

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MIA HARLAN



MINNIE



Minnie

Mia Harlan

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Author's Note

Minnie is a paranormal romantic comedy that contains certain topics that may be difficult for some readers, including:

Mental health issues, including references to anxiety, panic attacks, depression, and the use of medication to manage them.

Suicidal ideation, including characters contemplating whether to let harm come to them.

Drug addiction, including depictions of or references to addiction, including prescription medication.

Incarceration, including scenes and discussions involving a loved one in prison.

Parental struggles, including challenges of single-parenting under difficult circumstances.

Homelessness, including depictions of or references to living without stable housing.

Chapter 1



MINNIE

I peek out of the bakery to make sure the coast is clear. It's bright and early, so Main Street is predictably empty, and we're good to go.

I kneel down so I'm at eye level with Nathaniel and press my fingers to my lips. "We need to be very, very quiet. Okay, Natty?"

The little boy—who only just learned to hop on one foot—is too busy grinning as he practices his newfound skill to pay me any attention. The bottoms of his blue sneakers light up with each hop and the rainbow of colors reflects across the dirty bakery floor.

Panic settles heavily in my gut at the thought of getting caught in here. Which is a stark reminder that I still need to take this morning's dose of Formula M.

I reach into my neon pink Birkin in search of the familiar vial and slide my hand past the fluffy mouse snuggled inside. His

whiskers twitch. *“I hate when you take that stuff.”*

“I know,” I tell Agent Tiptoe, Mouse Extraordinaire. My nose gives an involuntary twitch as well, and I have to fight the urge to get on all fours. Which is a recipe for disaster in a short bodycon dress on the dirty floor.

Thankfully, I still have enough Formula M in my system from yesterday morning to keep my body still.

Natty pauses his hopping and looks up at me. “You know what?”

Now he’s paying attention?

“Not now.”

He pouts, the epitome of three-year-old frustration. *“You know what, Minnie?”*

“It’s not important, Natty.” I ruffle his hair. “Now, time to go. Remember to be quiet, okay?”

Natty nods, looking all serious and grown up and adorable.

I take out the fuchsia Formula M vial, and am about to pop open the diamond-shaped lid when another voice—deeper and much louder than Tiptoe’s—echoes in my head.

“You don’t need that stuff!” our pet fuzzy, Snow, snaps. Her name’s actually Snowball, but Natty’s been calling her Snow since he learned to talk, and it’s stuck.

I glance toward the top of the stairs, where the round white fluffball is perched.

Snow is a rescue that my sometimes-friend—and mostly-pain-in-the-butt—Zoe Wynter freed from a crazed vampire scientist a few years back. She looks like a giant white pom pom—Snow, not Zoe, who’s human, a brunette, and distinctly not round—and you can’t even tell she’s alive—again Snow, not Zoe, who’s super animated and full of energy—unless you can spot her eyes through all the fur or she shows you her teeth—which are terrifyingly sharp and currently bared at me.

I show Snow my own pearly-whites—an absolute must when speaking to a fuzzy—and fight the urge to plop down on the dusty bakery floor. I can’t help rocking back and forth in my pink heels while I speak, “Not you, too. I need Formula M to function. You know that!”

Translation: I need to take it so people don’t think I’m a total freak. Which, in a town like Silver Springs, really says a lot.

“Formula M,” Natty repeats. “What is that?”

I resist the urge to groan, or facepalm, or both. “Nothing important, Natty.”

Snow lets out a ferocious growl in response.

Natty turns toward the sound with a happy squeal. “Snow!” He claps his hands and starts waving. “Come, Snow. Come here, Snow! Play with me, Snow.”

He gets progressively louder with each request, and I grab his shoulders, my heart pounding in my chest. “Natty. Be quiet!” I hiss. “Someone could hear us!”

Natty rolls his eyes, like I often do, and examines his tiny fingers in a show of boredom. “Whatever.”

He sounds like a teenage girl with an attitude, which is entirely my fault—but also kind of adorable and makes me love him even more.

I lean down and give him a tight hug.

Natty giggles and waves at Snow again. But at least he’s no longer shouting... not that that particular fact does much to lessen my panic at the thought of being discovered. Which is a stark reminder that I need to take Formula M. Stat.

I start to open the vial.

“*Don’t,*” Snow growls.

I sigh and put the vial back in my Birkin. For now. “Let’s go, Natty.”

“*Can I come with you?*” Snow asks innocently. I can’t tell if she actually wants to join us or if she’s trying to mess with me.

I rock back and forth. “No, you can’t come with us, Snow. You’d scare off all the customers.”

Snow’s toothy grin widens. “*Scaring people. Tempting.*” Yup, she is definitely messing with me.

I fight the temptation to get right down on the floor like the fuzzy and rock faster. “Stay here and don’t let anyone see you.”

Natty jumps up and down and claps. “Let’s play hide and seek!”

I groan. “No hide and seek! Snow, stay home. Natty, we’re leaving. Now!”

Natty resumes jumping on one foot and lighting up the dusty bakery floor. But hey, at least he doesn’t run off and hide. I take that as a win.

Snow growls. *“I’ll just take a nice, long nap. As long as you bring me back something tasty.”*

My shoulders relax and I nod. “Raw meat with a side of raw meat?”

Snow lets out a satisfied growl and rolls out of sight, her fur pristine since I use a spell to keep the upstairs floor pristine.

I stop rocking back and forth and take Natty’s hands in mine. “Snow is staying home, but you know who *can* come with us?” I lace my voice with excitement, which always works.

Natty’s eyes widen. “Who, Minnie? Who?”

“Tiptoe!”

He claps his hands and shouts, “Mousie!”

I shush him. Then I wiggle my nose. “Tiptoe, can you climb on Natty’s shoulder?”

The mouse scurries out of my Birkin, jumps onto the front of Natty’s firetruck t-shirt, and scrambles onto the giggling boy’s shoulder.

I gently scratch his whiskers. “Thanks, Tiptoe. You’re the best.”

“Any time.”

I reach into my Birkin and glance at the staircase to make sure Snow's no longer there. Great, now I'm sneaking in my own home. I sigh. I have no reason to feel guilty for taking Formula M. I've been on it since my early teens. It's a part of who I am. But it still feels wrong... even if it is necessary.

I take a deep breath and down the contents. The effect is immediate, and Formula M's calming waves are a welcome relief. No more panic. No more worry. No more stress.

I drop the empty vial in my Birkin and kneel in front of Natty. "Time to go. And remember, we need to be careful and quiet. No one can know we're squatting at the bakery."

Natty misses the point entirely and focuses on the one unfamiliar word. "What's squatting?"

I would grimace, but Formula M isn't one for shows of panic or frustration. It only lets me look bored... and bored.

"Squatting is..." I think fast, since the boy's likely to repeat whatever I say at the worst possible time. "A type of exercise. Watch."

Luckily, working out is on the list of Formula M's approved activities... so long as I don't sweat. I manage to drop down into a wobbly squat, despite my four-inch heels, and Natty tries to copy me. Emphasis on tries. He bends his knees and tumbles backward, landing on his butt and nearly dislodging poor Tiptoe.

"I fell," he shouts, bursting into laughter.

Tiptoe lets out a series of loud squeaks. "*That was fun!*"

I shush them, though I'm smiling on the inside. On the outside... Formula M Neutral. Even my shush lacks gusto.

"Good try," I tell Natty. I scoop him up, dust off his jeans, and settle him on my hip, careful not to jostle Tiptoe.

Natty wraps his arms around my neck and snuggles against my shoulder. His soft, curly hair brushes my neck, and I feel a burst of love for the little boy.

My heart squeezes in my chest at the thought of losing him. Formula M helps numb the pain, but I'm still hyper-aware that I'm not Natty's mom. I'm just his guardian. For now. Until his dad takes him back.

"Minnie?" Natty whispers in my ear. "Are we going now?"

I peek outside to make sure it's safe, and nod. "Remember not to make a sound." My nose twitches. "You too, Tiptoe."

Chapter 2



MINNIE

The boarded-up bakery sits smack dab in the middle of Main Street, almost directly across the street from Jewels Cafe.

Once the sun rises, it's one of the busiest streets in Silver Springs. Day-dwelling supes—shifters, trolls, yetis, and witches like me—stop by the cafe for a morning pick-me-up, pass through on their way to work, or take their kids to Spell Library just down the street... basically do all the same things humans do. And when the sun sets, the shops on Main Street close, and anyone who's still awake heads to other places in town—Club Vee, a nightclub that primarily caters to vampires, or the After Dark casino in the basement of the old folks home. Don't ask.

Luckily, Natty's always up before the sun rises, so there's rarely anyone around. Which doesn't mean we're in the clear. One of the shop owners could still be standing by the window, looking out, or someone could turn the corner at any time.

Luckily, I have a vial of invisibility dust in my Birkin, and I sprinkle some of the contents over our heads before carrying Natty and Tiptoe outside.

It's still chilly out, which calls for some Summer Spritz. I pull out the spray bottle and pump the nozzle, covering us all in a fine mist. Since Natty hates wearing sweaters—and so does Formula M—the heating spell's been a lifesaver.

Warmth seeps into my skin and Natty giggles as we make our way down the street, away from Jewels Cafe. We round the corner and duck into a narrow alley between two buildings. The street is blissfully empty, and we wait the five or so minutes it takes for the invisibility spell to wear off, before doubling back to Jewels Cafe.

The old, wooden sandwich board sign advertising pumpkin spice lattes—which sell like hotcakes each fall—is already outside. And Amber—who owns the place—is behind the counter. She's six months pregnant, with triplets, but from my vantage point the only evidence is that her face is fuller. That and she's glowing.

She's snuggled up against her bear shifter mate, Wes, the golden rope of magic connecting them a constant reminder that they're fated mates.

The bear shifter breaks into a grin when he sees us. “Look who's here. It's Minnie and Natty.” His voice booms across the cafe.

Amber lights up, too. “Morning, Minnie. Morning, Natey-Nate.”

“Good morning.” My own tone is neutral, because that’s all Formula M will allow, but Natty more than makes up for it.

“Hi. Hi. Hi!” He waves his arm so wildly he almost hits me in the side of the face. Tiptoe nearly tumbles straight off, and I help steady the mouse.

The song playing on the cafe speakers changes and Little Wolf, the new hit single by Not a Vampire, comes on.

Amber perks up. “I love this song!”

Wes, who loves her despite her terrible taste in music, smiles down at her affectionately.

Natty, who has equally terrible taste in music, scrambles out of my arms and starts to wiggle to the beat. Traitorous Tiptoe, Fan of the Forbidden Tune, joins him, dancing on his shoulder.

I roll my eyes. “Not a Vampire is so lame.”

Amber gasps. “Little Wolf is legit the best thing I’ve heard all year! I’ve literally had it on repeat for *hours*.”

Wes nods. “She has.”

Poor guy. Well, poor guys, since Amber has two other mates— Julian, who’s a witch with wonky powers, and is currently on the other side of town, and Chase, a bunny shifter who spends his days glued to his laptop, writing romance novels. While listening to Not a Vampire.

Amber continues to gush about how much the band has evolved, but how Little Wolf is still *so* them, while Damien Starr’s words echo through the speakers. “*Innocent and sweet,*

wild and free, My good little wolf, come to me. Every touch, under twilight's track, Yes, just like that, no holding back."

You think you're all that, but you're not, Damien Starr. Or should I say Danny Stravinsky?

I wonder if throwing a Jewels Cafe mug at the speakers would get me fired. Probably. And it wouldn't be setting a good example for Natty.

I open my mouth to tell Amber just how much I hate Little Wolf, Not a Vampire, and Damien's smug face, but Formula M stops me. It sends a wave of calm coursing through me, and I feel myself shrugging. "Whatever."

Amber regards me for a second. "I don't mind changing it. I can always listen to it later." She doesn't even sound resentful as she puts on some classical music.

Natty stops wiggling and turns to Amber and Wes. "Minnie and I are squatting."

This is so not my day. I feel the need to cringe—and possibly start hyperventilating—but Formula M doesn't let me. It also has this annoying habit of doubling down on its effects whenever I'm freaking out, so the more anxious I get, the more bored I look.

I examine my manicure with a yawn.

Amber raises an eyebrow at my reaction and turns to the boy. "What was that, Natey-Nate?"

"Minnie and I are squatting," he repeats, though come to think of it, it sounds a lot more like "squaw-ing."

Amber and Wes shoot me confused looks, and that, coupled with Formula M's calming effects, does the trick.

I relax. "I taught Natty to do squats this morning."

Natty giggles. "I fell on my butt!"

My heart smiles, but my face stays Formula M bored.

Wes and Amber don't have that problem, and they both grin.

Wes rounds the counter. "You two must have worked up quite an appetite."

Natty nods emphatically.

"We did," I agree.

Wes is a great cook, and the bakery doesn't have a working kitchen, running water, or electricity. I've got a stash of granola bars, applesauce, and bananas, but I can always count on Wes for a hot, delicious—and most importantly free—breakfast.

He holds out his arms for Natty. "Do you want to help me mix the ingredients?"

Natty examines his nails. "Whatever."

Wes chuckles. "I take it that means yes?"

Natty stops pretending to be me and nods emphatically. Then, he shows that I haven't been that bad of an influence by adding a, "yes, please!"

Wes scoops him up, and Tiptoe jumps from the boy's shoulder and into my Birkin a second before Wes tosses Natty into the air.

The little boy squeals happily, and I tense inwardly as he flies high and then drops into Wes's arms. Formula M sends some calming waves through me, and I turn away so I don't have to watch.

My gaze immediately lands on the gorgon standing outside the cafe. He's got snakes peeking out from beneath his black beanie, and he's wearing reflective sunglasses—a good thing, or he might accidentally turn someone to stone. He's also holding a white cane, which he seems to forget about and almost trips over as he enters the cafe.

For a split second, I think he might actually be blind, but dismiss the thought as he looks around the small cafe. Something about him holds my attention, but I might as well be invisible, given the amount of attention he pays me.

He heads straight to the counter, eyes only for Amber, as he orders an espresso. For some odd reason, I want his attention back on me... but then Wes throws Natty up in the air again and it's gorgon, shmorgon.

I know the bear shifter would never drop the little boy—and Natty keeps yelling 'again' so I know he's loving every moment—but that doesn't make the anxiety lessen any. Formula M barely keeps up until Wes settles a grinning Natty on his shoulders.

Maybe I should buy some Bear Shifter Strength potion with my next paycheck. Regular Minnie may not be able to roughhouse with Natty, but Potioned-Up Minnie can do

anything. Who knows, maybe I'll even freak out less once I'm the one doing the tossing.

Natty looks at my bag. "Tiptoe, come!"

I reach inside and scoop out the mouse. Formula M keeps my nose from twitching, and I hope my mouse still understands me when I say, "Go with Natty."

I catch the gorgon watching me, and that coupled with Formula M's effects on my powers, makes me miss most of what Tiptoe says. I only catch one word. *Sleep.*

I'd let him snuggle comfortably inside my Birkin during my shift, but apparently health inspectors aren't fond of mice. "Natty, Tiptoe's sleepy. Let him rest when you get upstairs, okay?"

Natty nods.

Wes does too. "I've got your favorite pillow ready, Tiptoe. And some carrot and apple slices for you boys to share."

I settle the happily-chirping mouse on the grinning boy's shoulder and kiss the tops of both their heads. Then I pull the boy in for a tight squeeze. "I'll see you during my break, Natty."

He nods, and Wes turns to Amber. "Come upstairs with us, Ambea? You should rest, and Minnie's got everything under control down here."

I really don't, but I nod anyway.

Thankfully, Amber shakes her head. “I don’t mind working. And I can always waddle upstairs if I feel tired,” she adds with a playful twinkle in her eyes.

Wes frowns. “You should still put your feet up. I can give you a foot rub and make you something to eat. Are you craving pickles? Ice cream? Pickle ice cream?”

Natty jumps on the mention of dessert. “I want pickle ice cream!”

Since Flying Horse has a dick-flavored ice cream, pickle might be on their menu. But judging by the look on Amber’s face, not one she plans on having.

