I could feel his sincerity through our connection, and I wasn't going to insult him by questioning it. Shoving those insecurities aside didn't come naturally to me, but he'd made it easy. Especially when he looked at me like I was his world.

Noah grinned and bent, laying me on the bed. I fought the urge to wiggle as he stood back and watched me. I stretched my arms over my head and lifted one eyebrow. “Where's my show?”

Noah kicked his shoes off while he bent my legs and spread them apart. “You drive me crazy. I was going to keep my pants on so I could go slow, but now you've woken the beast.”

I had no problem skipping the leisurely pace. I was on fire with need. My

body knew what he could do to me, and I wanted it now. He could take his time later. His finger brushed through my wetness, and his thumb pressed against my clit.

“Holy crap. Yes!” I writhed and lifted and moved, trying to get more pressure where I needed it.

Noah shoved his pants off while staring at the apex of my legs. His groan vibrated through me, and his finger increased pressure exactly where I needed it. His cock bobbed hungrily as his arousal seeped from the tip. My hips lifted off the bed entirely until I felt the heat of his erection pressed against the top of my thigh. I wanted him between my legs, and I knew all I had to do was show him how ready I was. Within seconds, I felt his cockhead pressed against my opening.

“I love you,” I gasped.

Noah’s eyes filled with tenderness and desire. “Love you back, Sunshine.” A second later, his finger moved around his shaft and moved inside, testing me further and teasing me in the process. He knew it didn’t take much by now to get me ready to take him. It was like my body was made for him. There was a moment of doubt when I saw his size. I wondered if I would enjoy intercourse with him. I was happy to have been wrong.

He reclaimed my mouth, his tongue sliding against mine, mimicking how our bodies were joining. The pressure at my core increased, then disappeared. I had no patience for slow. I wanted him. Now.

I lifted my hips and wrapped my legs around his, making his cock slide through my wetness. His finger disappeared, and he thrust into me to the hilt in one swift move. There was no pause for me to adjust to his size. Noah was an expert at what made me tick and kissed down the side of my neck.

A groan left me when his head dipped, licked, and then sucked my nipple into his mouth. Just like that, I was on the edge of a mind-blowing orgasm. He pulled out a little, then thrust back inside. It was an intimate dance he’d established the first time we were together, and it reassured me his mind was always on my pleasure.

It didn't take long after that for him to set a fast and hard rhythm. Noah had my body coiling tightly in an instant, and my heart raced as I chased my climax. I couldn't think beyond the pleasure of the moment, which was exactly what I needed.

I arched my back, shoving more of my breast into his mouth while moaning loudly. My muscles clamped down on him when I felt one of his

fingers reach between our bodies and press over my clit. The man was everywhere at once, hitting every one of my erotic zones at the same time. When he shifted his mouth to my other breast, it was enough to send me careening over the edge.

The orgasm took my breath away. My body writhed, and he swallowed my scream. The moment was intense and powerful. A second later, he grunted and jerked above me as his climax exploded from him.

I wrapped my arms around his neck as I tried to catch my breath. "That was exactly what I needed."

"You know better, Sunshine. I'm just getting warmed up." His wicked smile was full of promise.

After several more orgasms, I collapsed against my pillow and was recovering next to Noah. It had been months since I had been nervous with Noah, but I couldn't turn my mind off now that he had thoroughly reminded me of how wonderful he was.

I nervously twirled a strand of hair around my finger as I lay across from Noah, my heart pounding in my chest. I knew without a doubt that he was the one for me. But something was holding me back, a fear that had been lingering in the back of my mind.

"Um, Noah," I began, my voice trembling slightly. "There's something I want to talk to you about."

He looked at me with concern in his eyes, reaching out to gently hold my hand. "Of course, love. You can talk to me about anything."

I took a deep breath, trying to gather my thoughts. "Well, you know how we've been together for a while now, and I love you more than anything."

He smiled, his eyes lighting up with affection. "I love you too, Dani."

I smiled back, feeling a surge of warmth in my chest. I decided it was best to rip the Band-Aid off. "I was thinking... I want us to mate and start the bonding process officially."

His eyes widened in surprise, and then a look of happiness spread across his face. "Are you sure, Dani? From the moment I met you, I've been dreaming of mating you. But I didn't want to rush you into anything."

I took another deep breath, mustering up the courage to speak my truth. "I know it's a big step, and it's one I've been fighting, but I've thought about it a lot. And I realized that my fear was holding me back. I've been hurt in the past, and I was scared to commit to someone again fully. But you've shown me that you're different, Noah. You've been patient and understanding and

supported my dreams and ambitions. I know you would do anything for me, and I want to do the same for you. I want to be with you forever.” My heart was hammering so hard while my mind tried to override my mouth. I wasn’t letting old fears ruin the rest of my life.

Noah's eyes softened, and he reached out to cup my cheek gently. “I'm so glad you feel that way, Dani. As sappy as it sounds, it was love at first sight for me. And I've been waiting for you to be ready for this step. I want to be with you for the rest of my life, too. But I will still be here loving you as long as I can if you don't want to do that.”

A tear slipped down my cheek, and I leaned into his touch, feeling a sense of peace and contentment wash over me. “So, you'll claim me then? Make me yours?”

He nodded, a soft smile on his lips. “Yes, Dani. I'll claim you and start the official mating process. I want to show you how much you mean to me.”

I leaned forward, pressing a gentle kiss against his lips. “Now, show me what this claim is all about.”

Noah was on me with a wicked smile as if we hadn't been making love for almost an hour. As we embraced, I knew in my heart that I had made the right decision. My fear had held me back for too long, but now I was ready to let it go and embrace the love and happiness that Noah and I could share. Our love was strong, and I was confident that we could overcome any challenges that came our way. With Noah by my side, I knew that true happiness was within our reach, and I couldn't wait to start this new chapter of our lives together.

# CHAPTER 17



## DAHLIA

My feet were killing me as we walked back to the car. “We can safely say we covered all of Gentilly,” I said as I sat behind the wheel of my car.

“Now we can go to Solstice Sin and look for Elan and Rhyssa,” Phi said as she climbed into the back seat.

I nodded as I started the vehicle and backed out of the parking spot. “Did we get the address?”

Kota held up the phone from the passenger seat. “Sure did. It’s not in a great area, though. We should do a spell or something to protect us.”

My gaze flitted up to the rearview mirror to gauge the responses of the others. I thought it was a good idea and was about to say so when I noticed Dani staring out the window.

My head swiveled to the middle seat and landed on Dani for a split second before returning to the road. “That’s a good idea, Kota. But I want to know what is going on with you, Dani? You’ve been quiet the entire search. Did something happen with Noah? Or is it Mike?”

I glanced up long enough to see Dani’s cheeks turn pink. “I keep thinking about how short life really is. And how we need to find this guy and get the crown back so we can get back to what matters.”

I gestured to the parking lot in front of us. More weeds were growing through the cracked pavement than there were in the state of Texas. The trash sticking to the spiky plants made it look like thousands of tiny snack and soda monsters were standing sentry in the lot. “I want to talk about what brought that on later. For now, we need to put our game faces on.”

Solstice Sin was a supernatural bar, unlike anything we’d ever been in. I didn’t need to go inside to know it was a stark contrast from Brezok’s establishment. The air was thick with an unsettling energy, and the atmosphere felt darker as if the shadows themselves were alive and watching.

We stuck close together as we entered the bar, I couldn’t help but notice the subtle differences in the patrons. Vampires mingled among the crowd, their predatory gazes lingering on us as we moved through the dimly lit space. The conversations were hushed, filled with an air of secrecy and

tension. This was a place where secrets thrived and danger lurked.

Our purpose here was to locate the Dark Fae who had stolen the artifact or his accomplice. We navigated through the crowd, our senses on high alert. Dani's gaze met mine, and her determination mirrored my own. We couldn't afford to fail. The stakes were too high.

Upon first inspection, we would hit a dead-end again. And then we spotted her. The Dark Fae we were looking for sitting at the bar with her companions. Rhyssa's hair was a cascade of rich ebony that framed her face in loose waves. Eyes of deep emerald held a glint of self-absorption. That is what convinced me it was the Dark Fae we were looking for. There was no mistaking the attitude that had been described to us by others.

Rhyssa wore tight garments of dark jewel tones, the fabrics whispering softly as they molded to her frame. Intricate jewelry graced her fingers and wrists in a garish display of wealth. Like with most of the Fae, her features were an exquisite blend of strength and beauty, with a sharp jawline and elegant bone structure.

Without a word, we approached them, our presence causing a ripple of unease among the group. Tension crackled in the air as Dre greeted Rhyssa. "Hello, Rhyssa. You're a hard woman to find."

Rhyssa snarled at Dre and glared at the rest of us. "Who the hell are you? And what do you want?"

One of Rhyssa's friends shook her shoulder and tried to say something to her, but Rhyssa shook her off. Kota stepped closer to the group. "We're the ones here to reclaim what you stole."

Rhyssa threw her head back and laughed. "Like hell you are! I didn't steal anything from anyone." Her voice was laced with defiance.

I laughed out loud. "The lake monster would beg to differ. He's been searching for you. Let's go down to the river and have a chat with him."

Rhyssa's friends started hurling accusations and insults. Clearly, she wouldn't give up the artifact without a fight. Before we knew it, chaos erupted. A spell was cast and suddenly, the bar was a battleground. I hastily cast a shield without thinking much about who it covered as furniture flew through the air.

A massive amount of energy left Dre's hands and blew two guys off their bar stools. That made them snarl and jump into the fray. The air was tense as our powers collided in a dazzling display of elemental forces. With my sisters Dre, Kota, Phi, Dea, and Dani, we formed a united front against the dark



adversaries.

Spells crackled through the air as my sisters and I unleashed our magic, arcs of vibrant energy streaking toward Rhyssa and her companions. Fire met water, earth collided with air, and the very fabric of reality seemed to twist as our powers intermingled.

Rhyssa, a formidable adversary, wielded her magic with a malevolent grace. Her movements were fluid and calculated as she conjured torrents of water to counter our fiery onslaught. Waves surged and crashed, the battle unfolding in a tempestuous dance of elements.

Amidst the chaotic battle, I caught sight of Dani and Phi pushing themselves to the limit. Dre, her expression determined, deflected a blast of water with a shield of telekinetic force, her face contorted with effort. Dani stepped up to help Dre, but her focus wavered, and a surge of water struck Dani, sending her stumbling back with a cry of pain.

I lurched toward Dani and noticed Phi moving sideways while wielding her powers. Phi was a force to be reckoned with. She excelled at anything she put her mind to. I couldn't get close to Dani as one of Rhyssa's friends stepped before me. I prayed Phi could get there to make sure Dani was alright.

From the corner of my eye, I watched as Phi summoned tendrils of fire that danced and lashed out at our foes. Rhyssa's allies were quick to retaliate. A dark gust of wind deflected Phi's flames, causing her to stumble into the path of a jagged shard of earth that materialized beneath her feet. She cried out, her side and arm sliced open as she tried to regain her balance.

Dre and I intensified our efforts, using our combined powers to create a blinding barrier of light that momentarily disoriented our opponents. It provided a brief respite, allowing us to regroup and reposition ourselves.

As the battle raged on, the air was charged with magic, each spell casting an iridescent glow across the room. The bar's once dreary atmosphere had been replaced by a maelstrom of power and conflict, the clash of elements echoing through the space. Sadly, that was a drastic improvement over what was there before.

Despite our determination and skill, Rhyssa and her friends proved to be formidable adversaries. My energy was depleting but not as fast as Phi and Dani with their injuries. Desperation clawed at the edges of my resolve. The thought of giving up didn't enter my mind because my sisters stood their ground with me. Being united in purpose empowered us. I knew that our

bond and determination would see us through. The battle was far from over, and we would fight with every ounce of our being to protect our city and one another.

As the battle raged on, something unexpected happened. Half of the patrons joined our side, recognizing the threat the Dark Fae posed. It was a turning point, shifting the balance in our favor. A quarter of the crowd took the opportunity to slip away, not wanting to be caught in the crossfire.

The remaining patrons were divided, some fleeing for safety while others rallied to aid us. It was a fierce and intense struggle, each side refusing to yield. Our determination burned bright, and with every spell cast, every blow struck, we pushed forward.

Finally, with a collective surge of magic, we managed to overpower Rhyssa and her allies. With Rhyssa secured by our magic, the bar fell into an uneasy silence. The aftermath of the battle was evident in the wreckage and the faces of those who had witnessed or participated in the fight.

The owner was a big, burly guy who had stood aside. Now, he turned to face us. “The Arcane Council will get a bill for the damage here.”

Kota snorted. “No, I don’t think so. We saved your bar from being destroyed by the lake monster as it hunted for Rhyssa and Elan. Next time you have a fugitive in your midst, contact your leader as instructed, or *you* will be charged for damages to *us*.”

The night was charged with tension as silence descended on the bar. The air was thick with the residue of magic. I turned away from the angry owner and faced my sisters. We shared a determined glance as a silent agreement passed between us. We needed to get to her house and retrieve the stolen crown.

We marched her outside and to my car, where Dea lifted Rhyssa’s handbag. “Where is the crown?”

Rhyssa spat at my sister. “I’m not telling you shit.”

Dea laughed, a bitter sound with sharp edges that made me cringe. Dea narrowed her eyes at the Dark Fae woman. “That’s what I thought you’d say. We can track her home using her belongings. Our best bet at finding the crown is following her movements. We know the leak about being in Gentilly was a big fat lie. Let’s see what she was really doing.”

Rhyssa opened her mouth, and I cast a duct tape spell on her, preventing her from saying anything as I shoved her in the back of my SUV. “I’m going to get out of here while you guys cast the tracking spell. I don’t want to hang

around any longer. Those vampires are around here somewhere, and they didn't look very friendly." I had an old blanket back there that I put on her and got behind the wheel.

My sisters' magic filled the car as they chanted while I drove away from the bar. Almost instantly, a deep red line appeared in front of me. It reminded me of the blue line on the map apps. Excited, I followed the lead through the city and tried not to get distracted by Dani and Dea leaning over the backseat and holding Rhyssa down while Dre used her powers to heal Phi's wounds.

Dani shook her head when Phi turned to her. "Save your energy, sestra. We don't know what we're walking into."

Dre nodded as the red line turned into a house. I drove past it and parked up the street and out of direct sight of the house where the red line traveled through the front door. To our surprise, she was staying within the Garden District, an area known for its charm and elegance. But tonight, it bore witness to a different kind of energy.

Dre and Dea had Rhyssa out of the back. As we approached her residence, a sense of foreboding settled over me. Dre stopped on the sidewalk before we could be seen. "Cast a personal protection spell on yourselves." Being aware helped us get better prepared this time.

"I'm calling Lucas and Noah, as well. We don't have to face this alone," I said.

"I already told Kaitlyn, and she's gathering members of the coven," Kota added.

None of us moved closer as we watched the house for any sign of movement. The minutes seemed to trickle by as we waited in the shadows. Kaitlyn arrived on foot and approached from the other end of the street.

Dre held up her hand and pointed to the faded line. Kaitlyn's arm shot out, stopping those she brought with her. Lucas and Noah came up from behind us. Dea and Phi practically screamed while Dani and I smiled at our mates. We knew they were coming because of our bond and had been able to slap hands over their mouths. Lucas and Noah's presence provided us with a renewed sense of determination and the reassurance that we were not alone in this fight.

As we cautiously approached the house, the moonlight cast an eerie glow on the streets. The shadows seemed to dance with a mixture of curiosity and malice, a stark contrast to the beauty that usually defined this area. Lucas handed Rhyssa to one of his shifters to guard as we resumed our journey to

her lair.

My heart was in my throat when the Dark energy overwhelmed me as we stepped across the property line. There were lights on in one room of the house but none of the others. I didn't like walking into this so blind, but we had no choice.

Lucas kicked the front door in, blowing it off its hinges. Stepping into the heart of Rhyssa's lair, the atmosphere was thick with tension and a tangible sense of danger hanging in the air. My eyes bugged out of my head when I saw the formidable assembly of Dark Fae standing in the living room. Each one radiated an air of calculated malice. It was clear that this would be a battle, making me want to pee my pants.

All four elements were hurled in our direction. A wave of water hit me while fire headed for Lucas and Noah. I opened my mouth to warn them and sucked in a lung full of water. Kaitlyn rushed forward, and the fire hit a wall and spread up to the ceiling. I had to focus on getting oxygen in my lungs so I didn't drown. I hadn't mastered my elements yet, but I could push the water away from me. I collapsed in a coughing fit as spells were hurled back and forth.

The room ignited with bursts of energy and vibrant lights. The walls seemed to tremble with the force of our clashes, and the scent of burning magic permeated the air. My heart pounded in rhythm with the chaotic symphony of the battle while I hacked up water and watched the fight. Lucas's movements were a blur of precision and intent as he protected me from harm. It allowed me to gather myself and get back into the fight.

When I got to my feet, I patted Lucas's shoulder, then hurled a magical bomb over Dre's shoulder and the group in front of her. I envied Dre's talents. Her telekinetic prowess was a force to be reckoned with. Objects flew through the air, becoming deadly projectiles that disrupted the enemy's formations and defenses. Her focus was unwavering, her concentration honed to a razor's edge. Pride swelled in me. That was my big sister!

Movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention. I reacted and swiveled with a ball of my witch fire leaving my palm before I finished moving. The Dark Fae screamed, and water cascaded over him a second later. It did nothing to stop my flames. I contained them to his person as I turned to help my sisters. I almost faltered as I fought the urge to walk away.

Phi's control over the elements came to life in a display of raw power. Firewalls danced and roared, forming barriers shielding her and me from our

assailants' attacks. Gusts of wind became both a shield and a weapon, bending to her will and unleashing controlled chaos upon our foes.