Wes chuckles. “I was just kidding about the pickle ice cream.” He ruffles Natty’s hair and turns to Amber. “But I’m here for you, Ambear. Anything you need.”

It hurts that no one will ever look at me the way Wes is looking at Amber, but I try to be happy for my friend. She deserves to be happy, and I do not.

Amber rests her hands on her protruding belly and smiles warmly at her mate. “I’m fine, Wes. I promise. And if I get hungry, or tired, or somehow even more pregnant, I’ll come upstairs, okay?”

Considering she’s already carrying triplets, and we live in a supernatural town, she’s basically just tempting fate... but her stomach doesn’t balloon further.

Wes chuckles, gives Amber a loving kiss, and scoops up Natty. Then he races upstairs, the sound of pounding feet echoing

through the small cafe.

And that's when I feel the gorgon's eyes on me.

Chapter 3



MINNIE

I busy myself putting away my Birkin and slipping on my apron while I take in the gorgon. He's claimed a seat by the door and he's lounging back in his seat like Jewels Cafe is his own personal living room. One of his sneakered feet is resting on his jean-clad thigh, but his casual outfit doesn't fool me. He's radiating confidence, and he wouldn't be doing that if he wasn't someone important, rich, or famous.

If there's one thing that Maude Montgomery—my not-so-dear mother—has taught me, it's to sniff out success from a mile away. But there are plenty of other handsome men in Silver Springs who fit the bill. One of Amber's sister's mates, Cash, is the social media mogul who built Screech. Zoe's mated to the famous hockey player Leith Rogowsky, who's played for the Silver Springs Blades and the Maple Ridge Meese. And fine, they're both taken, but Luca the siren—who's the town's fire chief and comes in for iced coffee, even in the dead of winter—is single, and I've never been this drawn to him.

Amber looks pointedly at the gorgon and raises an eyebrow. I respond with a Formula M yawn and examine my fingernails. They're painted pink to match my dress and look perfect thanks to the Enchanted Nails potion I've been using since I turned six. It was initially called Nails to Die For, but sales were down because no one was willing to test fate, and it got rebranded when I was in my late teens.

Amber stares at me for a few long seconds, shrugs, and waddles into the back, leaving me alone with the gorgon in the otherwise empty cafe.

He's still glued to his phone, acting for all the world like I don't exist. Even his snakes are completely still and ignoring me.

I clear my throat. "So... what are their names?"

The gorgon looks up from his phone, his brows knit in confusion—or possibly, annoyance. "Are you talking to me?"

I want to look away in embarrassment, but Formula M forces me to roll my eyes instead. "Who else would I be talking to?"

"Yourself?" The gorgon snorts at his own lame attempt at a joke and turns back to his phone. Dick.

His snakes don't utter a word, and I wonder if Formula M is especially potent today, or if they're as unfriendly as he is. It just figures that the hot ones are always jerks. Not that I was interested in the first place.

I turn my back on the gorgon and wipe down the already clean espresso machine. But when I sneak a peak at him, I realize I

shouldn't have bothered. The gorgon seems too fascinated by whatever he's reading on his phone to even notice.

When Amber finally returns, relief courses through me, and I say the first thing that comes to mind. "What's Julian doing across town?"

As in Julian, *Amber's* mate, whose life is forever intertwined with mine. I don't even care where he is or what he's doing—or, I wish I didn't—I just can't seem to help but be aware of exactly where he is at all times.

Amber places a hand on her pregnant belly, but her eyes twinkle when she teases, "Minerva Montgomery, are you trying to tell me you're still obsessed with my mate?"

"You wish," I fire back, though it's mostly Formula M talking. Plus, Amber and I both know I am, and always will be, obsessed with Julian. Just not like *that*. "And it's Minnie Alexander now."

Amber's eyes widen. "Since when?"

"Since last night, when I finally heard from the judge." I sound pretty bored with the whole thing, but that's just Formula M talking. Inside, I'm squealing and jumping for joy as I grab my Birkin and pull my brand new ID from my wallet. "Minerva Montgomery is dead."

The gorgon looks up from his phone. "Don't you think that's a little dramatic?"

I forget that he's a customer and say the first thing that comes to mind. "Not as dramatic as your snakes."

He frowns.

“Sorry about that,” Amber apologizes for me. “Your snakes are lovely.”

I’m not sure ‘lovely’ is the right word, since they’re still giving me the silent treatment, but they are definitely the furthest thing from dramatic. And he is a customer, and I need to remain professional.

I cringe on the inside, the word sorry already on my lips, but Formula M isn’t a fan of apologies. I examine my manicure instead. “Whatever.”

Sometimes, Formula M really sucks. Then again, it also keeps me from bursting into tears, hiding behind the counter like a weirdo, and having panic attacks every time something goes wrong... so I can’t complain.

Luckily, I’m saved by the bell—literally—as the one above the cafe’s front door dings, letting in the second customer of the day... and allowing me to ignore the first. I take the order—PSL for Paisley the pixie—and start on her pumpkin spice latte while Amber takes care of the small talk.

I’m just sliding it across the counter when the next customer—the troll cop, Liam, who’s Amber’s sister’s mate—comes in and I get started on his Mood Tea.

More customers filter in behind him, and Amber and I fall into a routine. We make PSLs, with an occasional Mood Tea or Unicorn Hot Chocolate mixed in. Along with one pumpkin

spice hot chocolate with an extra shot of chocolate and whipped cream for a human named Jenn.

I keep sneaking looks at the gorgon between orders. I can't seem to help myself, even knowing his personality leaves much to be desired. That and the fact that he's not the least bit interested in me. He even waits until my back is turned to order another espresso from Amber, then continues to scroll through his phone like he's got nowhere to be.

When the morning rush comes to a halt, Wes and Natty come downstairs to bring us some delicious quiche—which Formula M forces me to eat in tiny bites despite the fact that I'm literally starving—and then Natty gives me a hug and they head upstairs to play.

I turn to Amber and lower my voice so the gorgon—who still hasn't left, or looked at me, this whole time—can't overhear. “Thanks for watching Natty. And for giving me this job.”

“It's our pleasure. Well, the watching Natty part.” She grins, so I know she's teasing. She pats her rounded belly and worries her lower lip. “We need all the practice we can get.”

I roll my eyes, and this time, Formula M has nothing to do with it. “You've got nothing to worry about on the parenting front. You're great with Natty, and you've got three mates, all of whom will be amazing dads. Not to mention Julian's entire family will descend on you the moment the babies are here... I'm honestly surprised they haven't already. And Wes's, too,” I add as an afterthought, since the bear shifter comes from a large family.

Amber wrings her hands. “I know. I’m just being silly, but... what if I’m not a natural, like you?”

“Me? A natural?” The idea is laughable. I have no clue what I’m doing with Natty, but instead of sounding shocked, I sound completely nonchalant, like the whole topic bores me.

“You’re so good with Natty,” Amber gushes. “You always keep your cool... not that you can lose your cool because of, you know...” she waves her hand vaguely, but it’s obvious she means Formula M, “And Natty absolutely adores you.”

“He’s a great kid.” More than great. He’s amazing and perfect and I love him with every ounce of my being. But he’s also not mine, and one day, his dad will take him away. Then, I’ll be lucky if I catch a glimpse of him in town—assuming his dad plans to stay in Silver Springs.

I feel like crying, but Formula M has my back. No bursting into tears at work for this girl. I place my hand gently on Amber’s. “I always just figure things out as I go. You will too.” Even if you end up squatting in an abandoned bakery, pilfering meals off neighbors, and taking showers at the community center.

Amber wrings her hands again. “So speaking of figuring things out... I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something.”

Whatever it is, my gut tells me, I’m not going to like it.

Chapter 4



MINNIE

I glance down at Amber's hands, which she's wringing like crazy. "Tell me what's wrong." Because something definitely isn't right. What if—

Formula M sends a wave of calm coursing through me before I can worry about it. Amber doesn't have the same luxury, so she just keeps wringing her hands like a crazy person.

I tap my manicured nails on the counter. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I miss your wonky shifting. It was always a dead giveaway that you were nervous, and much better than that thing you're doing with your hands."

"That's one pregnancy perk I'm going to miss when the baby comes. Twenty-five weeks without a single wonky shift. I could get used to this." Amber smiles, then frowns. "What if my shifting is even worse after I give birth? What if I shift and drop the baby? Or... or..."

“You’ll be fine. I promise.” It sounds heartfelt in my head, but I can’t help noticing my words come out in monotone. I give Amber’s arm a gentle squeeze to show her I mean it. “Your mates will make sure the baby’s safe. Perk of having three, right? And if all else fails, can’t you just wear your sister’s necklace?” It weakens the wearer’s magic—or in the case of chameleons like Amber and her sister, eliminates them entirely.

Amber sighs. “I know, but I also kind of miss being... *me*. I don’t think I’ve felt like myself since I conceived. I’m always tired, my feet are swelling, my center of gravity is off, I don’t like any of the same foods.” She lowers her voice. “And I can’t stand coffee—not even decaf. But...” she perks up, “speaking of Violet’s necklace, Pepp came in after you left yesterday.”

I roll my eyes. “What does Peppermint,” a cardinal shifter—the bird kind, not the Catholic kind—who works at the post office and stops by the cafe all the time, “have to do with the necklace?”

“She doesn’t.” Amber taps her short, gold nails on the counter, another nervous habit she seems to have acquired since she hasn’t been able to shift. “But she’s got a friend... oh goddess, what’s her name?” Amber frowns. “It’s something dolphin. Doll Fin? Dell Fine?” She groans. “Pregnancy brain. Just one more way I don’t feel like myself.”

I give her hand a sympathetic pat and prompt, “So this dolphin can do what, exactly?”

“I’m pretty sure it was Dell Fine.” Amber frowns again. “But here’s the thing...” she lowers her voice and then whispers, “I’m not supposed to tell anyone, so keep this between us, okay?”

I nod.

“She’s like a walking ward.”

“A what?”

Amber forgets to whisper as she practically bounces on her toes. “She’s a witch, but her powers cancel out everything magical she comes into contact with.”

The gorgon looks up from his phone, a slightly horrified look on his face. Not that I blame him. He’s probably worried about his snakes. Quite frankly, so am I.

I’m also surprised he’s actually listening to our conversation. I’d assumed he was so focused on whatever he’s reading up on his phone he’s completely forgotten that we’re here, but apparently that’s not the case. Behind his bored exterior, he’s paying attention to us. And possibly me.

I feel like blushing, which is Formula M’s cue to act bored. Really, really, bored.

I yawn. “Whatever.”

Amber completely misinterprets my response. She knows the basics of Formula M, and that the more bored I look, the more anxious I am. She just assumes I’m worried about the dolphin witch, not the gorgon.

“I think this is it,” Amber lowers her voice again. “She might be able to break your curse.”

“You’ve said that before.” Several dozen times, in fact.

“I know, but this is different. We’ve never met a witch like her before.”

She’s said the same thing when she convinced Juniper to help, and that was a colossal fail. “The curse can only be broken by the witch who cast it.” Which is so not happening.

“She wouldn’t break the curse... she’d cancel it out. I’m not sure how her magic works. It might just be temporary. But there’s a chance it could be permanent, and then...” she trails off, her eyes wide and hopeful.

Amber won’t have to keep being nice to me. She’ll finally be rid of me. She’ll finally be free. And I will, too.

Because at the end of the day, that’s why I’m still around. Until the curse is broken, Amber is stuck with me. Not as an employee—for some odd reason she actually wanted to hire me—but here in Silver Springs. Because as long as the curse is in effect, I can never leave. And neither can she.

Not as long as her mate, Julian, is in the picture.

Amber smiles. “Dell Fine could be the answer.”

I try not to get my hopes up, too, and nod. “When?”

“Friday, I think... I’ll text Pepp to double-check.”

I nod again and spot the gorgon’s curious eyes on me. How much did he overhear? And is he watching us because he’s

worried the dolphin witch will hurt his snakes? Or maybe he's as drawn to me as I am to him?

I feel like blushing, but I'm cool and collected Formula M Minnie. Especially since there could never be anything between us—and not just because his personality is obviously lacking.

“So...” Amber wrings her hands again, which is a dead giveaway that there's more. “Have you heard of babymoos?”

I shake my head. “What's that? Some sort of birthing ritual? A paranormal doula?” I wrack my brain for something else. “An ethereal epidural?”

Amber snorts. “No. It's like a honeymoon, but you go while you're pregnant. Kind of like one last vacation before you become parents.”

“Oh, that sounds nice. Are you thinking of going on one?”

Amber nods. “The guys and I were looking at options...”

“Like the B&B?”

“We were thinking about going a little further than that.”

“You mean Scarborough?” I ask, referring to the next town over.

Amber shakes her head. “Actually, we've been talking about the new supernatural cruise line. Have you heard of it?”

I shake my head.

Amber keeps talking, but I'm no longer listening. A heavy feeling settles in my gut and I start to panic. Formula M tries

to calm me down. When that does work, it makes me yawn like five times, so no one can tell... well, no one except Amber.

“Minnie, you alright?”

“I’m fine,” I drawl, even though I’m not! How could I possibly be fine?

I can’t be that far away from Julian. And yes, I know that makes me sound like an obsessive ex—even though Julian and I were never a thing—but I’m not being clingy. It’s so much more than that.

It would *kill* me to be away from Julian. As in *literally* kill me. Because until the curse is broken, wherever he goes, I go. *Forever.*

Wave after wave of calm courses through me, but it does nothing. Literally nothing. I click my nails on the counter, annoying myself and only heightening my panic. I yawn. I roll my eyes. I wonder if the gorgon’s watching and thinks I’m a psycho.

“I’ve thought it through.” Amber sounds so certain that I want to scream.

If she goes through with the cruise, I’ll end up dead. I want to beg and plead and tell her she can’t do this to me. But Formula M doesn’t let any of my anxiety show, unless you count all the yawns and eye rolls.

“You have nothing to worry about, Minnie. I promise.”

There's only one way that would be true, and we both know it.
“Does that mean Julian isn't going?”

“He is. But maybe Pepp's friend can break the curse.”

Amber sounds so hopeful, but that's all it is. Misplaced hope.
“And if she doesn't?”

“Then we were thinking maybe you could come on the cruise?
Natty too, of course.”

I can't afford that. But I also can't admit I have money
troubles. Not while I'm taking Formula M.

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

You know I can't afford it, Amber! I mentally shout at her. She
barely pays me above minimum wage. And we're squatting at
the bakery because I can't even afford rent—not that Amber
knows about that little problem—but she should realize that
there's absolutely no way I could save up enough for a cruise.
I'm barely getting by as it is.

“Please come, Minnie,” Amber grabs my hand. “I need this.
The guys and I all need this.” Amber starts to hyperventilate,
and I miss the days when she used to crazy-shift whenever she
was panicking. It was way better than this.

Amber sounds so desperate, I wonder what she and her guys
would do if I refused to come. I doubt they'd leave me here to
die... but if they don't go on their babymoon, they'll end up
resenting me.

What if Amber fires me and stops watching Natty? What if she
stops being my friend?

It's bad enough being stuck in Silver Springs for the rest of my life. Being stuck here and being hated by literally everyone would be a whole lot worse.

Which is why I hear myself saying, "Fine. Natty and I will come. Even if cruises are totally lame." And then, I dig my own grave, because if there's one thing Formula M cares about it's appearances. "Pick the best rooms and send me the deets. Money is no object."

Amber lets out a happy squeal, and I wish the floor would open up and swallow me whole.

Chapter 5



ASHOK

Silver Springs is even more fascinating than vampire DNA, and as a scientist, I don't say that lightly.

I pick up Helix, my pet fuzzy, and the two of us gape out the tinted limo window as we pull into town. The streets are packed with supernatural creatures of all sorts, walking—or in some cases flying—right out in the open. A pixie flits past. A brunette in overalls who looks distinctly human wiggles her fingers and makes a mop and bucket levitate. A cop walks by wearing gloves, a ski mask, sunglasses, and gloves, which tells me he's likely a vampire just like me.

An entire supernatural world hidden right out in the open, the human population none the wiser.

"It's a supernatural paradise," I tell the two secret agents occupying the limo. They're both in their fifties, and look more like high school teachers than bodyguards, even though I've been told they'll keep me safe if things go south. Not that

I'm convinced, since apparently they're both raccoon shifters, but the agency insisted they're the right shifters for the job.

John leans across the limo and pats my shoulder. "Welcome to Silver Springs, Dr. Reddy."

It's the most he's said to me since we got into the limo, and the other agent, Barb, hasn't said a word since we were first introduced in Toronto yesterday at sunset. Granted, she dozed off as soon as we crossed the border from Canada into New York State, but she's been up for at least a full half hour, all of which has been spent in silence.

To be fair, this is the first time I've said a word myself, but I never know what to say to people. I settle Helix on my lap and wrack my brain for a conversation starter. Luckily, an opportunity presents itself just down the street. "Is that a gorgon?"

John nods. Barb grunts. Conversation non grata.

The gorgon has black sunglasses, a white cane that he taps before him as he walks, and a group of snakes peeking out from beneath his black hat.

I look away, my gaze drifting across the street, and I gasp when I spot the exact same gorgon inside the cafe. "Did he just teleport?"

John answers that one without even looking. "Probably."

I guess in Silver Springs, teleporting is a common occurrence. Wish I had that power. Then I wouldn't have spent all night on the road, bored out of my mind. Being a vampire really

sucks... literally. Just an endless thirst for blood, and no cool superpowers like levitation, teleportation, or invisibility.

The teleporting gorgon lounges back in a chair inside the cafe and scrolls through his phone, like he was always there. I glance back across the street, to the spot where he used to be... and he's still there, talking to his snakes. They shift around on his head, and he pats one. It rubs affectionately against his palm in response.

What the hell?

I turn back toward the cafe, where an identical gorgon still sits. His snakes look almost limp in comparison. Maybe all gorgons look alike... and dress in identical clothes?

A flash of orange catches my attention as a cat races past and shifts into a man with a mop of red hair. He waves at a man who sneezes and shifts into a winged white horse. A hairy yeti wearing a hockey jersey nearly barrels into him, laughs, waves, and keeps walking. Like all of this is normal. Except that in Silver Springs, apparently it is.

I thread my fingers through Helix's soft fur. "This place is insane."

"You get used to it, Dr. Reddy." John pulls out his phone. "It looks like we're on schedule and your lab is all set up."

I switch into work mode. "The fuzzies?"

"All fifty have been relocated. They've been fed and groomed. And the beaver is waiting for you." He turns the phone and shows me the live footage from the security camera. I don't

like seeing rows of cages—even if they are a luxury edition, with soft beds and TVs to keep the fuzzies entertained—but until all of them are adopted, they’re safer locked up. “We’ve got state-of-the-art security. Anyone tries to break in, and we’ll have them on their way to Silver Springs Penitentiary in minutes.”

“I know the agency will do whatever it takes to keep the fuzzies safe.”

John nods. “We’ve notified the local police force, so they’re expecting trouble once we make our announcement.”

“When will we be doing that?”

“The campaign will launch tonight at sunset, since that’s the preferred time for our target demographic.” As in other bloodsuckers like me. “Your presentation is scheduled on Friday night. Also at sunset.”

At the mention of the dreaded presentation, I tap the bridge of my nose. It’s a nervous habit I’ve had since I got my first pair of glasses at age six. Except they’re no longer there. Yet another unnecessary, unwelcome reminder that I’m a vampire.

I run my fingers through Helix’s fur, enjoying the calming effect the act always has. “I still don’t think I’m the best person to be giving this presentation. Public speaking and I don’t mix.”

“Don’t overthink it. Just say everything you’ve rehearsed. And if you forget the words, the notes are on your phone.” Which is identical to John’s, was provided by the agency, and is

probably being monitored as we speak. “So what happens until the presentation?”

“You proceed with your work, Doctor.” He puts away his phone. “We rented a house for us in town. We can stop by and settle in first.”

I shake my head. “Can you take me straight to the lab? I have work to do. There are several samples I need from the beaver. I’d like to get started on those, so we don’t have to keep it longer than necessary.”

“Of course, Doctor.” John pushes a button on the limo. “Take us straight to the lab.”

The limo driver acknowledges the request, and John turns to me. “Don’t forget to feed, Doctor.”

Feed. The word makes me flinch. I haven’t bitten or harmed a human since I was first turned, and yet every time I think about eating I hear their screams. It’s why the agency always has someone make sure I’m feeding. Because if I could cut the blood out of my diet entirely, I would.

I shove the dread aside, scoop up Helix, and sink my fangs into his flesh. The fuzzy starts to purr, soothing me, and I manage to take my fill without screaming, throwing it all back up, or jumping out of the limo and running down the streets of Silver Springs screaming like the monster I am.

Monster. Monster. Monster. Monster.

My brain repeats the word on a loop, reminding me why this presentation is so important. Friday night, I have to walk on

that stage and convince the vampires of Silver Springs to purchase fuzzies. I don't have a choice. It's the only way I'll ever make up for all the horrible things that I've done.

Chapter 6



MINNIE

I try to focus on serving customers, but Amber's news makes it impossible. What was I thinking, saying I'll go on the cruise? Or that money is no object? Of course it's an object. It's the most 'objecty' object I know. One that I'm severely lacking.

Which is why I panicked and Formula M had to take measures into its own hands. But at least I didn't admit Natty and I are homeless, prove I'm an unfit guardian, and get him taken away. Even if Amber would have kept it a secret, I doubt the gorgon would have.

I glance at him. He *still* hasn't left even though it's almost time for lunch. I don't get why I'm so interested in him, considering he hasn't looked up from his phone in hours.

Focus, Minnie, I remind myself. Make the drinks and figure out what to do about the cruise!

But what can I possibly do? Hope that Pepp's friend can break the curse? Convince Amber that cruises suck and she's better off staying at the B&B? Wait until Julian gets back from whatever it is he's been doing all morning and see if I can convince him of the same thing? It's either that or rob the bank so I can pay for the trip.

"This isn't what I ordered!"

The complaint pulls me out of my thoughts and I stare across the counter at Violet the recently turned vampire—who's eighty years old, with gray hair, wrinkles, fangs, and more energy than a three-year-old.

She frowns. "I asked for a PSL *with rainbow sprinkles*. I saw it on Screech," Violet announces proudly, like being on a supernatural social network is something show-off worthy. "And now that I'm immortal and don't have the same dietary restrictions, I can order a different drink every day."

She pushes her drink back across the counter toward me and waits for me to re-do it, because apparently on top of all my other worries, I can't even get simple drinks right.

I feel the need to blush, but Formula M masks my embarrassment with a wave of snark. Which is how I find myself pushing the drink right back and rolling my eyes. "Whatever."

The gorgon looks up from his phone and stares at me. I'd blush... if I could.

He and Violet both stare at me for three solid seconds. Finally, she speaks, “I don’t think you understand. My PSL is missing the rainbow sprinkles.”

I stare blankly at her, willing my body to move.

She clears her throat. “PSL is slang for pumpkin spice latte, you know,” she adds, as if it’s all some big misunderstanding.

Say sorry, I order myself. *Say sorry!* Instead, I roll my eyes. “Of course I know what it stands for. I work here.”

“Good. Then you must also know that the sprinkles are right over there.” She points to the shelf behind my left shoulder. “Can you add some for me so I can be on my way?”

The smart thing to do would be to add the sprinkles. It’s my *job* to add the sprinkles. I need to add the sprinkles. So of course Formula M decides I’m not getting the sprinkles.

The words leave my mouth against my will. “Get them yourself.”

I try taking deep breaths to calm down. If I’m calm, Formula M will let me get the sprinkles. And then I won’t get fired from a job that I needed badly before the whole cruise problem, and now need even more.

Shit! My panic intensifies, which only makes Formula M double down. “And don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”

Violet looks more shocked than offended. The gorgon, on the other hand, is looking at me like I’m worse than the dirt on the bottom of his sneakers. “Just add the goddess-forsaken sprinkles, Minnie.”

The way he says my name makes my heart race. And the fact that he obviously thinks low of me makes my chest ache. Which is how I end up crossing my arms in front of my chest.

“No.”

“Let me get this straight... you’re asking this lovely old lady to go all the way around the counter, to where you’re standing, so she can get the sprinkles and do your job for you?”

I wish I could take a page out of pre-pregnancy Amber’s book, shift into a mouse, and disappear.

Violet turns her glare on him. “Young man, I’m perfectly capable of walking around a counter.” And she proves it, with added vampire speed. She doesn’t even bother standing on tiptoe to reach the shelf, she jumps. Definitely for show. She adds the sprinkles and puts the container back.

I feel a wave of relief, followed by a distinct sense that my life is falling apart.

Formula M, being the pain in the butt that it is, forces me to roll my eyes at Violet. “See... that wasn’t so hard.”

She shakes her head. “You may want to rethink your career choices.”

And she isn’t wrong.

She also gives me an idea. Not to rethink my career choices, since there isn’t much I’m qualified to do. I’m a terrible barista. I suck at my waitressing job at Bob’s diner. And any time the temp agency sends me to work an event, I’m pretty

bad at that, too. But maybe I can find another part-time gig I can hold down until I save up enough for the cruise.

I could also cut down on some expenses. Not Formula M or the invisibility spell, both of which I *need* to survive. But maybe a few of the other potions like Cloud 9 ½, which keeps my heels from hurting. I can tough it out for a week or two.

The door jingles again, and I don't have to look up from what I'm doing to know it's Julian. I can sense him from miles away. Literally. Since I have an internal radar that tells me where he is at all times.

My heart leaps in anticipation, even though I know for a fact that he's mated to Amber, he's madly in love with her, and he'll never be mine. I don't even *want* him to be mine, but the stupid curse forces me to react this way every time he's around.

I used to think it was love. I used to believe Maude Montgomery when she told me we were meant to be. But now I know the truth. I'm not actually into Julian, she just decided he'd make the perfect son-in-law and took matters into her own meddling magical hands.

The indignation mixed with rage bubble up like they always do, but Formula M doesn't let me bunch my hands into fists or scowl at Julian. Instead, I find myself batting my eyelashes as I sweetly calling out, "Julian, I'm so glad you're here."

I wish you were anywhere but here! Well, so long as you don't leave town... because if you do, I'll be forced to follow, and right now I really can't afford to.

He smiles. “Hi, Minnie. Hope it hasn’t been too busy while we were gone.”

I don’t know how he manages to sound so polite and chill, but he does. His bluish-gray eyes meet mine across the cafe, and I can’t help but think how attractive he is. It’s those thick eyelashes, messy blond hair, and athletic build.

I can’t even hate him, because he’s such a nice guy. He’s never once yelled at me for flirting at him, or told me to get lost and stay away from him and Amber—who’s practically my only friend in this town. And he’s never looked annoyed, or shot me pitying looks, or made me feel bad for being cursed to chase him for all eternity.

I bat my eyelashes some more. “Why don’t you have a seat? I’ll make you any drink you want.”

Please don’t sit down. Leave. Go upstairs and find Amber and let this embarrassing purgatory come to an end.

“I can’t stay.” Julian’s words fill me with acute relief, even if I can’t actually show it. “Chase and I have a surprise for Amber.”

Chase? I glance past Julian for the first time and realize that the bunny shifter is standing behind him with a large box. How did I miss that?

And how did I not notice that the gorgon’s no longer paying attention to his phone? He’s scowling at me instead.

Chapter 7



MINNIE

The gorgon must think I'm a horrible person. No, worse than horrible. Horrendous. Atrocious. The lowest of the low. First, I was rude to Violet, and now I'm hitting on Amber's mate. And the fact that those things are out of my control somehow only makes it worse.

"Help!" A tiny voice startles me out of my thoughts, which are a train racing toward a cliff with no brakes.

I instantly forget about my pity party for one. I spin around, searching the cafe for an animal in trouble, but I don't see one. There shouldn't even be one here, aside from Tiptoe, who's safely sleeping upstairs. And this voice is different, less squeaky and far more panicked than my mouse has ever been.

"Where are you? What's wrong?" My feelings are shouting, but I sound bored. And with Formula M in my system, blocking my full powers, I'm not even sure the poor little animal can understand me.

“I’m right here, and nothing’s wrong?” Julian phrases it as more of a question.

“Scared!” the tiny voice calls back at the same time.

Chase, who can’t hear it either, frowns at me.

A mix of emotions flows through me—fear for the animal, frustration because I’m the only one who can hear it, and embarrassment because I’m acting even weirder than usual—and Formula M sends a wave of calm coursing through me.

“It’ll be alright,” I tell the panicked creature.

Julian and Chase both frown, but the gorgon looks more curious than confused.

“Please!” A whimper sounds from the box Chase is holding.

My gaze zeroes in on the gold wrapping paper. “Open it.”

“Out,” the animal pleads.

Julian shakes his head. “We can’t unwrap it before Amber sees it.”

“It would ruin the surprise,” Chase adds.

I want to shoot both men down with a glare so fierce they wither where they stand, but I sound indifferent. “Your surprise is terrified.”

“He is?” Julian frowns.

“Are you sure?” Chase asks.

At least they have the decency to look concerned, and the gorgon finally looks like he doesn’t hate my guts. Not that it

matters. Not now. Especially not when I might hate his.

I yawn. “If you’re going to surprise Amber, go. Now. You need to let him out.”

Amber’s mates exchange a glance and Chase breaks into a run with Julian on his heels. The apartment door slams upstairs and I turn to the gorgon. “Could you watch the counter?” I ask, since he’s clearly got nowhere else to be.

“I don’t work here,” he scoffs. “And I’m not watching the cafe so you can go after your precious Julian.”

I deserve that dig. I know I do. As far as the gorgon’s concerned, I’ve been hitting on my friend’s mate, openly, like I have every right to. But all I can think about is the gorgon’s snakes taking a page out of Tolkien’s books and hissing ‘my precious’ at Julian. At least Formula M and the curse have never made me do anything *that* bad.

“Whatever,” I tell the gorgon as I saunter to the door, heels clicking. I try to hurry, but Formula M doesn’t let me run unless I’m in a tracksuit, and even then I’m not allowed to sweat.

I flip the ‘open’ sign to ‘closed’ and turn to the gorgon. “Don’t steal anything while I’m gone.”

“I’m no thief,” the gorgon snaps, making it clear exactly what he thinks of people who steal. Even people who are left with no other choice and do it so they can feed an innocent child.

If I could scowl at him, I would. But I can’t. So I slowly walk away.

I keep urging my body to move faster so I can go upstairs and make sure the little creature is safe, but Formula M fights me with every step. Would it hold me back if it was a matter of life and death? Would it not let me run to rescue Natty if he was in trouble? What if he needs me, and I can't save him?

Wave after wave of calm courses through me, but not enough to keep the realization at bay. It's wrong to keep taking Formula M if it could put Natty in danger. But if I stop taking it, I won't be able to hold down a job, or care for the boy, or hold my head up so long as I'm in Silver Springs. So where, exactly, does that leave me?

I finally reach the top of the stairs and step through the apartment door. The smell of pumpkin spice latte permeating the cafe downstairs dissipates, replaced by the delicious smell of Wes's lunch.

My mouth waters, but food can wait. The poor little occupant of the box can't.

Except I'm not greeted by the distressing sight I expect. The gift-wrapped box sits wide open on the coffee table, the golden wrapping paper ripped to shreds. Amber is on the couch, her eyes wide and her cheeks flushed pink, and Natty is bouncing on the couch next to her, Tiptoe balancing expertly on his shoulder.

A fiery golden rope of magic that only witches like myself can see connects Amber to each of her fated mates. A grinning Chase is on the couch to her left, his arm wrapped around her shoulder. Wes and Julian are kneeling on the floor, matching

smiles on their faces. But the best part by far is the golden ball of fur racing around the living room, barking happily and wagging his tail.

“Puppy!” Natty yells when he sees me. “Look, Minnie. Puppy!”