Dea's hands swirled around in front of her body in waves and arches that spun power in front of her. The energy caught several Dark Fae in its grip and hurled them around the room. I had no idea what she was doing, but it was very effective until her hands shook and stopped moving. I felt an influence come over her long enough to allow a Dark Fae to shove her off balance.

I wanted to go help Dea, but I had to lunge toward Dani. A Dark Fae was attacking her from behind. I kicked the Dark Fae sneaking up behind her. He punched me, making me land on my back. Dani's magic surged forth, a tempest of energy that crackled with electric intensity. Bolts of power erupted from her fingertips, striking true and sending shockwaves through the guy who was about to stomp on my head.

I rolled to the side and shoved myself to my feet. I found myself immersed in the heart of the fray. Spells and counter-spells were exchanged rapidly, each incantation fueled by a potent mix of adrenaline and purpose. My senses were heightened, my instincts guiding me through the maelstrom of battle. There was a second where I wanted to stop and back away. I refused to allow myself to back down, though.

Beside us, Lucas and Noah unleashed their brand of ferocity. Their forms blurred as they engaged the Dark Fae in close combat, their shifter strength and speed a formidable advantage. Kaitlyn and her coven of witches wielded their spells, their magic interweaving with ours to create a symphony of power.

Blows were exchanged, magic crackled, and bodies collided in a chaotic dance of conflict. The room echoed with the clang of weapons, the hiss of spells, and the primal cries of combatants. As the battle reached its crescendo, the combined might of our forces began to wear down the Dark Fae's defenses. One by one, they fell before our onslaught. The room fell into a tense silence as few were left alive.

With the threat neutralized, I turned my attention to Rhyssa. Her defiance had given way to resignation. I knew that we had the upper hand. "Where is the crown?" I demanded in an unwavering voice.

Rhyssa looked to the left, where a male with a sinewy build and tousled locks of obsidian hair stood. His piercing grey eyes held a calculating glint. Dani stomped toward the guy and crouched in front of him. "You must be

Elan.”

Elan’s body jerked and jumped on the ground as he snarled, “I will never tell you anything.”

Dani smiled wickedly and placed her hands on his chest. Electricity traveled from her and into him, making his back arch. “I think you will.”

Dea’s eyes narrowed on Elan as he writhed and fought the magical hold on him. It wasn’t until Dre started shaking that I realized she was holding him down. The five of us converged behind Dani. Dea chanted a reveal spell, and the air above Elan’s head began to shimmer. The gold crown appeared where there was nothing before.

“Damn,” I whispered. “How did you know?” We hadn’t taken any of the potions that allowed us to see through Dark Fae glamour.

Dea tilted her head to the side. “There’s spirit energy attached to it. I felt it and knew he had to be hiding something.”

Dani’s determination blazed in her eyes as she reached out, and with a fierce yank, she seized the crown from the Dark Fae’s skull. “I’m tired of assholes,” she declared, her words echoing through the room.

I practically sagged with relief when my sister touched the crown. We were one step closer to unraveling the mysteries that had been plaguing our city. Yet, even amid our triumph, my thoughts were tinged with concern for Dani. Her anger and determination were palpable, a reflection of the turmoil that had been brewing within her. The loss of Mike had her raw. I couldn’t help but worry about how she along with her children, were coping with the weight of that loss.

At that moment, I couldn’t help but reflect on the complexity of human nature. People were multifaceted, capable of both darkness and light. Mike had been no exception, and his legacy was a testament to the intricate tapestry of his character. “We should turn them over to Terrence so they can be thrown into Coldwater Creek.” It was one thing to kill an enemy while they are trying to kill you and another to slaughter them when they are contained. I didn’t know their full history and didn’t need to, to understand they deserved incarceration for their recent actions.

Kaitlyn nodded. “I’ll take care of it. Can you stay, Lucas? Noah? To help ensure our safety.”

I kissed Lucas before we took our leave to get the crown to safety. Our journey was far from over. We had to return the crown to the lake monster later tonight when there were fewer mundies out and about. We also needed

to check on Cyran's progress with the water diversion. The last I saw on the news, things were getting better faster than ever before. The biggest hurdle was done, but it didn't feel like it.

# CHAPTER 18





## DAKOTA

I shivered and rubbed my arms. “The energy that thing puts off is unnerving. We need to hide it before it calls to some asshole nearby. If they want to come take that and don’t give us a thought, they can cross our wards.”

Dea grimaced as she sipped the margarita in front of her. We’d all sat down for a drink now that we’d found the crown. “It will be easier to cast new wards.”

*“You can cast a ward around the crown itself, but doing more on the plantation itself could backfire on those that live here with us,”* Adèle said into our minds. *“I recommend trying to conceal the power of the artifact itself.”*

The room was filled with focused determination as my sisters and I pushed our drinks aside. My mind raced with ideas and possibilities. We had been grappling with the enigma of the crown and its powers for hours. We’d been trying everything we could to contain and suppress its energy. Yet, despite our efforts, the crown’s magic seemed to persist, defying our attempts at control.

We were close. I could feel it. I kept thinking we needed to get more creative. Unfortunately, all of our tireless experimenting with spells, crafting potions, and even containment measures had failed. It didn’t make a difference when we sealed the crown within lead boxes. Each attempt had left us more frustrated than the last, as the crown’s power seemed to adapt and resist our every move.

I scratched behind Adèle’s ears. “How big of a target will there be on our backs when we leave the plantation to take that back to the lake monster?”

Adèle started purring and lifted her head into my hand. *“Anyone within a fifteen-block radius will know immediately. And anyone searching for or following it can track you six.”*

Lia frowned as she crossed her arms over her chest and sat back in the chair. “It sounds too dangerous to take to the lake then. We should figure out some other way to keep it safe. Didn’t Phoebe mention a Relic Keeper?”

*“Don’t give up this avenue yet. You still have books to look through. We*

*will cross other bridges when nothing else is left,” Adèle replied.*

Seated across from Cami, I went back to sifting through the pages of the ancient book we had discovered. I said a silent prayer that I could uncover any hidden wisdom that could shed light on our predicament. I read for what seemed like hours but was probably less than one. The text spoke of Oshun, the mysterious loa associated with the crown, and the profound magic it held. But nowhere did it offer guidance on how to conceal or mitigate its power.

A heavy sigh escaped my lips as I looked up from the book, my gaze meeting Cami's. “This is like trying to catch smoke with our bare hands,” I muttered, frustration lacing my words.

Cami nodded in agreement, her expression mirroring my exasperation. “I know. The crown's power is slipping through our grasp no matter what we do.”

As we exchanged weary glances, Adèle's voice filled my head. Her words were a soothing presence amid our uncertainty. *“Perhaps it’s time to entertain your other idea.”*

Turning my attention to Adèle, I felt a spark of hope ignite within me. This had to be our answer.

“You mean the Relic Keeper?” Dani asked. Dani had been far less distracted but still somewhat remote.

Adèle stood and stretched, her front legs flat and her hind remaining straight. Her eyes traveled over us with a steady gaze. *“Yes, I am referring to Nylah. She’s a guardian of ancient and powerful artifacts. She possesses the knowledge and skills to control and contain such energies.”*

I frowned at Adèle as annoyance traveled through me. “Why did you dismiss me when I mentioned it before?” It was even more attractive knowing the Relic Keeper held the knowledge to contain the crown's magic.

*“It’s important that you exhaust all resources in front of you before going to others. I redirected you out of respect for Nylah. She had a life before magic interrupted it, and she’s been through a lot.”*

Lia changed the subject back to what mattered when she asked, “Where can we find this relic keeper?”

Adèle shook out her body as she walked in a circle before curling up and laying back down. *“I suggest reaching out to Phoebe. I know that she and Nylah have worked together at least once. She will be able to tell you how to reach her.”*

Dre nodded and pulled out her phone. She pressed the contact and put it

on speakerphone. It rang three times, and I thought Phoebe wouldn't pick up. The breath I was holding whooshed from me when she finally answered the call.

"Hey, Phoebe," Dre said. "Listen, we need some information about the Relic Keeper." I wasn't surprised by how Dre delved into the heart of the matter but going by Phoebe's silence, I could tell that she was. "You know, Nylah. Adèle assured us that she can handle powerful magical artifacts and keep them hidden from prying eyes."

"I'm not sure what you want. Nylah is, uh, not really all that active in our community yet." This wasn't a topic she discussed often, or perhaps not at all.

"We're dealing with a pretty intense situation here," Dre continued. I could hear the frustration in every word she spoke. "We're trying to figure out how to handle a powerful artifact that's causing a lot of trouble. We were hoping you would give us Nylah's number so we can reach out to her for help."

There was a rustling on the other end of the phone. "I hope Nylah doesn't get pissed at me for giving this information. I trust you have a true emergency if you ask for her. But don't be surprised if she refuses to help. She's in a pretty rough spot right now. She isn't the only one in her family going through changes. I'll text you her number."