“*Happy*,” the golden retriever pup shouts, though I don’t need my ability to speak to animals to realize that little fact. It’s obvious to anyone who’s looking.

Julian holds up a cute little dog collar. It’s made of gold leather, with diamond-shaped gems all around. They’re all different colors, and sparkle in the light. He shakes it, and the bell on the front jingles. “Come here, Latte.”

“Latte,” Amber gushes. “That’s adorable.”

Chase grins. “The perfect name for the perfect pup.”

The perfect pup in question ignores everyone in the room and keeps chasing his own tail. My guess is he’s just happy to be free of the box, and he probably doesn’t even know what a collar is or what it’s for.

“Go to Julian,” I tell the pup.

Latte continues racing around the living room in circles, tail wagging. I don’t feel the urge to wiggle my own butt and stick out my tongue, which means my ability to talk to animals is also impaired, and the pup probably didn’t hear me.

I’m about to repeat the command, but Natty scrambles off the couch and chases after the pup, dislodging Tiptoe in the process. The mouse lands safely on the couch and dashes

behind the throw pillow, while the oblivious Natty races after Latte, squealing each time he lunges forward and fails to catch the pup.

Julian shakes the collar again. “Here, Latte. Here, boy.”

The pup still doesn’t listen. And even though I’d rather let him and Natty play, the curse, or Formula M, or both, decide that helping Julian is my number one priority. I focus on my words and try again. “Latte, come.”

Latte skids to a stop, changes trajectory, and races toward me. I scoop him up, my voice turning sugary-sweet. “Here you go, Julian.”

Amber starts to get up. “I got him.”

“You rest.” Chase grabs her waist and gently pulls her back down. “I’ll get Latte.”

Wes jumps to his feet. “You two sit. I’ll do it.” The bear shifter crosses the living room in two giant steps. “Amber, you shouldn’t be lifting anything heavy.”

“Latte’s tiny,” Amber protests. She tries to get up again, but Chase pulls her into his side.

Julian takes one of her hands and kisses her palm. “You’re already carrying our babies, Bean. Put your feet up and rest. We’ll bring Latte to you.”

Wes takes the wiggling pup and holds him up for Julian, who whispers something under his breath and clips on the jingling collar. Latte rewards him by licking his face.

“*Safe?*” a little voice asks, and whiskers peek out from behind the purple throw pillow.

“Latte won’t hurt you, Tiptoe. Julian, could you hold the pup up to the mouse so they can sniff each other?”

I bat my eyelashes at Amber’s mate and wish I could just glue them open so they stop embarrassing me.

Julian turns the puppy toward the couch when the collar starts to jingle. For a second, I think he’s shaking the pup, but then I realize it’s no longer on the pup. It’s flying through the air toward Tiptoe instead.

I want to scream, shout, jump to my mouse’s defense—but Montgomerys are always cool and collected, and Formula M ensures I comply.

Please, I silently beg. I need to help my mouse.

But it’s no use. I can’t move. I can’t scream. I can’t even beg Amber and her guys to help.

The collar contorts as if it’s alive, opening and closing rhythmically as it approaches the mouse. Each snap grows increasingly more eager, and the poor mouse squeaks in terror. But all I can do is stand rooted in place, feeling completely and utterly useless.

Chapter 8



MINNIE

Tiptoe takes off with a squeak and races across Amber's lap.

"Julian, what's happening?" she cries.

The mouse jumps over Chase, lands on the arm of the couch, and leaps down onto the hardwood floor.

The collar lunges in pursuit. Chase tries to grab it as it flies past, but it darts away from his grasp and dives down after the mouse.

Tiptoe lets out several short, high-pitched squeaks and skitters underneath the couch. The collar zooms after him.

A scream lodges in my throat, but refuses to come out.

Formula M sends relief coursing through me, but it's fake. Just like everything about me. Tiptoe isn't safe. I need to help him. I can't just keep standing here.

Except it's all I can do until the mouse scrambles from underneath the couch and races toward the kitchen. A split

second later, the collar dives out from beneath the couch and flies after him, bell jingling ominously.

Natty scrambles after them. “I’m going to catch you,” the little boy shouts, oblivious to the danger a feral spelled collar could cause.

It could attack him, hit him, strangle him, or a number of other increasingly awful things. I need to shout a warning—to stop the boy from racing after the collar—but I can’t move. Luckily, Amber and her men can.

Chase, Julian, and Wes jump into action at the same time. Wes is fastest. He sets down Latte and lunges after Natty.

Amber is still trying to stand when he scoops up the boy, and Chase and Julian skid into the kitchen and lunge for the mouse and collar. They miss.

Tiptoe flattens himself and slips under the fridge. The collar shrinks, zigzags away from Chase and Julian, and dives under the fridge, too. The men flatten themselves on the floor and try to reach them, while Amber finally manages to get to her feet and waddle-races to the kitchen.

Latte dances around her, barking and wagging his tail. She starts to reach down, but Wes scoops the pup up with his free arm.

And while all this is happening, I stand rooted in place, no help at all.

Tiptoe’s panicked cries echo from underneath the fridge, followed by the collar’s ominously jingling bell. I need to do

something. Anything. I need to save my mouse!

I feel like I'm going to explode out of my skin, but all I can do is yawn and examine my nails while my soul sobs.

Then, everything goes quiet. Tiptoe's panicked squeaks stop, and the bell no longer jingles. Silence echoes through the apartment, broken up by Latte's panting and Natty's giggles.

Chase jumps to his feet first. "We need to lift the fridge."

Wes rushes over, hands Latte to Julian and Natty to Chase, and grabs the fridge. "I got it."

The task is no trouble for the bear shifter, and he lifts it clear off the ground. Julian hugs the puppy against his chest and kneels down. He reaches underneath and jumps to his feet. "He's okay!"

Tiptoe stands stock-still on Julian's palm, looking terrified and lost. The collar is around his neck, but instead of golden yellow, it's now the same shade of pink as my dress.

The mouse gingerly lifts one paw and touches the collar that's looped around his throat. The bell jingles, and the mouse jumps in surprise, but he seems otherwise unharmed.

And acute relief courses through me. Tiptoe is okay!

Now that I'm relatively calm, Formula M lets me go and I can finally speak. "What just happened?"

Amber and her guys all shrug in confusion.

Natty claps his hands. "We were playing tag."

At least the kid isn't traumatized. As for Tiptoe, I'm not so sure.

I cross the living room, heels clicking against the hardwood floor. "How are you feeling, little guy?"

The mouse doesn't reply. For a split second, I worry the collar is preventing him from saying anything, but then one word echoes through my head. "*Okay.*"

Latte barks and wags his tail. "*Happy.*"

I reach toward the mouse and carefully touch the pink collar. The bell jingles but nothing else happens. I slip a finger underneath it. There's definitely enough room for Tiptoe to breathe.

Julian chuckles nervously. "Guess we were all worried for nothing."

"Guess so." I giggle. And grimace on the inside. "Let me get this thing off."

I slide my fingers along the collar, checking every inch of it. Twice. "There's no clasp. I can't open it."

Julian shakes his head. "There's one on the back."

I bat my eyelashes and say a sugary sweet, "Thanks, Julian," while wishing I could disappear. "You're a lifesaver. I'm so glad you're—"

Amber clears her throat. "Minnie, who's watching the cafe?"

"I closed it."

Her eyes widen. "We can't just close in the middle of the day."

“Whatever.” That’s what I tell her. Not ‘sorry.’ Not ‘I’ll go open it right away.’ ‘Whatever.’ If she were to fire me, it’s a good enough reason. Not to mention all the flirting I keep doing with Julian. Why would she ever want to keep me around?

But Amber, being Amber, just waves it off. “Don’t worry about it, Minnie. We all forgot about it with all the drama.”

Natty randomly starts singing ‘Mr. Sun, Sun, Mr. Golden Sun’ in his usual, adorable way that brings a smile to my heart, and I finally relax.

“I’ll go downstairs and reopen the cafe,” I tell the group. Then, I bat my eyelashes and simper. “Any luck getting the collar off, Julian?”

He shakes his head. “The clasp isn’t there. I think we’re going to need scissors.”

“We’ll handle the collar,” Amber adds. “And Natty can stay up here and play with Latte.”

Natty claps his hands at the announcement, and I give him a kiss before heading downstairs.

Even though Tiptoe is fine, and everything worked out in the end, I can’t seem to get the image of the panicked little mouse fleeing the collar out of my head. It could have strangled him, and I did nothing to help.

What if Tiptoe was in danger again? Or Snowball? Or Natty, for that matter? What if someone tried to kidnap him, or he ran into traffic, or climbed too high and needed help? And what if

Amber went into early labor and I was the only one around to help?

I know I can't keep taking Formula M, but what choice do I have? I need it to function, and it's not like there are many alternatives. Human anxiety meds would require an official diagnosis, and money, neither of which are options so long as I'm Natty's guardian and Amber and her guys are going on that cruise. And getting a new formula has never been in my budget—only in Maude Montgomery's—so it's Formula M or bust.

As I step into the cafe proper, I yawn, examine my nails, and yawn some more as I head downstairs. Which is Formula M code for I'm freaking out. Then I look up and my eyes meet the gorgon's.

Granted, his eyes are hidden behind reflective sunglasses, so he could be looking at literally anything else. But I know he's not. I know he's gazing into my eyes as surely as I know I'm gazing into his.

He's lounging in the same spot where I left him, legs stretched out in front of him, ankles crossed, a bored look on his face. For a split second, I wonder if he's on Formula G—for Gorgon, of course—but then I realize he can't see what I see.

A rope of pink fiery magic connects us. Which makes the gorgon my fated mate.

Chapter 9



MINNIE

I stare at my fated mate. My soulmate. The gorgon I'm meant to spend the rest of my life with.

He's an objectively attractive guy, but definitely not the hottest man I've ever seen. Which is odd. You'd think the universe's pick for me would at least make my top five.

I'm also not too fond of his snakes, which are lifeless and devoid of personality. And his wardrobe, which is less 'romance novel cover' and more 'substitute gym teacher.' The sneaker-jeans-beanie combo are casual and chill. He's rude, obnoxious, and anything but.

Which all really goes to show that I've inherited the judgmental gene from Maude Montgomery. Or that I'm seriously freaking out now that I know he's my fated mate.

Any sort of relationship for me is out of the question. And even if I could date—which I can't—and I were to fall madly

in love, I'm still the freak who needs Formula M to survive. Why would anyone want to be with me?

The gorgon looks up from his phone and his lips curve. "See anything you like?"

The embarrassment is instantaneous, but my cheeks don't flush and I don't rush out of the room. I also don't do any of the cringe-worthy things my gut tells me to, like dive behind the counter or crawl out of the cafe.

When I do speak, I'm perfectly cool and collected. "You wish."

It would be better if I could make a classy exit, but I can't seem to tear my eyes off him. Literally. Formula M forces me to maintain eye contact—or as much eye contact as one can maintain with a gorgon wearing reflective black sunglasses.

I wait for him to look away first, but he keeps staring. Is he into me? Or is he just the type who never backs down?

I examine my nails. "Do you need anything?"

He shrugs. "Nope. I'm good."

Maybe we are fated mates. The magic connecting us does look the same as the fiery magic connecting Amber to her men. And I've seen the same fated mate magic all over town. Purple magic connects Amber's sister to her mates: a troll cop, a social media mogul vampire mage, and to Wes's bear shifter library assistant brother, Nole. Turquoise magic connects Zoe to her chameleon shifter hockey player, a mage detective, and an ice block shifter journalist. The three friends all have three

fated mates each, and some women in town have even more. Maybe that's what's happening to me?

Or it's all an elaborate trick courtesy of Maude Montgomery...

My heart sinks. There hasn't been a new fated mate connection in Silver Springs in years. The chances of it happening now, and to me, are slim. I'm probably drawn to the gorgon the same way I'm drawn to Julian—due to false magic.

Unless he is the one...

Frustration bubbles inside me, and I stand there for several more seconds until Formula M calms me enough that I can finally move.

I unlock Jewels Cafe, serve the disgruntled snowman shifter waiting outside, and turn to the gorgon. The least I can do is get to know him, and go from there. Even if we can't date, if we are fated mates, maybe we can be friends. "I'm Minnie."

"I know." He shakes his head, but doesn't bother looking up from his phone. "I've heard it like a dozen times."

I flush on the inside and wish I could make up some excuse and just leave. Walk out of the cafe, leave Silver Springs, and start a new life on the other side of the world. With Natty, of course. Pipe dream.

Formula M makes me hold my ground. "And your name is?"

He's silent for so long I'm sure he's not going to answer. Finally, he says, "Gorg."

"Gorg the gorgon?" I ask.

He shrugs.

Guess his parents weren't very creative.

"Can I get you another espresso, Gorg?" I offer. "On the house."

He shrugs again.

I make it anyway, along with a Unicorn Hot Chocolate for myself. Formula M won't let me drink the whole thing, but I can usually get in a few small sips of sugary goodness, along with a lick or two of whipped cream.

The cafe is quiet, so I grab our drinks and settle across the table from Gorg.

He raises an eyebrow, which peeks out from behind his sunglasses. "So, you're a barista?" As in the weird barista who makes herself at home at a customer's table.

Instead of getting back up and running out of the room, I raise an eyebrow right back and wait.

"Why are you working here?" he asks. I figure it's because the guy is obviously successful and thinks my job is beneath him, when he adds, "You're not very good at it."

I feel a wave of rage, and Formula M takes over. "I'll have you know I'm great at my job. The only thing I'm not good at is taking unwarranted criticism from strangers."

At times like these, I'm so grateful the potion has my back.

Gorg crosses his arms in front of his chest. "Okay, enlighten me then. Why did you become a barista?"

What do I tell him? That my parents cut me off, and I couldn't leave Silver Springs to start over somewhere else? That I had no money, no friends, and no one else except Bob from the diner would hire me, so now I work two jobs?

Formula M doesn't let me admit any of those things, but I manage to give Gorg a half-truth. "Amber's a friend."

He doesn't look convinced. "Really? Is that why you were hitting on her boyfriend?"

"Fated mate," I correct.

I watch Gorg carefully to see how he reacts. Does he realize we might be fated mates, too? Does he feel the bond between us? Or is it a one-sided curse inflicted by my so-called mother?

Gorg just looks amused.

I examine my nails. "I was not hitting on Julian." Even though I totally was.

"If you say so." He purses his lips.

There's something almost familiar about him, but I can't trust instinct. Not when it's constantly telling me I'm into Julian when I know for a fact I'm not. And things are no different now. I just have to get to know Gorg and see if he might be the one.

He tilts his head to the side. "Do you enjoy working here?"

At least he's trying to get to know me, even if having a conversation with the guy is so frustrating I want to tear my

hair out.

And speaking of hair—or lack thereof—the snakes on his head are at a forty-five degree angle, and they're not shifting around or trying to right themselves. So weird.

“I’ll take that as a no?” he asks.

It takes me a second to realize he’s talking about my job.

I flip my hair breezily, “It’s whatever.”

Honestly, it’s not so bad. I’m grateful to have a job at all, even if it isn’t what I want to do for the rest of my life. And it definitely beats the life Maude Montgomery had planned for me...

Step 1: find a nefarious way to steal Julian away from Amber

Step 2: drag him back home and regain access to my inheritance

Step 3: spend the rest of my life being subservient to Julian while organizing fancy shmancy parties for snooty rich people.

I’d much rather work at Jewels Cafe, thank you very much.

And speaking of my so-called mother, I need to figure out if Gorg is my other half... or just another step in her plan.

The bell above the cafe’s front door jingles, and Tanner, a local gardener who shifts into an Egyptian mau. He’s a nice enough guy, and a regular, but a wave of annoyance courses through me when I see him. Not because of anything he’s done, but because he’s interrupting my time with Gorg.

“I’ll have the usual,” he says.

I just wish I could tell him to come back in ten minutes.

Formula M helps with the annoyance, sending calm coursing through me until I no longer care. Unfortunately, it also keeps me frozen in place, so when I try to get up, I find I can't move.

"A double shot dirty chai," Tanner reminds me.

I ignore him.