"Thanks, Phoebe. I appreciate it," Dre sighed, her shoulders relaxing as the tension eased. "We will keep you updated about how this goes. Just trust me when I say this will appease the lake monster you've undoubtedly seen pictures of while keeping the six of us safe from an ambush."

Phoebe cursed under her breath before she said, "Business as usual there, I see. If Nylah can't help, please call back, and I will see what Aidon and I can do."

Lia bent toward the phone. "I doubt he can do anything unless he can conceal loa power."

"From what he told me before, he can't interfere with another pantheon. Still, keep me posted," Phoebe said.

We all thanked her, and Dre hung up before turning her attention back to the task at hand. The air was thick with anticipation as we leaned over the table to get closer to the cell Dre had set in the middle.

The next moment was crucial to our success in masking the crown's power. The phone chimed as Phoebe's message with Nylah's number came through. Dre opened the device without hesitating and pressed the number to

call the Relic Keeper.

“Hello,” a woman answered after two rings.

“Hello, Nylah? My name is Dre, and I'm here with my sisters, Lia, Kota, Phi, Dea, and Dani,” Dre began as her gaze remained focused on her phone. “We've heard about your expertise as a Relic Keeper. We're facing a unique situation with an artifact. It's a crown that holds an uncontrollable power.”

Nylah's voice came through the phone, composed and steady, instilling a sense of confidence within us. “I'm not sure what I can do for you. What is it specifically that you want from me?” Her voice held an edge of uneasiness and distrust.

“We've attempted various methods to contain its magic, but nothing seems to work,” I said. “It's a magnet for trouble, and we don't want to leave the house to return it to its rightful keeper until we are assured it can't be tracked with us. Or when it gets back into the creature's hands. We're hoping you might have insights or a solution to help us conceal the power it emanates.”

There was a lengthy pause before Nylah responded. “I understand your concern about having power be tracked and how dangerous that is to the six of you. I encountered a situation like this myself. However, I don't know what I'm doing, so I can't advise you.”

Dea stood up and bent so her face was close to the speaker. “We all know what it's like not to know what you're doing. We've only had our magic for a few months, and I can't tell you the number of times we've been injured and almost killed. Anything you can do to help us is appreciated. We all have families that we don't want to endanger.” Dea's empathic power rolled from her in rippling waves that gained strength as she spoke. I wanted to give her what she requested by the time she was done.

Nylah sighed into the speaker. “To properly assess and address the issue, I would need to see the artifact in person.”

Dre nodded as a smile broke out across her face. “We're prepared to do whatever it takes to bring you the crown. Dea is right about the danger to our families, but our city is also at risk. You don't have to be an expert to be the best person for the job. Besides, Phoebe said your expertise could be the key to containing the crown's energy.”

“Thank you for considering this,” Phi added, her voice carrying a note of urgency, while Lia said, “If you're willing, we would like you to come here and perform the spell, not just assess the situation.”

“As much as I want to deny you, I can hear the urgency in your voices. Besides, my best friend has told me you guys are safe witches and good allies. Especially for when I need the best party planners.” A scratching sound echoed from the tiny speaker before Nylah’s voice became distant. “Are you angling to have your anniversary party planned by these women?”

“You can’t blame a girl for trying, Nylah,” a woman on Nylah’s end of the line said. “You’re talking to the Six Twisted Sisters. There’s no one better, and Kaiya deserves the best. You know I know nothing about romance.”

I shared a look with my sisters before we all chuckled. Dani was nodding as she glanced down at the phone. “We would be happy to help Kaiya. Don’t worry, Nylah.”

“Shit, I thought I hit mute,” Nylah replied. “Alright. I will come to you.”

“We will call the djinn leader and have him teleport you here,” Dre offered.

“I have a way to fly to you if you can wait until well after dark,” Nylah replied.

Dre shook her head. “We would like to have this handled sooner rather than later. Every second it’s here, we are at risk of it drawing a paranormal to our plantation, and we are running tours today. The last thing we need is to have a paranormal show up and kill an innocent man, woman, or child.”

Nylah sucked in a breath. “I get that. How does this work with the djinn?”

Dre explained that Kaveh would arrive at her location and then asked if that would be safe. She hung up when Nylah said it was her day off and she was home. She promised to be waiting on the phone.

Nylah agreeing to our request seemed like a huge win. Dre swiftly dialed another number and soon, Kaveh’s voice filled the room. We explained our situation and asked if he could teleport Nylah to our house. There was a momentary pause, and then a warm gust of wind swept through the room.

“Thanks for coming,” Lia told him. “Pretty soon, you’ll start collecting debts from us.”

Kaveh dismissed her comment with a wave of his hand. “Without you six, I wouldn’t have met my mate. I owe you everything. Call this Nylah, and I will have her here soon.”

Dre nodded and dialed Nylah again. A scream echoed through the phone before it went dead. Kaveh reappeared with Nylah in his arms. The Relic Keeper was a gorgeous woman with skin like Cami’s. She smacked Kaveh on

the arm and looked at the crown in the middle of the table next to Dre's phone as it rang again.

She answered it, and a woman on the other end was yelling and demanding to know if Nylah was safe. "I'm fine, Kaiya."

Kaveh looked around, perplexed. Dani put a hand on his arm. "Nylah's like us. She didn't grow up in the magical world and had no idea what was happening."

One of my eyebrows rose as I pinned Kaveh with a look. I introduced each of my sisters and myself. "You're lucky you didn't give her a heart attack and kill her."

Kaveh looked horrified at the thought. "I apologize, Nylah. I assumed you were accustomed to the process and shouldn't have. I took it for granted that you had the knowledge the Twisted Sisters had about me. It will not happen again."

Nylah nodded respectfully. "It's alright. Now, I know." She was a striking woman dressed a lot like us in yoga pants and a t-shirt. "I assume this is the artifact you need help with." A profound energy radiated from her fingertips as she touched it.

Dani nodded. "Yes, it is. It was concealed until the magical hurricane unearthed it not long ago along with countless other objects."

Nylah didn't seem to hear Dani as she remained focused on the artifact. Her eyes fluttered shut, and she entered a trance-like state. We watched in awe as Nylah channeled her power, weaving intricate spells that wove around the artifact. She drew symbols in the air and chanted. The room pulsed with magic, and for a moment, time stood still. Then, with a final surge of energy, Nylah's eyes snapped open, and she stepped back.

"I think it's done." She said that as more of a question than a statement. I understood her doubt over her abilities. I was still like that a lot of the time. "The crown's power is contained. It will no longer pose a threat."

"Can you sense anything about it?" Lia asked. "We've been told it has certain powers, and it was in the hands of an evil Dark Fae for a bit. I'd like to know if he could accomplish something we don't yet know about."

"It's a vessel," Nylah began, her voice taking on a faraway quality as if she were lost in thought. "An instrument of connection, designed to open a channel between our realm and the realm of the voodoo gods."

My eyes shot open as she nailed it on the head. We hadn't told her anything about what it was used for. This woman was mighty if she learned

this without knowing how to use her powers.

Her words registered next, and I realized that it was more profound and dangerous than we could have imagined. The idea that it was meant to establish a link with voodoo deities sent a shiver down my spine.

“No,” Dani's voice broke the silence, her tone edged with panic. “We can't let it exist, so people like Marie can use it to bring her loa over here to take over our world. We have to destroy it.”

Her words mirrored the fear that surged through us all. The thought of the artifact serving as a bridge to powerful and unpredictable voodoo gods was a nightmare we couldn't afford to entertain.

Nylah regarded us with curiosity. “I can take it to my vault, where it will remain hidden from those who seek its power, but I don't believe it can be destroyed.”

My brow furrowed in contemplation, my mind churning with thoughts. “Wait,” she interjected, raising a hand to stall Nylah's offer. “If this artifact is a tool to connect with voodoo gods, then perhaps we can turn the tables. Use it to our advantage.”

Confusion danced across my sisters' faces, and I elaborated on my idea. “The sea monster – the one that wrecked the levee – wants this crown. We can convince it to swallow the crown so it can't be stolen again and used.”

The room buzzed with a mix of uncertainty and intrigue as my proposal hung in the air. The prospect of turning the artifact into a weapon against the very threat it had attracted was both audacious and risky.

Nylah regarded me with a contemplative gaze, assessing the potential of my plan. “It's a bold strategy. But it could backfire on you. I don't know all that much about this world yet. It seems like it's unwise to piss powerful monsters off.”

Dre lifted a shoulder. “We promised the lake monster we would bring the crown back. We can give it the choice of where to keep it safe.”

I tilted my head and looked at my sister. “The choices being in Nylah's vault or in its stomach?”

Dre nodded. “Yeah. I like the idea of the artifact being more secure.”

Nylah extended her hand toward the crown, her palm hovering just above its surface. “My offer to keep it safe stands. I need to get back to Kaiya now. She was teaching me how to control my fire.”

“I'm going to hang up now, Nylah. See you soon,” Kaiya said before the phone went dead. I'd forgotten she was still on the line.

Dre extended her hand to Nylah. “We will call and let you know what the creature decides. If it wants you to keep it, we will hold onto it until you can get here to pick it up.”

Nylah smiled at us. “Sounds good. And it was a pleasure to meet you all.”

The weight of our decision hung in the air as Kaveh disappeared with Nylah. “We're doing the right thing, aren't we?”

Dre blew out a breath. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“It's a solid plan,” Lia interjected. “We are giving the creature the decision, which shows that we respect his role as its protector.”

Dani stood up and reached for the crown. “Let's get this done so we can focus on finishing the preparations for the Mixer.”

Agreement rippled through the group, a shared commitment to see this through. The desire to have this situation resolved fueled our determination. And thanks to Nylah's help, we were able to act without delay.



# CHAPTER 19



## DAHLIA

My pulse was well above a hundred beats per minute as we walked from the parking lot to the river's edge, where we interacted with the lake monster before. My gaze skittered to Dani, who had the crown in the bag on her hip. I still didn't feel anything from the artifact. Whatever Nylah did had worked like a charm.

"Can you feel any vibrations coming off of it?" I asked.

Dani shook her head from side to side without tearing her eyes away from the horizon where the river was sparkling in the moonlight. "Not a thing. If it didn't make my bag bulge so much, I wouldn't be able to feel it at all."

"It's weird that the spell Nylah used made it light as a feather, too," Phi said. "I get the physics of how the level of magic might affect it. However, I don't get how it makes it lighter because changing the weight doesn't matter."

Kota shook her head. "That's too much to think about right now. I'm focused on getting this done so we can move on to the party."

Everyone agreed, and we stopped at the edge of the grass. Dani pulled the artifact from her purse and handed it over to me. I almost tossed it back to her. Having it in my hands made me feel exposed. Almost as if a giant spotlight was shining down on me with neon words telling the magical world to come and get me.

Shaking my head at my wild imagination, I refocused on the matter at hand. My gaze traveled over the moon's shimmering reflection as it danced upon the river's surface. Something vibrated around us, and the ancient power in the crown seemed to pulse. Frantic, I tilted my head and looked at my sisters to see if they noticed it resonating with an energy that thrummed through the very air around us. Dre's wide eyes made my heart beat even faster. If it was freaking her out, this couldn't be good. She was always calm and focused.

Dea squared her shoulders and dipped her head once. "This is our chance to ally with the enigmatic lake monster that has guarded this Object of Power for generations. That's all we need to remember right now."

Dani nodded in agreement. "You're right."

Dre started chanting. She recited the incantation and wove threads of

magic through the air that created a subtle shimmer that enveloped us. The rest of us joined in the casting, and within seconds we'd made a veil of glamour concealing our purpose from any prying eyes. United in our determination we stepped forward and beckoned the guardian of the waters to emerge from its depths.

A hushed expectancy settled over us as we waited. I refused to blink in case I missed it. Being caught off guard while holding a priceless artifact was not on my agenda. A few seconds later, the lake monster emerged with a surge of water. A ripple of awe traveled through our group. It was a majestic, otherworldly presence that commanded respect. Its luminous eyes, like orbs of ageless wisdom, fixed upon the crown in my hands.

A smile curved my lips until the churning waves went still. It was a stillness that belied the turbulent force beneath. Unfortunately, the tranquility was short-lived, as serpentine tentacles surged with alarming speed, lashing out aggressively. An unexpected battle had begun.

Phi's power manifested in a dazzling display of control over the elements as she encased each tentacle in intricate ice formations. The frozen restraints held for a moment, but the creature's relentless determination soon shattered them, sending shards of ice scattering in the air. Dammit. We just needed to keep it still long enough to explain we were there to give it back.

With tentacles the size of train cars barreling toward you, there was no stopping long enough to try and talk to it again. It could be reasoned with, but self-preservation kept me fighting along with my sisters. My focus sharpened, and with a swift, fluid motion, I slid the crown over my arm and brandished my blade. Its gleaming edge sliced through the air as I engaged the encroaching tentacles. Each strike was met with a gush of iridescent blood, a deep purple hue staining the water and our clothes.

Beside me, Kota's conjured harpoon gleamed with deadly intent. With an elegant flourish, she hurled it toward a writhing tentacle. The harpoon embedded itself with precision. The lake monster's screech echoed in response, a mix of anger and disbelief.

“You think you're different? That the same darkness does not drive you?” the monster's voice reverberated through the air, tinged with a biting scorn. It hadn't spoken to us before, and I wasn't convinced this was all from the creature. There was some pretty frightening energy behind it. “You're just as blood-thirsty as those you claim to oppose.” So, he knew who we were.

With every clash, every strike, it became clear that our efforts were not

just a battle against the lake monster but a battle against the perception of us. I never thought I would be battling against the idea that we were no different from the malevolent forces that sought to exploit the crown's power. We wanted nothing to do with it.

As Phi continued to freeze tentacles one by one, her precision and control creating moments of respite. The battle raged on. We fought steadfastly, fueled by a shared purpose and a belief in our mission.

Amidst the chaos my thoughts were a whirlwind, a storm of emotions and instincts colliding. Our actions and sacrifices were a testament to the lengths we were willing to go to safeguard our city and the ones we loved. We would never hurt anyone. It was an insult to be classified in the same group as those that had caused so many deaths.

And as we clashed with the guardian of the crown, a realization crystallized within me. Our battle extended beyond physical combat. It was a battle of ideals, proving that we were indeed different and were warriors of justice, not agents of darkness.

The tension in the air was thick and heavy from our battle with the sea creature. It had retreated and had its many tentacles lifted and ready to strike. It was a macabre sight with the iridescent purple blood dripping into the water. We stood together at the water's edge, poised for another clash, when I felt something change.

Adèle's soothing presence reverberated within our minds, a calming force amidst the chaos. "Stop," her voice resonated. We paused with our collective gaze fixed on the sea creature before us.

*"Approach the situation with caution. Consider the possibility that the sea creature is not inherently malevolent,"* Adèle said as her energy shifted. Given that she had communicated with the creature before, I imagined she was trying to talk to it again. Having her had saved us in more ways than I could count, and it was a huge relief that she was there helping us. I was curious as her words sank in, and her telepathic touch connected us to the enigmatic being.

*"Use a spell of understanding,"* Adèle suggested, her ethereal guidance pointing us toward a path of communication. *"It will listen now."*

We exchanged a nod of understanding, and then the six of us combined our magic, weaving a spell that shimmered like a bridge between us and the sea creature. The energy pulsed, enveloping us in a luminous cocoon that resonated with a newfound purpose.

“*What's wrong?*” Adèle's gentle inquiry reached out, delving into the sea creature's essence.

A series of images and emotions flowed back, the sea creature's consciousness intertwining with Adèle's probing presence. It was difficult to decipher what they all meant, but the gist of it was that it was angry we had stolen Oshun's magic. It made sense that it thought we were evil.

“*No, they didn't steal anything. They had the magic cloaked so that it couldn't be tracked. It will keep the crown safer. Dig deeper, and you will sense the energy.*” Adèle's presence carried a soothing reassurance as she encouraged the sea creature to listen.

“*What do you want?*” Adèle's voice held a delicate balance of curiosity and empathy.

The images flashed through our minds again. Unsurprisingly, it wanted the magic Oshun unleashed, so the conduit returned. The sea creature's pictures held a profound yearning. My head started pounding as my assumption was clarified. It longed for its connection to be enhanced because its purpose was unfulfilled. The weight of its desires resonated, and I found myself caught in the current of its emotions.

With Adèle's gentle guidance, we continued our conversation unraveling the sea creature's motivations and shedding light on its intentions. “*Why do you seek the crown?*” Adèle's voice pierced through the enigma, a beacon of understanding.

The flashes of images were back and making my head hurt even more. It wanted to be close to Oshun and the realm of gods and magic. The sea creature's response echoed with a fervent devotion, a desire to serve as a conduit for the magic of its goddess, Oshun. Its story threads wove a tapestry of connection. It revealed a being that had once been intertwined with the divine, only to be severed from its purpose. And then, as if unveiling a hidden truth, the sea creature's essence trembled with a newfound revelation. It showed us that there was a dormant cave where it was magically cut off, but the spell was broken.

The words painted a vivid picture – a creature dormant in a cave, isolated and severed from its connection to magic. When the spell was broken, it had awoken and was driven by a single purpose: to be close to Oshun once more, to fulfill its role as a conduit for her magic. Our minds buzzed with a mix of awe and understanding. We had a newfound clarity that connected the dots of the sea creature's journey.

*“What does Oshun desire?”* Adèle's voice carried a sense of intrigue, seeking to unravel the heart of the matter.

The sea creature's response flowed back, an intricate dance of emotions and memories. Oshun wanted to weave magic from the realm of gods into the realm of humans. The sea creature's words revealed a profound truth. Oshun aspired to bridge the gap between realms and weave a tapestry of magic that transcended boundaries. Its desires reflected Oshun's ambitions, a testament to the intricate connection between goddess and conduit.

As the conversation unfolded, a sense of understanding settled over us. We realized that the sea creature's motivations were rooted in a deep-seated devotion and a longing for purpose. And in that moment, Adèle's guidance paved the way for an agreement, a pact forged between us and the sea creature.