Gorg looks slightly amused. "I'd do it," he says, "but I have no fucking clue what a dirty chai is. I'm more of a dirty martini type of guy myself."

Tanner cocks his head to the side and deadpans. "Very James Bond of you."

Gorg grins.

I still don't move.

Tanner and Gorg exchange a look. Finally, Gorg says, "I thought you said you were an excellent barista."

And, since Formula M is always up for a challenge, I finally manage to get to my feet. Head held tall, I round the counter. "One chai with two shots of espresso coming right up."

Gorg grins. "I thought for sure it had olive brine."

Tanner snorts, and my heart laughs right along with him. Did Gorg just make a joke? Maybe he's got a sense of humor hidden under his somewhat annoying exterior. And why not? There's a lot more to me than meets the eye.

I hurry up with Tanner's drink, and the moment he's gone, I settle back in my seat across from Gorg.

I raise my Unicorn Hot Chocolate to my lips. I barely even taste it before Formula M forces me to put it back down. No empty calories for this girl. I sigh internally and think of some way to get to know Gorg. “So, what’s your favorite food?”

He stares at me for what feels like an eternity. “Beluga caviar.”

Everything inside me recoils. Beluga caviar has always been Maude’s favorite. So either the pink magic is just another trick of hers, or my fated mate prefers the world I’ve spent my whole life hoping to one day escape.

I tap my nails on the table, the annoying clicking echoing through the cafe in time to the classical music playing softly from the speakers.

Gorg shoots me a sweet smile. “What’s your favorite food, Minnie?”

I should be glad he wants to get to know me, but I can’t even reply. I can’t say that I love burgers, fries, and hotdogs—basically all the foods my mother and Formula M would never let me talk about, let alone eat. “I’m quite partial to beluga caviar myself.”

My mother would be proud.

Me? I feel a little sick.

If I’m ever able to date, and I were to accept Gorg as my fated mate, would I just be trading one prison for another? My mother’s rich world for his, and the same confining rules that would require a lifetime on Formula M to navigate?

My heart hurts, and I try to focus on anything other than the conversation slowly chipping away at whatever hope I had left.

There must be something we have in common, like maybe the love of animals? “Tell me about your snakes.”

“My snakes?” he repeats as if he’s forgotten they live on his head. Or are they just a part of him? Would I be equally confused if he said ‘so, tell me about your hair?’

Or did I just offend him? I probably did. I should just disappear and stop trying to talk to people altogether.

Instead, Formula M forces me to stare at my bored reflection in his sunglasses until he reaches up, as if to pet the snakes, and quickly jerks his hand back. “Look, you’ve got a customer.”

An athletic-looking man with purple hair steps into the cafe. “I thought that was you, Phil.” He grins. “What’s up.”

“That’s not Phil. That’s Gorg.” The words leave my lips a split second before I realize I’ve been duped. Gorg—I mean, Phil—has been lying to me this whole time.

My insides cringe. My mate’s a liar named Phil. Minnie and Phil. Mill? Phinnie? Does it really matter when he’s a big, fat liar?

Grape Head snorts. “Gorg? Are you trying out bad nicknames? And since when do you drink espresso?”

Phil or Gorg or whoever he is takes a page out of my book and shrugs.

“What’s gotten into you, man?” Grape Head examines him carefully. “And what’s wrong with Marie?”

Shit, he has a girlfriend named Marie?

Or maybe not, since Phil-Gorg frowns, “Who’s Marie?”

Or maybe he’s just trying to cover up the fact that he’s a big, fat liar who gave me a fake name and has been hitting on me despite already having a girl.

“Really?” Grape Head snorts. “What kind of gorgon forgets his snake?”

Marie’s his *snake*?

Phil-Gorg grabs his cane and jumps to his feet. “I’m late!” he shouts and races out the door.

“Who are you? The White Rabbit?” Grape Head shouts after him. “Wait up!”

Phil-Gorg races outside with Grape Head close on his heels. I try to run after them, but Formula M isn’t having any.

By the time I finally reach the door and step outside, both men are gone.

Chapter 10



DAMIEN

I race down the street, the dude with purple hair gaining fast.

Who the chameleon is this Phil? And more importantly, why is Purple Popsicle chasing after him? Emphasis on *him*, since I'm definitely not, and never will be, Phil. I just saw the dude and shifted into an almost-perfect copy.

"Phil, wait. Talk to me!" Purple Popsicle is relentless.

I should have shifted into someone more inconspicuous. But it's not my fault I saw a gorgon and figured he's Minnie's type... a total snake.

I'd laugh at my own joke if I wasn't being chased down Main Street like a common criminal.

I try to speed up, but Phil's cane keeps getting in the way and his body's annoying. He's fit, but there are snakes hanging off his head, bouncing around, ready to bite. *Fucking gorgon.*

I turn another corner and shift into the yeti heading up the steps to the public library. Hopefully Purple Popsicle won't realize there are two identical yetis, and one doesn't belong.

I lounge with my back against the wall, hairy arms crossed in front of my chest. I know I should have picked someone more... human... but I'm so used to shifting into unique-looking supes it's my go-to.

I examine my large fingers as Purple Popsicle turns the corner and races past. *Loser!*

He doesn't notice anything is amiss. If anything, he just runs faster.

I grin and search for a new body to shift into.

I spent all fucking morning with Minnie as Phil, and what do I have to show for it? Absolutely nothing. All I really learned is that she changed her name, she works as a barista, and she's still a witch with a capital B.

But I won't make the same mistake twice. I need a body that won't stand out, and a woman this time—someone she could gossip with the way she had with Amber. *Why the chameleon didn't I think of that the first time around?*

A woman Minnie's age steps out of the library. She's casually dressed, her brown hair's up in a bun, and if I saw her at a concert, I wouldn't look twice.

Perfect.

I shift into her, down to the black sneakers, gray dress pants, and purple sweater. She looks like the shy type, and I hope to

hell no one at the cafe knows her.

I head back to the cafe where Minerva Montgomery—no, wait, Minnie Alexander—is waiting. What kind of last name is Alexander, anyway? Probably some rich guy she’s sunk her claws into.

Well, too bad, Alexander. Should have put a ring on it. She’s mine now.

I have no fucking clue where that thought comes from, but I shake it off. I don’t want her like that. I just need her to honor our deal. And to do that, I need to learn what makes Minnie tick.

And what I can offer that she won’t turn down.

I step back into Jewels Cafe, and Minnie looks up from behind the counter. She pastes on a fake-as-hell smile that’s supposed to pass for Friendly Barista, but is actually a whole lot closer to evil doll.

If I owned this place, I’d fire her on the spot. Then again, if I did that, there’s no way in hell she’d agree to marry me.

“Hey, *Violet*,” Minnie says. It takes me a second to realize she’s talking to me. Shit. How the hell does she know Mousy Cardigan Girl?

“Stupid small town.”

“That’s what I always say,” Minnie smiles not-at-all-sweetly and examines her nails like they’re the most fascinating thing in the world. And having done the yeti-check myself, I know

that they most certainly are not. She's no hairy beast, and those nails? In comparison, they're boring as fuck.

“What do you always say?” I demand. Aside from ‘whatever,’ which has been a staple of her vocabulary all morning. Coupled with all the yawns, eye-rolls, and nail-checks, I'd have to say her mother did a stellar job of brainwashing her.

What the hell happened to the girl I used to know?

I feel like punching something... or someone. Not Minnie. I wouldn't beat up a girl, not even if I've shifted into one. But I wouldn't mind taking my anger out on a punching bag. Or a tree.

“Silver Springs is lame,” Minnie says. “But I didn't think you, of all people, would agree with me, *Violet*.”

What the hell does that mean?

She clearly knows Violet well. Would she spill all her secrets to her? Maybe even tell her what I want to know? The one thing Minnie would be willing to sell herself for?

I try for a friendly smile. And pull it off much better than Evil-Doll-Minnie, if I say so myself. “Why don't you just go somewhere else?”

Minnie yawns. “Where should I go?”

“You tell me.”

She doesn't get a chance to reply, because footsteps echo down the stairs, and a man steps into the cafe. I recognize him

from earlier. He's the guy who was carrying the gift wrapped box. Chase.

"Oh, hey, Violet," he greets me. "Amber's taking a nap."

Like I give a fuck... but I guess this Violet would. Good thing I was listening in on Minnie's conversation and heard that she's having more than one. "She needs all the sleep she can get before the babies come."

Chase nods. "Can we get you something to drink?"

I shake my head. "I forgot my wallet." I didn't, but if I take out my wallet, they might realize I'm not Violet.

Chase snorts. "Since when do you pay for your drinks?"

Minnie taps her nails on the counter, like this entire situation is annoying and I should either order something or leave.

"I have to go. I... forgot my phone!"

"Wait," Minnie says. She doesn't really sound like she cares if I do, but being the fool that I am, I stop.

I could never say no to Minnie, and even now, after she's turned into this stranger, I still can't.

"Let me make you a drink," she says.

Chase nods. "Amber would never forgive us if we let her sister leave when she's clearly upset."

Her sister? Fuck me.

I race out the door without looking back. I'm not used to running with fucking balloons slapping my chest with every step. How do women live like this?

At least it's not snakes.

Anything is better than snakes.

Once I'm out of sight of the cafe, and practically on the other side of town, I finally stop to catch my breath. Violet is definitely not winning any marathons.

And I'm not winning Minerva Montgomery. Or Minnie Alexander. Or whoever the chameleon she is. Not like this.

But I'll find a way. And when I do, she's walking down the aisle with me, even if I have to drag her kicking and screaming.

Chapter 11



MINNIE

I don't know why I even bother following not-Violet outside. Just like earlier when they'd shifted into Phil, my maybe-mate is long gone.

The fiery pink magic has dissipated, which means that wherever my mate's gone, it's far.

I share a look with a pigeon sitting on the ledge above Jewels Cafe. "He probably wasn't my fated mate, anyway."

The pigeon coos in agreement.

"But what if he was?" I add.

The pigeon doesn't even dignify that with a response.

Does it really matter? My mate is gone. And unless they plan on shifting into someone else for attempt number three, I'll never see them again. Unless...

I glance up at the pigeon and focus on my words. Formula M squashes any desire to flap my arms like wings, and I'm not

even sure the bird understands me when I say, “Can you follow the woman who raced out of the cafe? I need to know who she really is.”

The pigeon takes off after not-Violet, so I guess that’s a yes. Or the bird didn’t hear me and I’ll never see my maybe-mate again. Knowing my luck, it’s definitely the latter.

I head back inside. Chase is behind the counter. “I called Nole, and he says Violet was fine when she went out for lunch. He’s going to check on her.”

Nole is Violet’s bear shifter mate and Wes’s brother. He’s at the cafe a lot, and he and Chase are constantly talking about books, so I’m not surprised he’d text him. I am surprised he hasn’t figured out it wasn’t really Violet.

“That was a chameleon shifter.”

Chase’s jaw drops. “An impostor?”

I shrug.

“Do you think she was scoping out the place?” Chase asks. “I bet she’s a burglar. Or a spy.”

He zones out, like all great authors do, while his mind races through various plots. At least that’s what I assume, since he gets that far-away look pretty often, and then his eyes glaze over.

But, for all I know, he’s picturing all the different ways he’s fucked Amber. Which is a mental image I want gone. Stat.

Chase refocuses on me, but Formula M keeps the blush off my cheeks and a bored look on my face. I start to join him behind the counter but his words stop me. “We couldn’t get the collar off Tiptoe.”

My heart sinks. I knew it was too easy. “Did Julian try to cut it off?”

My voice gets all dreamy when I say his name, and every part of me cringes.

Chase runs a hand through his hair. “We tried. It didn’t work. Thing is…”

He hesitates, but I have a feeling I know where he’s going with this. “Julian cast some sort of spell on the collar, didn’t he?”

I intend to sound annoyed. I sound all dreamy, like Julian’s wonky magic is the most glorious thing I’ve ever encountered—instead of an annoying inconvenience my mouse is paying for. Not that I can blame Julian. Of the two of us, I’m the one with the most inconvenient magic, considering he has to drag me on his romantic babymoon, and I just have a mouse with a collar.

“Don’t worry, we’ll figure it out.” Chase lowers his voice. “Don’t tell Amber, but the reason we got Latte is because she’s been so worried about being a parent. We thought if we all took care of a puppy together, it would help with her self-confidence.”

Which sounds totally absurd to me. I cherish Tiptoe and Snow like they’re my kids. But caring for them and raising Natty are

entirely different things. No diaper changes or midnight feedings or round the clock attention. Not to mention all the costs. Doctor's visits, diapers, wipes, and formula when he was young, toys, new clothes and shoes, the occasional ruined library book, Summer Spritz potion when he won't wear a sweater...

I'm stressed just thinking about it all, but end up rolling my eyes at Chase. "So Julian cast a spell on the collar?"

Chase nods. "We'll figure out how to get it off Tiptoe."

I'm not holding my breath, but I don't tell him so.

Now, not only do I have to come up with money for cruise tickets—just so I can trail around after a lovey-dovey Amber and her men—I need to figure out how to get the collar off Tiptoe.

Which gives me an idea. "Amber told me you guys are going on a cruise." When Chase nods, I plunge ahead. "I've been on a couple of those before." And by a couple, I mean several dozen, because that happened to be one of Maude Montgomery's favorite pastimes. Especially since the on-board child care meant she didn't have to be watching me. "They're not all they're cracked up to be, Chase. Trust me."

I don't sound very convincing, but Formula M lets me plunge on.

"Cruise ships are crowded. Like floating malls on Black Friday. There's no peace or quiet, and with Amber being pregnant..." I trail off, waiting for Chase to tell me they'll

think of something else. He doesn't. "The entertainment is overpriced and mediocre. And the ocean view gets old after a few days, and then, it's just water, water, and more water." Plus I was sea-sick and puking my guts out, but Formula M doesn't let me admit it.

I imagine being glued to the toilet barfing while Amber and her mates make googly eyes at each other. Then, I picture myself purchasing the tickets, only to have my credit cards declined.

I plunge on. "Not to mention the food. There's a lot of it, sure, but that doesn't mean it's any good. And you don't want to take any risks with Amber being pregnant."

Chase's face falls. "Amber's really looking forward to it. It's all she can talk about."

I shrug, and my words don't carry any of the guilt I feel. "I just wanted to give you the heads up. But who knows, maybe your experience will be different."

Chase perks up. "And it is a *supernatural* cruise line. The first of its kind. They mentioned an on-board forest for shifters, and magical medical care. I bet we won't have anything to worry about."

Except the cost, which will probably be quadrupled to pay for a freaking forest.

Chase starts to list all the exciting things the cruise line offers, but I can't seem to pay attention. Especially since there's no

way I'll be able to pay for the tickets, so there's no way I'm going.

But just because I couldn't convince Chase doesn't mean I still can't try with Wes. He's been in protective bear mode since Amber conceived, and if anyone's going to freak out and cancel the cruise, it's him.

I look extra bored for the rest of my shift, then grab Natty's wagon from the back room and go upstairs. I help myself to some of Wes's cooking while Julian—thankfully—makes himself scarce, play with Latte—who's got even more energy than a three-year-old—and spend ten minutes convincing Natty to use the toilet. The boy insists he doesn't need to go, but he really does, and after he goes, it takes another ten minutes to get him to put on his shoes. Three-year-olds, am I right?

Luckily, Formula M gives me endless patience, and I'm not even the slightest bit annoyed by the time we finally make it to the door.

Amber's still asleep and Julian's nowhere to be found, so Wes walks us out.

"I had so much fun with you today, Natty." He pulls him in for a bear hug. "You'll be back again tomorrow, won't you?"

Natty nods emphatically. "I want to play with puppy!"

"I know Latte will love that," Wes says, getting to his feet. He turns to me. "Don't worry about Tiptoe. We'll have the collar off in no time."

He sounds so sure of himself, but I'm not holding my breath.

I glance at the mouse, who's curled up on his favorite pillow.

"*Good,*" the mouse says.

I can't tell if he's good where he is, or if getting the collar off will be a good thing, but I know he'll be safe here.