In a surge of unity, we resolved. The sea creature would retain the crown, its connection to Oshun's magic preserved. In return, it vowed not to cause turmoil in New Orleans or elsewhere. A sense of harmony settled over us, a bridge of understanding transcending words.

As the magical threads of communication ebbed, the sea creature's presence receded, returning it to the depths from which it had emerged. We stood there with our gazes fixed on the shimmering waters.

Dre's voice broke through the moment, reflecting the profound lesson we had just learned. *“That was unexpected in every way.”* Her words carried a sense of wonder and wisdom. *“Not everything requires a bloody fight and someone's death.”*

As her words hung in the air, I couldn't help but reflect on our journey, the battles we had fought, and the beings we had encountered. Our quest to recover the enigmatic power of the crown had led us down unexpected paths, revealing the intricate tapestry of connections that wove our world together.

In the end, it wasn't just about magic or artifacts. It was about understanding, empathy, and the bonds that connected us all. And as the moon cast its silvery glow upon the water, I knew that our journey was far from over. There were still other objects that had been woken and were creating mysteries waiting to be unraveled and lessons to be learned.

# CHAPTER 20



DANIELLE

“Will you take this to the poolside bar, Dimples? Brezok wanted to put another keg out before too many more show up.” I batted my eyelashes at Noah in an attempt to look coquettish.

Noah chuckled and pressed a kiss to my lips. “Anything for you, Sunshine. But you don’t need to try and win me over. I’m yours forever.”

Noah pressed his lips to mine in a kiss that turned heated in a matter of seconds. When that man touched me, I lost all sense of reason. There was a giddy feeling that took over, and passion quickly followed. It was far more intense than my crush on Denny in middle school, and I thought I couldn’t love anyone more.

“There are rooms in the house five feet away, you know,” Steve said, breaking into our moment.

Noah reluctantly broke away from my mouth and lifted one eyebrow as he looked at my brother-in-law. “As if you don’t need the same advice. We all see how you kiss Dre.”

Steve's smile was more like a cat that ate the canary than anything else. “And we always manage to find a room too.” Laughing, Steve continued, and Noah picked up the silver keg of craft beer and walked away.

I was right behind him with two platters of desserts made by a gargoyle. I set the expertly decorated cookies on the sweets table and looked around. As we set up for the Mixer, the warm night air carried a sense of excitement. The poolside area buzzed with anticipation. The theme for the evening was “Outlaws Unveiled.” It was a playful nod to the mysterious djinn who had recently been allowed back into the city of New Orleans after decades of being banished.

Wanted posters adorned the fences. Each one showcased a different djinn along with intriguing details and snippets of their stories. The images were captivating and informative. The idea behind them was to invite guests to engage with the djinn and learn more about them.

As my sisters and I worked to put the finishing touches and create an inviting atmosphere, I couldn't help but notice the tension in the air. The djinn were a new addition to the supernatural community. Their presence had



raised curiosity and skepticism. Not to mention a touch of unease among the other paranormals attending the Mixer.

Dre shot me a knowing glance as we adjusted one of the posters. “It’s going to be an interesting night.”

I nodded in agreement. My mind was already spinning with ideas to break the ice and foster a sense of camaraderie. The djinn were, after all, our friends. It was important to show the others that they were just as much a part of our community as anyone else.

As the guests began to arrive, I seized the opportunity to implement my plan. With a mischievous grin, I stood before one of the djinn. He was a tall and stunning man named Malik. “So, Malik,” I began, lightening my tone, “I couldn’t help but notice on your poster that your favorite vacation spot is a beach. What do you love about beaches, and what’s your favorite one?”

Malik’s eyes twinkled with amusement as he leaned against a table, a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “The beach calls to me,” he mused, his voice smooth and melodic. “There’s something about the endless sand expanse and waves’ rhythmic crash that calms my restless spirit. It’s a place where I can feel truly free.”

A ripple of interest coursed through the crowd as they listened to Malik’s response as he talked about his favorite beach on the island of Fiji. I glanced around, noticing that people were beginning to engage with the posters, asking questions and delving into conversations with the djinn. But I wanted to take it a step further, truly bringing everyone together.

I pulled Lia aside, told her about my idea, and asked if she would make an announcement. I loved organizing and decorating for the parties but preferred to remain in the background after they started.

Lia gave me a serious look. “You’re going to owe me one.”

I squeezed her hand. “Add it to my tab.”

Chuckling, Lia walked to the middle of the deck. “I have an idea,” she announced, in a voice magically enhanced to capture the attention of the gathering. “Let’s turn this into a little game, shall we?”

Curious murmurs filled the air as people exchanged glances. I could sense a mixture of intrigue and skepticism, but Lia didn’t let that faze her.

“Each of us will take a turn asking a question to one of our djinn friends here,” she explained, her gaze sweeping over the crowd. “And if they answer truthfully and you find it intriguing, you take a drink. You then get to share something with them, and if they feel the same, then it’s the djinn’s turn. It’s

a win-win situation. We get to know each other, and we all have a bit of fun in the process.”

Laughter and nods of approval greeted my proposal, and soon enough, the game was underway. People gathered around the posters, engaging in lively conversations and raising their glasses as they took turns asking questions and sharing stories.

Malik's eyes met mine, a playful glint dancing in his gaze as he raised an eyebrow. “Your turn, Lia. What's the most adventurous thing you've ever done?”

Lia chuckled, feeling the warmth of the moment enveloping us. "I can tell you it involves my sisters, but that's a story for another time," she teased, sipping her drink. “But for now, let's focus on our new friends and their tales.”

As the evening unfolded, the atmosphere shifted from tense to jovial, the djinn and the other guests laughing and sharing anecdotes. The Wanted posters, once a source of curiosity and speculation, had become a catalyst for connection and camaraderie.

As I watched the mingling of paranormals, each one discovering the unique stories and personalities of the djinn, I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride. In our small way, we were bridging the gap, fostering understanding, and showing that even in a world filled with magic and mystery, the bonds of friendship truly mattered.

After grabbing cookies for my sisters, I headed to them and then backtracked to get a couple more when I noticed Xinar and Cami had joined them. I couldn't help but wonder what Xinar had been talking to Cami about. They'd been close to each other most of the night. I knew the well-dressed UIS agent liked Cami, and I understood why. She was gorgeous. There were definitely subtle sparks that seemed to dance between the two of them. No doubt about it, the connection that was growing stronger with each passing moment.

Xinar cleared his throat, a playful glint in his eyes as he turned to Cami. “You know, I've been thinking,” he began, his tone light, “how about we go out on a date sometime?”

Cami's cheeks flushed a delicate shade of pink, and a smile tugged at the corners of her lips. “I'd like that,” she replied, her voice carrying a hint of excitement.

A chorus of cheers and teasing remarks erupted from my sisters and me

as we told them both it was about time they acted on their feelings. It was a heartwarming sight to see the blossoming of a new romance among our friends.

I took a deep breath, my heart pounding with a mix of nerves and excitement. I wanted to share in the mushy, romancey stuff. The decision I'd made a few days ago had been on my mind, and now it was time to let them in on it.

"I have something to tell you all." I paused for a moment, meeting each of their curious gazes. "I've decided to finish the mating with Noah." My hand went to my neck, where Noah had sunk his teeth into me. I thought it would be painful, but I'd been wrong.

Lia's mischievous grin appeared, and she couldn't resist a playful tease. "Well, look at you, Dani, getting marked by a wolf shifter."

I rolled my eyes, a blush creeping up my cheeks. "Why didn't you tell me what that would be like?"

Lia chuckled and shook her head. "Since when have I been one to kiss and tell?" We all burst into laughter at that.

Kota sobered first and put her hand on my shoulder. "Are you sure about this, Dani? It's a big step, and I know you've had reservations."

Dre's voice held a hint of concern as well. "I know we were giving you a hard time about keeping Noah at a distance and refusing to give him what he needed. But we don't want you to make this decision just because of that."

I took a moment to gather my thoughts before speaking again. "I appreciate your concern. But this isn't about anyone else. It's about what I want. I've thought about it a lot and can't think of anything I want more. I have no doubts about wanting to mate with Noah. Trust me, it's not because of what you said. It's because I genuinely feel that he's the one I want to spend my life with."

There was a pause as my words settled in, and then a chorus of supportive nods and smiles from my sisters. I could see the genuine happiness in their eyes, and it warmed my heart.

Dre reached over and squeezed my hand. "We just want to make sure you're making the right choice for yourself, Dani."

"Exactly," Kota added, a reassuring smile on her lips. I couldn't ask for better sisters. We might sometimes argue and disagree, but they always looked out for me.

"Dani, I'm so happy for you!" Lia exclaimed. Her voice was filled with

genuine joy.

My eyes twinkled with happiness as I placed a hand over my neck. My heart skipped a beat as I caught Lia doing the same thing. There was a thoughtful expression on her face before her gaze landed on me. “Dani, are you thinking what I'm thinking?”