"Take good care of him," I tell Wes.

We say our goodbyes and I lead Natty downstairs and help him climb into his wagon, which has everything he'll need for the trek across town to Silver Springs Penitentiary.

Chapter 12



MINNIE

Natty plays in the wagon while I tug it across town. Normally, I sprinkle a bunch of Cloud 9 ½ potion on my feet around this time, but I need to ration it if I'm going to save up enough money to go on a cruise.

But we're literally two minutes away from Jewels Cafe before I can't take it anymore. I'm already in excruciating pain and I don't own sneakers I can change into. I have no choice. I need to be frugal, not foolish bordering on insane.

The rage I feel at my heels isn't a good look, but Formula M's calming effects don't do anything until the potion's kicks in. Then, it's Cloud 9 and a hundred fluffy pillows, happiness, and sunshine.

I keep glancing up at the sky, hoping the pigeon I sent after not-Violet will swoop down with answers, but no luck.

The streets empty once we leave Main Street, and I start to sing. As long as no one can hear me, Formula M doesn't seem

to mind, so we sing all the songs Natty loves. Wheels on the Bus, Old MacDonald Had a Farm, and the supernatural favorite, Witch, Witch, Scratch that Itch.

Natty giggles as he pretends to scratch his head, his knees, and his belly, and then I lean in and tickle him, letting his laughter warm my soul.

When we're just out of sight of the prison, I think about poor Tiptoe. He's not allowed to come with us, so we always let him out here so he can visit some mouse friends at a nearby warehouse.

The thought of him at Jewels Cafe, with that collar still locked around his neck, makes my heart feel heavy. I can't stop thinking about how panicked the little guy looked when the collar was chasing him. And I can't help thinking that I failed him because it was my job to protect him.

"I miss Tiptoe," Natty whines as we pass the mouse's usual drop-off slash pick-up spot.

"Me too, buddy. But we'll see him soon."

Luckily, the prison comes into view, and Natty lets out an excited squeal and claps. "We're here. We're here!"

I'm not sure how I feel about the kid getting this excited about prison at three. On the one hand, it does not bode well for his future. On the other, I can't blame him. I'm excited, too.

For a split second, I picture him all grown up, standing behind bars in an orange jumpsuit. I start to freak out, but Formula M pumps some calming vibes into me, helping me relax.

Natty isn't going to lead a life of crime. I'm going to do everything within my power to make sure of it, and so will his dad. I hope.

As we approach the front gate, one of the guards, Vigga, nudges the other guard, who's a foot taller than her. She barely reaches my shoulder, though, so he's probably average height. "Told you they'd be here," she says. "Wednesdays 'round three and Fridays 'round eleven, like clockwork. Never miss a day."

It's true. I've never skipped a visit since we first started coming two years ago. Natty wasn't even one yet, and would be asleep in his stroller by the time we reached the gate.

Now he's wide awake, and he bounces in the wagon excitedly and waves. "Hi, Vigga." Then he turns to me. "Minnie, Vigga likes fries!"

She's a regular at Yes Now, Bob, the diner where I work part time and always bring Natty.

She grins. "I love fries. How about you, Natty, Natty?"

He rubs his tummy. "Yum!" Then he turns to the other guard. "Who are you?"

"That's Marty with a D," Vigga says.

"Darty," Marty with a D snaps back.

Vigga nods. "Right. Could you buzz Minnie and Natty in?"

He shakes his head. "We need to search them first."

Vigga rolls her eyes. "I know these two. They're fine."

But Marty with a D isn't having any. "We need to follow protocol."

Vigga shrugs. "You're wasting your time, but suit yourself, Marty with a D."

"Darty!" he growls.

"I seem to recall when you walked in this morning, first thing you said was 'Hi, I'm Marty with a D.'"

"Marty with a D is Darty," he snaps, marching over to Natty and me to start his search.

Vigga shakes her head. "Don't mind him. It's his first day."

"Step forward," Marty with a D orders.

Since we're not carrying any contraband, I do as he says. And the fact that it's his first day gives me an idea.

I turn to Vigga. "Are you hiring?"

She shakes her head. "Marty with a D filled the last vacancy. But don't worry, he won't last long."

"I can hear you," he snaps as he rearranges the contents of Natty's wagon. "And I'm not going anywhere."

"Check back in a few weeks," Vigga suggests.

Which doesn't help, since by then it will be too late.

Marty with a D finishes checking us and I wheel Natty toward the gate. When we're about to step through it, all the spells affecting me dissipate.

Silver Springs Penitentiary is warded, which means no magic works once we pass through the gate. My feet ache without Cloud 9 ½, and the cold, biting wind slaps my bare limbs, reminding me that a short-sleeve skimpy dress is a poor choice without Summer Spritz. Natty's in a t-shirt, but there's a nice warm blanket in the wagon, and I wrap it around his shoulders.

The effects of the curse and Formula M vanish, too, and I can no longer sense where Julian is. Nor do I care. For the duration of my visit, I'm blissfully free.

I can also say or do whatever I want. I shoot Natty a huge grin and bounce up and down on my toes since I feel so free. "Ready to see Daddy?"

"Excited!" Natty cries. As in he literally shouts the word aloud as he claps and bounces up and down in the wagon.

It's so adorable I can't help but giggle. I love giggling!

But I can't help being aware of the downsides. If anything goes wrong, Formula M's calming effects won't kick in. And if I can't think of the right thing to say, I'll just look like a fool.

Plus, my nails are just plain ugly without the longer, perfectly polished Enchanted Nails. And without Spelled Smooth, my perfectly straight red hair frizzes around my head.

Plus, when a blue jay flies overhead and calls out to me, I don't understand what it's trying to say. It just sounds like a bird. And despite my inability to access my powers, the prison

still feels like the one place in the world where I can be myself.

Potion-Free Minnie.

Or maybe just *free*.

It's not something I like to admit, even to myself, and it's made me wonder what it reveals about my character.

"Why did we stop?" Natty asks.

"Sorry," I tell him and resume walking.

Natty claps. "I want to see Daddy."

"Me too, bud. Me too." My cheeks flush and my heart does a little somersault.

I love visiting Natty's dad.

Zachariah Riehl may be a criminal, but he's also the kindest man I've ever met. He's a loving dad to Natty and, over the last two years, he's also become a good friend.

I may even have a bit of a crush on the man, though that's definitely one-sided. The only reason Zachariah likes me is because I take care of his son and bring him for regular visits. But I know for a fact that my feelings for him are one hundred percent real, since I can feel them inside the warded prison. And I also know that Formula M and the curse are actively preventing me from being interested in anyone but Julian, since my feelings for Zachariah are always dampened the minute I step outside the boundary of the ward.

I pause and take a moment to think about Gorg. Or whoever the hell was hiding behind the gorgon exterior. Is he really my fated mate? Or was the magic connecting us fake? Yet another trick of Maude Montgomery's, meant to somehow control my life?

All I feel when I think about him is annoyance. But maybe I just need time to get to know him. The real him. Or maybe it's all a trap.

But that's a problem for another time. There's a kind, handsome prisoner waiting for us, and a little boy who's excited to see his daddy.

Chapter 13



MINNIE

My heart races as we step inside the prison, but it's excitement, not fear. I'm probably more comfortable and at home in Silver Springs Penitentiary than anywhere else in town, and I can't wait to see Zachariah.

Natty knows the drill. He follows me towards the largest locker in the Visitation Lobby, and waves to the burly bearded guard stationed next to it. I've never gotten his name since he's always stationed inside and my social skills without Formula M are next to nonexistent.

"You know the drill," the Burly Beard tells us.

We make quick work on unloading the wagon. Natty helps me place his blanket, picture books and toys in the locker, followed by the folded wagon, which barely fits. Once they're safely secured inside, the guard escorts us toward the body scanner.

Natty empties his pockets without being asked. He takes out two rocks, one leaf, and what I think might be a piece of quiche from breakfast and places them into the tray.

“You can pick these up on your way out.” Burly Beard tries and fails to hide a smile.

Natty nods sagely and walks through the body scanner. He holds up his arms for the too-tall, too-skinny guard to search him, and my worries about his future return.

Not only does he know his way around a prison, but some of his favorite people are locked behind bars. Not to mention he has me for a guardian—a freak who can’t afford a place to live and who can’t survive without spells. I’m definitely not doing him any favors.

“Next!” Burly Guard says, prompting me to move. I don’t have pockets, so I head directly through the body scanner and let Too Tall Too Skinny search my person and direct me toward a guarded set of double doors.

The visitation room on the other side reminds me of a large cafeteria. There are tables set out, and prisoners are seated and waiting.

I spot Zachariah right away. He is hands-down the most handsome man in the prison, much more so now than on the day we met. The first time I saw him was actually the day I inadvertently helped catch and arrest him, but being the amazing man that he is, he’s never held it against me.

Back then, he'd been scrawny with sunken eyes, the malnourished, sleep-deprived look a result of taking care of Natty on a non-existent budget. But his time in prison has done him good.

He's put on some much-needed weight, and a lot of muscle. He looks relaxed and at peace, and a smile that wasn't there in the early days lights up his face the moment he sees us.

When our eyes meet, all my worries float away. The man may be in prison, but he's one of the kindest, most wonderful people I know. Yes, he made a mistake, but he's paying for it now. And in two years, he'll be out of prison and turning over a new leaf. If he can do it, why can't I?

"Daddy," Natty squeals.

"Natty!" Zachariah lights up, and it's like the sun comes up over the prison visitation room. That smile does something funny to my insides, and a lump forms in my throat.

We cross the visitation room, and Natty throws himself into his dad's arms for a tight hug.

Alyssa, another prisoner, nods at us from the adjacent table. Even though the chairs are bolted to the floor, hers never is. She leans back in her chair with one booted foot on the edge of the table. Her long blonde hair is tied back in a ponytail and her eyebrows look freshly plucked even though I'm sure you're not allowed tweezers in prison.

"Hey, Natty," she says. "How's your swim lessons? You turn into a fish yet?"

“Hi, Lyssa.” Natty grins from ear to ear.

She’s been at the table next to Zachariah’s every time we’ve visited. I’ve never seen Alyssa have a single visitor, and I’ve wondered who she might be waiting for, but I never worked up the courage to ask.

Natty holds his breath for several seconds and lets it out. “I’m a fishy! Glub. Glub.”

Alyssa pouts her lips like a fish, and Natty giggles.

I’m always surprised when she’s playful with the kid because she seems like the sort of person you wouldn’t want to mess with. There’s just something about the way she holds her head high and lounges back in the chair that tells me I wouldn’t want to get on her bad side—even here, in the warded prison, with guards lining the walls.

“Hey, Alyssa. I like the jumpsuit,” I say before she can criticize my outfit. I don’t know why I start this game each time, especially since Alyssa always wins.

She looks me over slowly, as though judging every inch of my clothes, shoes, and lipstick. “Was that all you could find in the discount bin?”

“I’ll have you know this is designer,” I say, though the words taste funny in my mouth. Without Formula M forcing me to say them, they sound more like something Maude Montgomery would say.

“I didn’t know dollar store clothes had designers. Good for you for finding something in your budget.”

How is someone in a literal orange jumpsuit making fun of my clothes?! And winning?!

I try to think of a good comeback, but today, I've got nothing. Without Formula M, I'm on my own, and I'm too worn out after the morning's events. I still have to come up with enough money to go on a cruise, figure out how to get Tiptoe's collar off since I don't trust Julian to figure it out, and track down a chameleon shifter who may or may not be my fated mate.

Zachariah lets go of Natty and finally turns to me. I instantly forget all about my problems, and about Alyssa.

I'm self-conscious about my appearance without Formula M, but the way he looks me over makes me forget what I'm wearing, and where we are. Literally everything floats away, and it's just the two of us, alone, in our own bubble.

"Minnie. It's so good to see you!" Zachariah grins and envelops me in his arms.

He hugged me the first time I brought Natty for a visit as a baby, and it's been our thing ever since.

Zachariah has really filled out during that time, too. I could practically feel his ribs, but now his body is solid, and his chest hard beneath my cheek. He makes me feel warm and safe, like I belong... even though I don't. I don't belong here in prison any more than I belong on the outside.

I don't think there'll ever be a place that's right for me.

Chapter 14



MINNIE

A prison guard clears his throat loudly, the sound echoing through the visitation room. I'm not sure if the warning is meant for Zachariah and me, or for someone else, but we pull apart anyway.

My cheeks flood with heat. Anyone looking at us probably thinks we're in a relationship, but I'm no one to Zachariah. Just the girl who offered to raise his child and fell in love with them both, knowing full well that one day, he'd take his little boy and leave me behind.

Natty and I settle across the table from him, and Zachariah breaks into another one of his signature wide grins. "It's so good to see you."

"You too," I say, my cheeks still pink.

He turns to Natty. "You look so much bigger than last time I saw you."

“I’m so big.” Natty stretches his hands up in the air and I have to grab his waist so he doesn’t tumble out of his large metal chair. It’s bolted down far enough away from the table that there’s a gap large enough for Natty to fall through. And since the prisoners have to sit at the other end of the table, and Zachariah isn’t allowed to reach across it, the role of Natty Rescuer falls to me. But I’m used to it, and catching the boy is now pretty instinctive.

“Want to sit on my lap?” I ask Natty.

“No. I want to sit here.” Natty points at his own chair.

“Confident kid,” Alyssa says from her spot at the next table. “I like him.”

Zachariah nods. “You’re doing such a great job with him, Minnie.”

His words send another wave of heat traveling up my neck and flooding my cheeks. I swear I spend a good chunk of my visits with Natty’s dad blushing, and without Formula M’s usual effects, I know I always turn as bright as a tomato. Yet another reason he’ll never be attracted to me.

“Natty is an amazing kid,” I say. “I can’t take any of the credit.”

“Of course you can,” Zachariah says, but he’s wrong.

“Thanks.” I do my best to make my smile seem real. But deep down, I know that all of Natty’s good traits he got despite having me as a guardian, not because of it. Because even if I do my best, I’ll never be confident or well-adjusted or smart or

any of the things I want Natty to be. The best I can do is not completely screw him up.

“What’s with the glum face?” Alyssa asks me.

She always calls it like it is, and I wish I had half the confidence that she does.

Zachariah reaches across the metal table, but stops himself before a guard can rush over and do it for him. “I mean it, Minnie. I really appreciate everything you’ve done for us.” He smiles softly at me, his brown eyes filled with warmth. “I’ll never be able to repay you.”

“Having Natty in my life is payment enough.” I plant a kiss on the boy’s soft hair, inhale the smell of the conditioner we use at the community pool, and try not to think about the fact that my days as Natty’s guardian are numbered.

Two years. That’s all the time we have left.

Then, Zachariah will be free, and he’ll take Natty and move away. There’s no way he’ll want to stay in Silver Springs and see the people he robbed, day in and day out. Even if he has worked hard behind bars and returned every penny he stole.

He leans forward in his seat, huge biceps bulging.

“Do you spend all day doing pushups?” I ask, my eyes glued to them. Then I realize what I just said and turn beet red.

Alyssa snorts. “She’s into you, Ri, like a...” Her gaze slides to Natty, and she closes her mouth against whatever snarky and probably X-rated thing she was going to say that isn’t safe for a child’s ears.

I open my mouth and close it. At times like this, I wish the prison wasn't warded and Formula M had my back.

"Like a what?" Natty says innocently.

"Um..." Alyssa for once looks like a cornered animal, slightly panicked. "Like a fish is into water?"

"Glub glub," Natty says, doing his fish impression.

Zachariah grins at me, but he looks slightly embarrassed.

"There isn't much else to do around here. And I need to be strong so I can lift my little big boy way up high." For a split second, his face falls, but then he smiles wide. "Tell me about everything you've been up to since I last saw you."

"We went swimming on Monday," I say.

"I'm a starfish," Natty shouts.

He climbs out of his seat, and I remind him to sit down. "He can float on his back for a few seconds." I describe how the swim teacher had the kids lie on the water on their backs with their arms and legs out so they'd float. "Natty did such an amazing job. He's a natural."