My smile widened, and I nodded eagerly. “If you think we should plan our mating ceremonies together, then yes.”

The two of us launched into an animated discussion, our minds buzzing with ideas and possibilities. From enchanting decorations to what the ritual might entail, we envisioned a ceremony that would celebrate our unions and the deep bond of sisterhood that connected us.

Just as we were caught up in our planning, Emmie Lou approached Dre, holding what appeared to be a centuries-old ceramic doll. The doll wore a necklace adorned with a brilliant blue gemstone. It had a symbol etched onto its surface. My curiosity was piqued, and I exchanged a puzzled glance with the others.

Emmie Lou's expression was a mix of concern and intrigue as she addressed Dre. “I found a doll, Grammy. It is pretty shiny, but it feels funny. What is it?”

Cami's hand went to her throat, and her gaze traveled around us. “That's an old family heirloom I used to dream about inheriting. It was the one thing I used to allow myself to believe my mother might leave to me. But it never felt quite like this before.”

Adèle's voice resonated in our minds, her words carrying a note of caution. “*This heirloom is another powerful artifact. And it contains malevolence.*”

I was immediately drawn to the heirloom, and I could sense its energy pulsing. Something was amiss, and the realization sent a shiver down my spine.

“No evil spirit is going to take my granddaughter on my watch,” Dre declared, her determination evident in her voice.

Our unbreakable sisterhood remained a constant source of strength and support in a world filled with magic, mystery, and unexpected twists. We would all help Dre protect her family. As we faced new challenges and discoveries, I knew that no matter what lay ahead we would navigate it together. Drawing strength from each other and the unwavering love that bound us.

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EXCERPT FROM MUD BUGS &  
CHERISHED HUGS BOOK #10



DANIELLE

“Who’s ready to build a fireplace?” The words came out of my mouth in a rush as I carried the chop saw and put it on the table Lia had brought out.

Lia chuckled at the chorus of groans and said, “I’m ready, sestra.”

The cool breeze rustled through the leaves as we gathered outside the main house at Willowberry. I inhaled the faint scent of earth and magic swirling around us. Joy spread through me. It was project time. I’d recently found a love for renovating houses, and we were going to do a project I’d been looking forward to.

During renovations of the houses on the back forty of our property, Lucas and Noah had decided it was safer to brick up the existing chimneys because they were so old and hadn’t been kept up in any way. While I got the need for safety, the houses didn’t feel the same without a cozy fireplace in them. And, of course, I started thinking about how to add one. I started by building one for Genevieve and her husband, Kieran. It had turned out so well. We were now doing one here.

Dre pointed to the two-by-fours. “Kota, you and Phi grab those and help me measure for the corner poles, and I will mark them for Lia to cut.”

I’d draw rough sketches of my idea, and Dre and Lia tried to measure the wall where it was going. It took Phi stepping in to get it right. Between all of us, we had a plan, and we got right to work.

A sense of camaraderie filled the air as we toiled together on the project. When I did the framework for a fireplace façade for Genevieve’s house, I was working with her husband, Kieran, and it was much harder because I didn’t have the working relationship with him that I did with my sisters.

Sighing, I looked over the dark gray bricks that lay scattered around us. “How many bricks for the sides again, Phi?” I’d been putting them in their separate piles based on where I’d cut them to fit so it would be easier when it came time to assemble. I imagined that they sat like soldiers waiting to be assembled into a beautiful and functional structure.

Phi picked up her tablet and opened her note. “You needed forty-four for each side.”

“Thanks,” I called out, counting how many I already had done.

Needing more bricks, I headed to the pallet where our order sat. I watched Lia's skilled hands precisely maneuver the chop saw as I passed her. She was in her own world, which was something I understood. I lost myself in making precise cuts along the edges of the bricks.

When I returned to the masonry saw, Dre joined me with the frame for the sides. “Let’s try to dry-fit what you have so we can gauge our progress.”

“That’s a good idea. It would suck if our calculations were off, and we had to buy new bricks for this.” I wanted to bite my tongue for saying that. I should know better than to put that out in the universe like that.

Dre chuckled as she measured and double-checked our progress, her attention to detail ensuring that every element aligned perfectly. “Some of these aren’t fitting, but it won’t be that many wasted. Good job, sestra.”

“Hey, Dre, how’s Emmie Lou holding up?” Phi asked, her brow furrowing with concern.

Dre's expression grew somber as she continued measuring. “It’s only been a few days, but she hasn’t been herself since she found that damn doll and necklace. You know how happy she usually is. Lately, she's been down. I swear that charm is cursed.”

Lia stopped her cutting and wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. “Why do you say that? I didn’t pick up on anything trying to attach to Emmie Lou.”

I shivered at the thought of having a cursed object up in the attic. Sure, it was contained in a lead box, but I didn’t want it anywhere near us if that was the case.

Dre lifted a shoulder. “I can't seem to shake the feeling of it. It could be fear for my grandbaby, I guess.”

Kota's eyes met mine, a shared concern passing between us. “Where did she find that creepy doll and the necklace, anyway?” Kota asked as she sipped her water.

Cami, who had been overseeing the progress with keen interest, joined the conversation. “The necklace has been in my family for generations. I remember seeing it in a box of old things, but I hadn't seen it since I was alive. I don’t know about the doll. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Dre's brows knit together as her hand closed around one of the bricks she was placing along the sides. “Emmie Lou seems to have a knack for finding things, even the hidden or forgotten, so there’s no telling where she dug it



up.”

Phi let out a chuckle, nudging Dre playfully. “Maybe she's displaying a magical trait already, sestra. You'd better tell Spencer his little girl will be a handful.”

Dre's lips twitched into a half-smile, and for a moment, the weight of our recent battles seemed to lift. “That'd freak him out for sure. You could be right, though. Emmie's got a determined spirit, just like her grandmother.”

“You've got that right. Of your four granddaughters, she is a lot like you for sure,” I agreed as I resumed cutting the bricks.

Dea lifted a shoulder. “Let's ask her to show us where she got it when she comes over for her swim later today.”

“Three-year-olds aren't the most reliable, but it's our best shot at learning more,” Lia agreed. Her deft hands moved with practiced grace as she returned to making precise cuts. “On a different note, I've been thinking we should incorporate some symbols or something into the façade. Maybe a fleur de lis or elements of Celtic knotwork. I like the latter because it symbolizes our interconnectedness, our past, present, and future entwined.”

Dre's measuring tape moved methodically as she considered the idea. “That's not a bad idea, Lia. I like it. But what if we embed small crystals within the mortar? We could enchant them with a protection spell or something.”

My mind started churning as they spoke. I smiled at Dre. “And regardless of any magic, they would catch the light and shimmer like stars. It would add a touch of enchantment to the design and be pretty. I like that idea, but we couldn't do something as intricate as tiny crystals in a Celtic knot in a quarter of an inch of grout.”

Dea pursed her lips as she crouched down next to Dre and picked up one of the spacers. “That's not enough space. Maybe the crystals are random in the mortar, and we add the designs elsewhere.”

My fingers traced over the smooth surface of a brick, the possibilities unfurling as we tossed around the ideas. “We could always carve sigils into the bricks, each representing one of us. Like a visual representation of our strengths converging into something greater.”

Phi's eyes gleamed with excitement as she added her input. “Let's take it a step further. What if we infuse the mortar itself with a bit of our magic, too? It would create a subtle, protective barrier, a shield woven into the very fabric of the façade, which I think we could all agree our visitors would appreciate.”

Kota waved the two-by-four she was holding from side to side animatedly. “That’s the best idea we’ve had. You know the only clients we can rent to are supernatural ones, right? And given our reputations for attracting trouble, they will feel better about staying so close to us.”

I smacked Kota’s on the shoulder. “Our wards reassure them.”

Lia chuckled as she shook her head from side to side. “Not when we’ve countless paranormals sent to live here to undermine them. Not to mention how Marie infiltrated one of our events.”

I scowled at my sisters. “Do you always have to point out the obvious? I want to be able to share these homes with mundies too.”

Dre stood up and held up a brick. “I would love to be able to invite friends from our old life to stay here. Especially Nancy. But we have shifters, pixies, gnomes, and more living on the property. Having mundies here for tours or parties is one thing, but extended stays are far too risky.”

“You’re right. So, carving symbols on the face of the bricks, then? What are we going with? Runes? Celtic knots? Or something else?”

Lia handed Dea the cut piece to add to the braces for the sides. “I vote for all of the above. We can use our dragon talons to draw them.”

Dre snorted as she rolled her eyes. “Speaking for the safety of our guests, you and I shouldn’t try to do that, Lia.”

Lia laughed while all eyes went to Phi and Kota. I smiled sweetly at them. “Looks like you two have some drawing to do.”

Kota grabbed a brick and pulled up a picture. “That part I will be happy to do. It’s easier than the rest.”

A sense of shared purpose and creativity filled the air as the foundation of our vision took shape. I watched Kota and Phi for a few seconds, envisioning the intricate design that would soon adorn Willowberry's fireplace. “This fireplace will be a testament to our journey, a symbol of our collective magic and our unbreakable bond.”

As we continued to discuss the details, our conversation took on a deeper dimension. We delved into the intricacies of magic, drawing parallels between this project and the one I had undertaken for Genevieve's house. There was a stark contrast between doing this with magic in mind and doing it without. Just the discussion added an energy to the air that was missing before. Of course, there was also the fact that I did the previous one largely with Kieran and a little help from Genevieve.

“It's fascinating how we can infuse our magic into physical objects,” I

mused, recalling when I had created enchanted windows in the greenhouse connected to our magical kitchen.

Dre nodded as she held a brace and one leg while Dea nailed them together. “It’s like weaving a spell into the very essence of the material. Our magic becomes intertwined with the bricks and mortar, creating something greater than the sum of its parts.”

“That’s pretty deep thinking, sestra,” Kota teased Dre, making Dre smirk.

Dre rolled her eyes. “I’ve been known to do that occasionally.”

“Magic has changed everything about us,” Lia said as she worked.

Dre’s jaw dropped open, and she put her hands on her hips. “Are you saying I’ve never been deep before, sestra?”

Lia’s hands jerked back, and her hands flew into the air. The blade of the chop saw clanged as it bolted upward. “I, un, no. That’s not what I meant.”

Now that Lia wasn’t operating dangerous machinery, Dre wrapped her arm around her shoulders. “I know. You’re referring to how different everything about us and our lives have become. I no longer go running with my group. Instead, I chase demons and evil supernaturals with my sisters.” That made us all laugh.

Phi’s talon moved over the surface of a brick as she added, “These symbols are not only a testament to the strength of our bond and the depth of our connection, but also really freaking cool. Sestras can create magic that transcends the ordinary!”

That sparked another round of ribbing Dre and Phi about being deep thinkers. Funny enough, it lightened the mood as we resumed work with renewed determination. The bricks began to align, forming a sturdy framework that would soon hold the heart of a warm and inviting fireplace. Each cut and placement was infused with intention and magic. At one point, Dea went out to our magical kitchen and grabbed some clear crystal quartz that she smashed with magic. We jointly infused it with a calming spell along with some minor protections.

As the fireplace façade slowly shaped, our conversation shifted from design to reflection. “It’s incredible how much we’ve grown and learned since we first started this journey,” I said as my gaze scanned our progress.

Kota nodded in agreement, a smile tugging at her lips. “We’ve faced challenges that tested our limits and bond as sisters. There were times I didn’t think we would survive the process.”

Dea lifted a hand in the air. “I thought I was a goner when the Dark Fae

and Samedi took me. Then again, by that vile ghost Madame LaLaurie. I'd say it's a miracle I'm here now."

We each shared stories about when we were hurt or in danger, and it made me look back at all we'd been through. We survived because we had each other. Our sisterhood was its own kind of magic. With a shared sense of pride, we continued our work, remembering our previous battles fueling our determination. As the final bricks fell into place, the fireplace façade stood tall and proud. It vibrated with our collective magic, creativity, and unbreakable bond.

The sun bathed Willowberry in its warm embrace as Dre, Kota, Lia, Phi, Dea, and I worked on the fireplace façade. Our hands moved with purpose, and the air was filled with a sense of camaraderie.

"Pass me those crystals, would you, Lia?" Dre's voice rang out, and she reached for the glimmering stones, passing them to her with a smile.

As we continued our work, a sudden commotion shattered the peaceful ambiance. Running footsteps approached, and I saw Ianassa and Rhaenise hurtling toward us. The expressions etched on both wood nymph's faces were filled with worry. "What's wrong?" I called out as my heart began to race.

"Theisi," Ianassa panted when they came to a stop. Her voice was laced with urgency. "She's gone missing. We can't find her anywhere."

My heart sank, a heavy feeling settling in my chest. Theisi, our friend, was a wood nymph like them. They were peaceful women. I couldn't imagine her running into trouble. She had vanished without a trace? My mind stuttered and struggled to comprehend what she was saying.

The news sent ripples of concern among us, and we exchanged anxious glances. How could this happen? We had meticulously warded the property against any harm that might befall its inhabitants.

"Missing?" Phi's voice held a note of disbelief as she echoed my thoughts. "But we have wards in place. No one with ill intentions should be able to approach. Was she off plantation property? Maybe swimming in the river?"

Dea's brows furrowed as she joined the conversation. "Could it be a breach in our defenses? An oversight we missed?" Trust Dea to get right to the heart of the matter while I was still back on how.

Rhaenise shook her head as she held Phi's gaze. "She was in her tree. We don't leave the property. We use the pool at night when we want to go for a swim. You've given us everything we need right here on Willowberry land.

We do not need to leave.”

Dre scowled as her eyes moved across the horizon. “Could she be running around another part of the woods? The gods know we have enough of them that she could have gotten lost.”

Ianassa wrapped her thin arms around herself as she stood there shaking and staring at Dre like she’d suggested. Theisi jumped into a shark-infested ocean. “Theisi would never go off by herself. Something has happened. Trust me, I felt it.”

Rhaenise nodded in agreement, and she moved closer to Ianassa and wrapped her arms around the other nymph. “I was woken from a nap when I thought ants were crawling all over me. Before I knew what was happening, I heard Theisi scream. She was gone when Nassa and I reached T’s tree.”

“Are our wards down?” I asked as chills traveled down my spine. Someone had hit in the heart of Willowberry. This wasn’t good at all.

Adèle’s voice resonated in our minds, her presence a comforting reassurance. “I’m scanning the wards now. There may be a weakness or blind spot we haven’t detected.”

As we pondered this unsettling development, the urgency to find Theisi spurred us into action. We fanned out, our determination fueling our search for any clues that might lead us to our missing friend. It never occurred to us that staring at the ground where we’d been working for hours wouldn’t lead us anywhere. It was the first thing every one of us did.

My mind raced as I considered the possibilities. Theisi was an ancient wood nymph deeply attuned to the land. It would be her if anyone could navigate the wooded expanse of Willowberry undetected. By that same token, she should have been able to detect someone stalking her tree before they reached her. And that wasn’t even getting to the question of *how* they managed to take her. The wood nymphs melted into their tree. There wasn’t a door or obvious opening.

“Dre, let’s check the eastern woods,” Lia suggested, her voice taut with worry. “See if there’s any trace of magical interference.”

Dre nodded, her eyes narrowing as she focused her senses on the task at hand while we all continued heading in that direction. Meanwhile, Lia’s fingers traced intricate sigils in the air, her magic weaving a delicate web that stretched across the property. I felt her intent through our connection. She was seeking out any disruptions. I added some power to her spell, as did Kota and Dea.

“We should expand our search,” Phi said, her eyes scanning the horizon. “Theisi might have left a clue somewhere beyond our property line.”

Dea's voice resonated with resolve. “We'll find her. We won't rest until we do.”

*“There are no weak spots or holes in the wards. They are all intact and functioning as they should. I can't detect where someone crossed them, either.”* Adèle's words weren't exactly promising. *“Phi is right. Expand the search. You should call in the shifters, too, so they can cover ground faster.”*

Lia pulled out her phone while Adèle guided us as we walked through every inch of our land. She helped us deploy magical methods of searching as we went. Spells were cast, wards were scrutinized, and the land itself seemed to hum with our shared determination. As our magic interwoven, a sense of dread flowed through us. The longer we came up empty, the more panicked we got.

Hours stretched on, our search taking us through the dense undergrowth and along the meandering riverbanks. The presence of our wolf shifter allies—Aaron, Hank, Finnigan, and Kai—added another layer of vigilance to our efforts.

With a shared sigh of exhaustion, we regrouped in a small clearing, our eyes meeting those of the shifters. “We've scoured the area,” Aaron reported. The young man's grim expression made my gut twist into a knot. “But we didn't pick up any scents that didn't belong, either.”

Hank's brow furrowed as he added, “It's as if she vanished into thin air.”

A sense of frustration and helplessness settled over us. We had searched every inch of the property and employed our magic to its fullest extent, yet Theisi remained elusive.

“I don't understand,” Lia murmured as she resumed walking toward the house. “How could she disappear without a trace?”

That was the question of the century. You could practically hear our minds whirring with questions and uncertainty as we traveled back through the woods. One thing was clear: The mystery surrounding Theisi's disappearance ran deeper than we could have anticipated. Thankfully, we had each other and our shared resolve. Together, we would unravel this enigma and bring our friend home safely. At least, I hoped so.

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Reviews are like hugs. Sometimes awkward. Always welcome! It would mean the world to me if you can take five minutes and let others know how much you enjoyed my work.

Don't forget to visit my website: [www.brendatrim.com](http://www.brendatrim.com) and sign up for my newsletter, which is jam-packed with exciting news and monthly giveaways. Also, be sure to visit and like my Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/AuthorBrendaTrim> to see my daily posts.

Never allow waiting to become a habit. Live your dreams and take risks. Life is happening now.

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XOXO,

Brenda

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