"That's a good skill to have," Alyssa says. "You never know when you need to heist someone who lives on an island. You'd be surprised how many rich bast... bass live on islands."

Luckily, Natty doesn't seem to be paying attention to Alyssa's lecture on how to land in prison. He's busy pretending his fingers are swimming back and forth across the table.

"And Natty learned to j-u-m-p," I spell it out, "on one f-o-o-t."

“Jump on one foot, huh?” Alyssa asks. “That’s a good start, but what you really need to know how to do is how to jump between buildings. But one-foot jumping might help you with balance until you’re tall enough to leap between roofs.”

“Don’t listen to anything she says, Natty,” I tell him, but he scrambles off his chair. He starts jumping on one foot, and a guard crosses the room toward us.

“You can’t do that,” he snaps. “Get the boy to sit back down, or you’ll have to leave.”

Natty bursts into tears.

I pick him up and settle him on my lap. I try to do my best to comfort him, and Zachariah looks like he’s trying to decide if he should pummel the guard or burst into tears himself. It must be hard, having to sit across the table from his crying son and not be able to do anything.

“He’ll be okay,” I tell him.

Zachariah purses his lips and nods.

“Sorry,” Alyssa adds. “I should have realized with the whole spelling thing.”

“It’s not your fault,” I tell her.

“That was some fantastic jumping, Natty,” Zachariah adds, trying to distract him. “Hey, why don’t you tell me more about swimming. Did you go underwater?”

Natty perks up again, but I can’t help glancing over at the guards. They’re a constant reminder that the best part of my

life—and Natty's—are brief monitored visits with a man who lives behind bars. It's just not normal.

Then again, when have I ever been normal? No matter how many potions I take, I'll always be messed up, and so will my life.

Chapter 15



ZACHARIAH

My favorite two hours every week are spent right here, in the Silver Springs Penitentiary visitation room with my little family.

I lean forward in my seat—well, as forward as the guards will allow—and try to savor every minute.

A part of me knows that we're not really family. The woman who birthed Natty abandoned him before he could talk, and said she never wanted to see either of us ever again. And the gorgeous redhead sitting across from me, smiling lovingly at my son, isn't his biological mother. She also isn't my wife, my fiancée, or even my girlfriend. Hell, before the day I was arrested, she wasn't even my friend.

How can I expect her to see visiting me as anything but charity when I've been in orange from the day we met?

But I can't think about any of that. Not right now, when I get to spend time with my two favorite people in the whole wide

world.

Minnie's practically glowing as she talks about swim class. She's so bright and happy and full of life. I'm so lucky I get to spend time with her every week—and I don't fucking tell her enough.

“And then,” she says, eyes bright, “Natty jumped into the water all by himself. Didn't you, Natty?”

My boy nods proudly, but his words are drowned out by a roar a few tables over. Birch, a bear shifter who is in prison on drug charges, is glaring at his brother. “Pancakes are less structurally stable,” he snaps.

“Well, waffles are co-dependent,” his brother fires back. “Need a fucking waffle iron, like a pan isn't good enough.”

Alyssa whips her chair around to face them—a chair that was definitely bolted to the floor when we arrived. “Anything worthwhile requires accessories. You telling me you don't wear earrings or a proper belt?”

Birch's brother glances down at his crotch, and they launch into a new debate. Which is fine by me, since it gives our little table some privacy. Alyssa may be a good friend, but this is the only alone time Minnie, Natty and I get.

“What do you guys say, waffles or pancakes?”

“Waffles,” Natty says immediately. “With ice cream!”

Minnie worries her lower lip, and I wonder if I'll ever get the chance to pull her into my arms and kiss the living daylights out of her. As if she'd want me to. The first time she saw me, I

was in handcuffs, for fuck's sake. And I know she loves my son, but there's no reason those feelings extend to me.

And even if they do, I've still got two years left in this place. Plenty of time for her to meet another man, fall in love, and get married. Not a thing I could do about it if she did.

"Actually..." Minnie hesitates. "I like them equally. I think..."

"You think?" I ask.

Her cheeks flush in that adorable way I love, and she shrugs.

I grin. "Good, because I'm a pancake guy myself. With a side of bacon, sausage, and eggs. Soon as I'm out of here, I'm buying you two breakfast."

Natty squeals. "Can we go now? Please, Daddy?"

His words make my heart soar and shatter all at once. "I wish I could, bud. I really, really, do."

Minnie ruffles his hair. "You have to wait until you're a little older, Natty."

The little boy pouts. "Why?"

"Because your daddy can't right now, but he can when you're this old. She holds up five fingers.

Natty taps her thumb. "One." Index finger. "Two." Middle finger. "Six." Ring finger. "Five." Pinkie. "Ten!"

Minnie ruffles his hair and grins. "Something like that."

"When you're five," I whisper past the lump caught in my throat.

By the time I'm free, Natty will have formed long-term memories of his dad in an orange jumpsuit... and I'll have missed half of my boy's childhood.

"One day, I'll make you breakfast and take you swimming, Natty Spaghetti. At a real beach, by the ocean."

Natty bounces in his seat. I worry about him falling out, but I know Minnie's got it. "Can we see baby shark?" he asks.

I grin. "Definitely."

Natty grins back. "Daddy, we're squatting."

I frown.

Minnie grabs Natty's shoulder, and I realize why when she says, "Natty saw me working out this morning." Last thing we need is for him to demonstrate.

My girl's cheeks flush and she doesn't meet my eye, and I wonder what she has to be embarrassed about. Maybe the comment she made earlier, when she was totally checking me out.

I grin. "Were you now?" I drawl, picturing her delicious body in tight yoga pants. Fuck, I wish I wasn't stuck behind prison walls so I could make her mine.

She nods. "I showed Natty how to do squats, but he fell on his ___"

"On my butt!" Natty bursts out laughing.

"He didn't get hurt," Minnie says. "And—"

"Time's up!" a guard booms.

My heart sinks as we all get to our feet. I pull Natty in my arms for a tight hug and try to memorize everything about my little boy, down to the smell of his shampoo. That way, I can replay this moment, over and over again, when I'm missing him so much it hurts.

And then, I'm pulling Minnie in my arms and trying my best not to spring a boner in the middle of the visitation room.

"Thanks so much for coming," I tell her softly. "And for bringing Natty. Just knowing that my little boy is with you, and that he's happy, and safe, and taken care of... that's all I could ever ask for."

"Of course," she says quickly, like it's no big deal that she's raising my son, when that should be my job. Like she thinks anyone would have taken in a stranger's baby and brought him to visit his dad in prison twice a week for two fucking years.

"I mean it, Minnie. I don't know what I'd do without you." I don't know what I'll do if you ever meet someone else. But I can't ask you to wait for me. I can't ask you to put your life on hold until I'm out. But I can spend every visit holding my breath, waiting to see if you or Natty will mention another man in your life. Praying that you're still single when I finally get out of prison, and that you'll let me be yours.

But I bottle up those feelings and shove them deep down as I watch Minnie carry Natty out of the room.

"You okay, Ri?" Alyssa asks.

I nod, even though I'm not, and she knows it. She's been locked up in this place almost as long as I have, and of everyone in here, she's my closest friend. And she's listened to me pine for Minnie enough times that she knows I've got it bad—and that I miss my son so much it hurts.

“Friday will be here before you know it,” Alyssa tells me. “They’ll be back with more tales of swimming and jumping.”

I nod again. I'm not sure if I could speak past the lump in my throat.

She pats my shoulder. “Come on, it's almost time for lunch. We're having pasta, and you know that's the only thing Paul in the cafeteria doesn't hate cooking.”

“Pasta,” I perk up a little.

“You heard your girlfriend.” Alyssa knows Minnie and I aren't together, but she can't seem to help teasing. “She was checking you out. Prison's been good to you. All that food and exercise is turning you from dad to daddy.”

I scowl. “Don't ever call me that again!”

Alyssa laughs at her own joke.

I groan. “I hate being trapped in here while they're out there. Two more fucking years. I don't know how I'm going to do it.”

She squeezes my shoulder. “I get it. But you're turning your life around; you're getting therapy, you're getting healthier, and you're working toward a degree and a better job. When

you get out, you'll be there for them in a way you couldn't have been before.”

And I vow to do just that. I will be there for Minnie and my boy no matter what. Even if that means watching her be with another man.

I just have to hope and pray that no one else enters her life in the years I've still got behind these walls.

Chapter 16



MINNIE

As I pull Natty's wagon back into town, I feel a renewed sense of resolve. Zachariah is relying on me to take care of his son, and the little boy *needs* me. He doesn't have anyone else.

Amber and her guys are expecting triplets. They can't take Natty in if this curse kills me. And it'll be another two years before his dad gets out of prison and is able to care for him.

Which means that it's up to me to figure this out.

"I need to find a job," I announce, as if putting those words out into the universe will somehow make one materialize right in front of me.

Natty looks up from the toy race car he's wheeling up and down the sides of the wagon. "Why?"

"Because grown-ups need jobs."

"Why?"

Ah, to be three years old, without the weight of the world on your shoulders. And it's not just the world—it's the magic, and all my other problems, too.

Formula M, the curse, and all the potions I use feel heavy now that I'm outside the freeing confines of the prison. And my problems pile on, swirling in my mind, over and over again.

Zachariah thinks I've got everything under control with Natty, when we're barely getting by.

Amber expects me to pay for cruise tickets there's no way I could ever afford.

Formula M sends a wave of calm through me. "A job will help me earn money," I tell Natty. "And I know just the place to start. The library."

I pull Natty's wagon towards Silver Springs Public Library, which the locals have affectionately nicknamed Spell. And the name fits, since there is a huge collection of spell books hidden in the basement. Spell books I may need to look through if Julian doesn't get the collar off Tiptoe by tonight.

As we approach the front doors, a pigeon swoops down from the sky and lands next to Natty's wagon.

"Birdie!" Natty cries.

My heart leaps, but Formula M keeps my expression neutral and my tone bored. "Have you found *him*?"

I don't feel the urge to flap my arms like wings, which means Formula M is dampening my powers, and I can't fully communicate with my winged friend.

I do catch one word when the bird speaks. “*Car.*”

“What kind of car? Where did it go?”

“*Drive,*” the pigeon says, which is completely unhelpful.

Natty squeals, startling the pigeon, which results in some frantic wing flapping that only seems to excite the boy further.

“What’s birdie saying?”

“Nothing useful,” I tell him, which is not the way to endear oneself to a bird offering to help.

Natty pouts. “I wanna talk to birdie!”

“Later,” I tell him. “Who did he shift into? What did he look like?”

“*He isn’t,*” the pigeon coos. I can’t quite interpret the next word, especially with Formula M making a conversation near impossible.

“What?”

The pigeon coos. I can’t be sure, but I think it translates to ‘wolf.’

“*Supernatural,*” the pigeon adds.

“Can you say that again?”

The pigeon coos and I try my best to focus. “*Not.*” “*Wolf.*”
“*Supernatural.*”

“Not a... werewolf?” I groan internally. “I already knew he wasn’t a werewolf. He’s a chameleon shifter. Can you tell me anything else?”

The pigeon flies away.

“Birds are so useless!” I tell Natty.

“*How dare you?*” a raven caws from a nearby branch.

“I didn’t mean you,” I tell the raven.

We head inside the library and find Violet the librarian—the real one, not my fated mate in disguise—behind the desk, scanning books into the computer. I know for a fact it’s her, since there’s no fiery pink magic connecting us. That and she’s acting very Violet—hard at work as always.

She could really use another assistant. Namely, me.

I can’t help feeling nervous—and bracing myself for rejection—which is how I end up sounding Formula M bored when I ask, “Does the library have any job openings?”

Violet shakes her head. “I keep trying to push for another part-timer, but no luck.”

I shrug like it doesn’t matter, even though my heart sinks. But there have to be other jobs out there, right?

Violet leans over the counter and peers down at Natty. “Why, hello there, Nate the Great. Are you returning some books today?”

“Yes!” He reaches inside the colorful Spell Library Children’s bag, which we keep in his wagon to safely store all his books, and pulls them out one by one. He balances on his tiptoes to hand them to Violet, nearly falling each time. “All done.”

Violet makes a show of examining the books and smiles. “Thank you for taking such good care of these, Natty.”

The boy beams.

She scans each one into her computer, and Natty yells ‘beep,’ the sound echoing through the library. I used to shush him when we first started coming here, but it turns out that real libraries are loud, unlike the magical pay-per-use library my mother used to drag me to when I was young. It was an old, stuffy building where the silence was so poignant you could hear a pin drop, and apparently the exception to the rule.

To quote Violet, “Real libraries are *alive*.”

And real librarians don’t glare at you and announce that ‘children should be seen and not heard.’

Violet helps Natty pick out some picture books, signs them out, and gives him some coloring sheets from the tray on her desk. I snap one to a clipboard I always keep handy, help Natty open his pencil case full of crayons, and pull his wagon back down the ramp to the sidewalk.

Time to find a job.

I don’t have many job requirements, but I also don’t have many skills, so I head for O’Malley’s.

It’s a bit of a walk, so Natty finishes coloring a parrot, moves on to the raven, and falls fast asleep by the time we get to the pub.

I tug his wagon inside—which isn’t an easy feat—and make a beeline for Charlie, who owns the place.

She glances up at me and quickly twirls in the opposite direction while carrying a giant tray of cheese fries oozing molten yellow goodness.

At first, I think she's intentionally avoiding me—not that I'd blame her, since there are some not-so-nice-but-well-deserved rumors about me circulating around town—but she sets the tray down on the bar and grabs a towel. Then she slides through the rowdy crowd that's busy watching videos of people making fools of themselves and heads toward me.

Don't get nervous, I remind myself. If I do, it'll trigger Formula M, and ruin any chance I have of getting this job. I *need* to make a good impression, but that's about as likely as negotiating peace between feuding forest creatures. Spoiler alert: I tried that once at the academy, and the squirrels ate my homework while the skunks left a 'fragrant FU' in my dorm room.

There's no chance in hell I'm getting this job!

Formula M sends a wave of calm coursing through me and I examine my nails.

"Hi, Charlie," I say politely. Or try to, anyway. Instead of friendly, I end up sounding like she's the last person I want to see, and I wish I was anywhere but here.

She pastes on a polite smile, glances down at her arm, and wipes off the bacon bits stuck to it. "Hello. Forgive the melting cheese in my hair. It's been one of those days. My hostess is at a retreat to realign her energy, whatever that means."

She glances down at Natty and immediately frowns at the sleeping boy. She even lets out a visible shiver, but I realize she's not looking at him, but at the coloring sheet on his lap.

“Not a fan of birds?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Not all birds. Just ravens. They're too smart for their own good.”

I want to tell her not all ravens are the same, and while some are definitely too smart for their own good, others are kind-hearted and perch on your windowsill for a late-night chat.

I open my mouth... and let out a yawn. Admitting I talk to birds is a no-no for Formula M.

Charlie pastes on the friendly smile again. “Table for two?”

I shake my head. “I'm actually here about a job.”

“A job? I recognize you from town. What kind of job are you looking for? I could text a few people that I know to see if they need any help. The funeral home or the retirement home might need someone.”

Instead of grimacing like I want, I let out a yawn. “Are you hiring?”

“Oh. “ Her eyebrows shoot up. “You want to work here?”

I shrug. “It's whatever.”

Great. That's my response? There's no way I'm getting hired now!

“Unfortunately, we're not hiring at the moment. We'll keep you in mind if a job opens up.” Charlie says, her tone implying

it is never, ever going to happen. Especially since she already admitted her hostess is away and she clearly needs the help.

What am I thinking, walking in here and asking for a job? I'm not qualified to work in a pub. I only lasted two weeks at the hotel bar, and my manager told me I should consider a different line of work.

But I really need this job, or I won't be able to afford the cruise, and then...

I realize I'm spiraling a split second before Formula M comes to my rescue. It calms me down and summons the words I need. "I have tons of server experience." I don't. "I have a bartender license." I really don't. "I'm great at multitasking, I'm a team player, and I can clear a table in under a minute. Plus, I don't mind having cheese in my hair." Which is an outright lie.

Even Charlie looks impressed. "Wow! If you can really do all that, I can tell my hostess to stay in Syracuse to realign what she wants. What's your availability?"

"Monday nights, Tuesday mornings, and Friday afternoons."

Charlie frowns. "Those are oddly specific hours. Why only those days?"

"I have a very busy social calendar." Which consists of two part-time jobs, the prison's visiting hours, and my ability to find a trustworthy babysitter for Natty. I should tell Charlie that, but Formula M keeps my lips zipped tighter than the pumpkin spice jar at Jewels Cafe.

Charlie rolls her eyes. “Of course you do. You’re welcome to drop off your resume. If there are any openings, I’ll give you a call.”

Which is polite speak for no way in hell, Minnie Alexander.

I want to cry, but yawn instead. “It’s your loss.”

As I turn to leave, I see Charlie move her hand quickly. I swear she tries to fling bacon bits at me.

I drag the wagon with the still-sleeping boy out of O’Malley’s. I don’t stop until I turn the corner, and then, I just stand there, completely at a loss.

How will I ever convince anyone in town to hire me? But if I don’t, how will I pay for the cruise? After two failed attempts to find work, I don’t really feel like any more rejection, but what other choice do I have? Hope that Peppermint’s friend can break a curse no one else could?

Chapter 17



MINNIE

Since the bakery doesn't have a working kitchen or any food apart from a few boxes of applesauce and granola bars, we always eat out. And since I'm on a budget, our food requirements are 'free' with a side of raw meat for Snow.

So when Zoe texts an SOS the following evening, the timing couldn't be more perfect. *Free dinner, here we come!*

Formula M stops me from worrying too much about her emergency, and I barely care that Tiptoe is still staying at Julian's while he tries to remove the pink collar.

I drop Natty off at Jewels Cafe. Luckily, Amber's always happy to watch him while I run 'home' to grab something, which is code for walking slowly around the corner, waiting for the invisibility spell to kick in, and popping into the bakery.

Amber's practically bouncing on her toes when she sees me. The moment Chase has Natty out of the wagon, she grabs my

arm and pulls me outside so we can talk privately.

“Pepp literally just texted,” she says, holding up her phone. “Her friend will be here tomorrow morning. Which means we can break the curse!”

My insides churn.

I still haven’t managed to find a job, despite two days of active searching. I’m so desperate, I may actually go apply at The Magical Rooster—and I’m sure Juniper will be dying to hire me once she finds out I’ve never used a sex toy, and probably never will. Hard to fly solo when any time I try to think of anything sexual, the curse forces me to picture Julian.

Just the thought alone makes me want to throw up. And the fact that I’m thinking about sex and Julian in the same sentence while his fated mate is literally standing in front of me only makes things worse.

No job it is.

Which also means that Peppermint’s friend is my best chance at solving all my cruise-money problems. And if this doesn’t work it’ll be just another painful disappointment in a string of painful disappointments. And I do mean that literally, since testing the curse hurts more than getting your heel caught in a crack in the sidewalk, having a wagon crash into you, and then falling face first onto the concrete.

Been there, done that, do not want to repeat it again.

I examine my nails. “Whatever.”

Amber isn't fazed by my lack of excitement. She grins and stops closer, lowering her voice so no one else in the cafe—including Natty—can overhear. "Pepp made me promise we won't tell anyone about null witches. Delphine doesn't want anyone to know she is one. That's the name by the way. D-E-L-P-H-I-N-E," Amber shows me her texts with Peppermint. "Do you think it's still pronounced Dell Fin or Dell Fine? Or maybe Dolphin with an E? What if I get it wrong and offend her?"

I yawn. "Who cares." Even though I care. At this point, Delphine is my only hope.

Amber worries her lip. "I guess I'll just let her introduce herself. Yup. That'll work."

I really hope it does. "I'll be back in a few, okay?"

Amber nods, and I walk off down the street. By the time I double back, fully invisible, she's back inside. I walk up to the cafe to check in on Natty—because I'm paranoid guardian of the year, and it's not the first time I've checked in on him without anyone knowing—and then go back to the bakery to grab Snow. Then, I get Natty settled back in the wagon and head across town to Zoe's.

Zoe and her guys invite us for dinner a few times a week—usually after I blatantly lie and tell her Snow is sad and wants to visit. It's a win-win, since Snow does miss her former pet-parent, and Zoe loves cuddling the fluffball. And did I mention free food? But it is a relief not to be the one inviting myself over this time.

“Finally,” Zoe cries when she throws open the door. “Guys, Minnie and Natty are here!”

She scoops Snow up for a quick hug, then repeats the process with Natty, before setting both of them free to race around the living room.

Zoe’s three mates trickle in a minute later. Fiery turquoise-colored ropes of magic connect her to each man, and I yawn.

Sometimes, it feels like every woman in town has fated mates except me. Perpetually single Minnie who will never find a man. Unless...

I zero in on Xavi—not because I’m interested, since he’s clearly taken—but because he’s a journalist turned supernatural blogger, and he knows everything that goes on in Silver Springs. “Have you heard of any new fated mate groups in town?”

If he has, then chances are I’ve found a fated mate. And while three is better than one, I’ll take what I can get.

If he hasn’t, then I’ll know it’s another trick of Maude Montgomery’s—one last ditch effort to steal Julian from Amber now that she’s pregnant. It’s cruel and heartless and exactly the sort of thing the woman is capable of.

Xavi pulls out his phone. “Who? When? I need facts.”

Disappointment courses through me. Nothing gets by Xavi, and if he hasn’t heard anything, that’s all I need to know. I examine my perfectly-manicured nails. “I haven’t heard of any either. I was just making small talk.”

“Oh,” Xavi’s face drops.

Zoe squeezes his hand. “Sorry, Xav. But we don’t have time for fated mates. Well, except you guys, obviously. Minnie, we need to talk.”

Worry rolls around in my gut but I act totally nonchalant. “I bet your mates totally freak out when you say that.”

Xavi nods. “Oh, we do.”

“Our Wynter is a force to be reckoned with,” Leith adds affectionately.

Ghost grins. “He means that Wyn’s scary when she’s mad.”

Zoe shoots her guys a mock scowl and they all grin down at her, their gazes filled with a sort of love no man will ever aim at me.

I can’t stand watching them be all lovey-dovey. “So what did you want to talk about?”

“Right.” Zoe’s face turns serious. “We need to figure out a way to stop Reddy.”

Stop ready? I frown... well, on the inside, anyway. “What?”

“Not what. Whom. The mad scientist.”

Which makes zero sense.

“Minerva Montgomery, don’t tell me you don’t know who I’m talking about.”

“Actually, it’s Minnie Alexander now.” I open my Birkin and start to search for my wallet, which has my brand spanking new, shiny ID.

“Not now,” Zoe shouts. “I mean, congratulations. We’ll celebrate... later. Right now we need to talk about the mad scientist.”

I instinctively look past her, as if a man with Einstein hair and a laboratory have somehow materialized in her living room. But all is safe—except Natty.

“Stop. Get down from there. Natty!” I sound bored despite the fact that the boy is busy jumping on one foot on top of the coffee table. *I swear I can’t look away for one second!*

Luckily, Zoe recognized Bored Minnie for what it truly means—panicked, freaking out, help me Minnie. She spins around to look just as Natty loses his balance and starts to fall.

My insides scream.

Luckily, Zoe’s on it. She flicks her wrist, and three pillows zoom out to soften Natty’s fall.

Before Natty can reach them, Ghost raises his hand in the boy’s direction, and he starts to float in mid-air.

“Higher, higher!” Natty cries like it’s all a game.

“Children,” Ghost mutters, but complies. “You know, I won’t always be around to catch you.”

Zoe scowls at her mate. “You mean *I* won’t always be around to catch him.”

Ghost smirks. “Are you telling me you’re the one holding him in mid-air?”

He raises his arm, and the giggling Natty flies higher.

Zoe frowns. “I had him.”

He raises an eyebrow.

She crosses her arms in front of her chest. “Show off.”

Leith snorts. “Since this is clearly going to take a while, I’ll go get dinner. How does Anthony’s sound?”

I normally can’t have pizza, since Formula M likes to keep it classy, and anything that isn’t healthy or gourmet is a no-go. But when the potion’s effects start to wear off around dinner, I can usually sneak a few bites... so long as I use a fork and knife.

“Pizza,” Natty shouts before I can reply. He stomps his feet excitedly... on the ceiling... since Ghost has him floating upside down. “Yay, pizza!”

I swear, if it was me up there, I’d be having a heart attack while yawning non-stop, rolling my eyes, and examining my nails all at once. But three-year-olds have no fear—or maybe just my three-year-old. I’m kind of impressed.

“Pizza’s great,” Zoe tells Leith. “Any chance you can take Natty with you? Minnie and I *really* need to talk.” And the way she says it tells me it’s not going to be good news.

Leith nods. “Not a problem. Come on, men. We’re going hunting.”

And with that, the three of them march off, a giggling Natty floating behind them.

“Bye, Minnie!” the little boy shouts, waving wildly, but even that amusing sight isn’t enough to cheer me up. Because, if the look on Zoe’s face is anything to go by, something is seriously wrong.

Especially since a mad scientist is involved. But what does that have to do with me?

I haven’t heard of any mad scientists popping up in Silver Springs. Even if I had, there’s a perfectly competent police force Zoe could turn to. And if she were in need of a witch, there are plenty far more powerful than me. Like Juniper, who runs The Magical Rooster, or Zoe herself.

So the fact that this all somehow involves me doesn’t bode well. Not to mention I have enough things to worry about—like trying to break the curse, and finding the chameleon shifter who may or may not be my mate. That and the fact that Natty could have been seriously hurt on my watch.

Chapter 18



MINNIE

Zoe locks the door, sets out some raw meat for Snow, and drags me toward the couch. “We’re going to need wine for this.”

She flicks her wrist and a bottle floats out of the kitchen, followed by two glasses. The cork pops off, wine fills each glass without spilling a drop, and then the glasses float up to Zoe and me.

If Maude Montgomery had Zoe for a daughter, she would have been proud. Instead, she had me, a child without an ounce of Casting Magic in her blood.

Apparently, I inherited my powers from some distant relative my mother told me to never, ever mention. A great aunt who ran off to live in the forest with twigs in her hair and squirrels and birds for company. Or, at least, that’s how I’ve always imagined her. Truth is, she could just have easily gotten distracted talking to a bird, walked into traffic, and got hit by a

car. My mother always warned me it would happen because my head was always literally in the clouds.

I grab my glass and down the whole thing in one gulp. It's been that sort of day.

Formula M's worn off enough to let me, but it still forces me to provide some tasting notes. "Blackberries, a hint of tobacco, and that oaky undertone. Perfect."

I don't taste any of the things I mention, but chances are I'm right. I also can't get drunk while I'm on Formula M—and not for lack of trying—so I don't protest when the bottle floats up and refills my glass. It'll take several bottles just to get tipsy, and that's in the evening, after the potion's started to wear off.

Zoe takes a small sip herself. "Glad you approve. Now, on to business. Just give me a second." She pops into the kitchen, and comes back with Snow. "Who's a full little fuzzy? You are." She gives the fluffball a scratch, settles her on her lap, and covers her fluffy ears. "Poor little fuzzy, she's been through enough. She doesn't need to hear this."

Which is how I know it's bad.

I lower my voice. Not because there is anyone around, but because if there's one thing Formula M loves, it's gossip. "Okay, spill."

Zoe takes a deep breath. "The scientist who created Snow is in town. Dr. Ashok Reddy."

I gasp. We're gossiping, so Formula M doesn't stop me. And it's late enough that it lets some of my worries through. "He's

in Silver Springs Penitentiary?” Where Natty and I go to visit Zachariah? Where we might run into the monster who created and tortured my pet before Zoe finally freed her? “What does he look like?” That way, I can avoid him like the plague.

After all, I doubt he’ll have stained, disheveled clothes, dirty hair, or fangs in prison.

And I better remember his name, too. *Ashok. Dr. Reddy.* I hope I never, ever see you.

“He’s not in prison.” Zoe says, and my heart sinks.

She flicks her wrist, but instead of more wine, the closet bursts open. A broom and a washcloth fly out and start to work on the coffee table and ceiling. Which is the Zoe equivalent of wringing her hands or blowing into a paper bag.

Mine is Formula M. I yawn. “Then where is he?”

“In town, selling fuzzies.”

Selling fuzzies? As in he made *more* of them? After everything Snow’s been through?

I’m internally shouting, but can’t seem to get the words out. When I finally do, I lower my voice and sound all gossipy as I ask, “When did he get out?”

“I wouldn’t know. The agency doesn’t tell me anything.” She shakes her head. “It could have been yesterday, or maybe they never arrested him. I quit right after I brought him in, so I haven’t heard anything. And it’s not like I ever followed up on any of the crazies I captured. My job was criminal apprehension. What the agency did with them wasn’t my

problem. Well, as long as it was ethical..." she adds. "I knew there'd be a trial, usually followed by a sentence at a magical maximum security prison, like the one here in Silver Springs. And sometimes I got called in to testify, but not for Reddy. I figured the victims he bit would have been enough. He always drank too much, and then dropped them off on the hospital doorstep, so they all survived. Their testimony would have been enough."

I reach out and pet Snow as a heavy feeling settles in my gut. How can a man like that be free?

"I think..." Zoe takes a deep breath. "Well, more like... suspect... that the agency is funding his research. They wouldn't have set him free, not unless he was rehabilitated, so they must be working with him. Or someone is. The guy was pretty near broke when I found him, but now he's got ads running all over Screech."

"Ads? For what?"

"Fuzzies." Zoe pulls out her phone and hands it to me, then covers Snow's ears again. "The asshole's been making more of them. And now he's selling them. To vampires. As *food!*"

My heart starts to cry.

When I first met Snow, she told me she was born in a lab. She grew up in a cage, she never bathed, and she barely ate. The mad scientist—Dr. Reddy—would head out at sunset with animal traps, then go check them just before sunrise, but they never yielded much.

She told me he'd starve himself, too. That he'd avoid drinking blood until he was too hungry to resist. When his fangs would finally pop out, he'd start to cry. And each time he went out and came back, he'd be well-fed, but broken. He'd curl up in bed and sob until the sun set again, and then resume his work—creating an animal he could successfully feed from.

He bit Snow, once, but her blood made him throw up. And good thing, too, because it hurt. And she would have fought him tooth and nail if he tried again.

My heart squeezes painfully in my chest as I glance down at Snow. Her eyes are closed, and she's purring, oblivious to the horrors another generation of fuzzies is getting subjected to.

“He's selling fuzzies,” Zoe says. “They're going for half a million each—food and pet in one. That's why he's in town. He's hoping to sell them to the vampires who live here.”

I think of the vampires I know. Violet, the sweet little old lady turned vampire, who's willing to get her own sprinkles, and whose three vampire mates look sixty years her junior and treat her like a queen. I picture Sapphire, who's mated to Bob—debatably the nicest man in all of Silver Springs—and who only bites two things... willing men... and ice cream. Not to mention sweet book nerd vamp Oscar, who's mated to Juniper, and couldn't hurt a fly.

“This is Silver Springs, Zoe,” I tell her in a whisper, like it's the juiciest of gossip. “We know all the vampires in town, and none of them would ever force-feed on their pets.”

“Normally, no. But there are posts all over Screech claiming that fuzzies don’t feel pain. That they love getting bit, that their blood tastes better than a human’s, and that biting them has therapeutic effects, or some bullshit like that.”

I roll my eyes. “No one would buy that.”

Zoe scowls. “They better not. And we’re going to make sure of it.”

Chapter 19



MINNIE

Zoe sounds so confident about us stopping Dr. Reddy, and I don't blame her. She's got the training to back it up. She may look harmless, working as a magical maid and using her magic to summon wine and brooms—but beneath the surface, I know that she's a badass. And she's stopped Reddy before.

Snow told me how Zoe strode into that lab like an avenging angel. She used her magic to tear down an empty cage hanging from the ceiling, and bowled it at the crazy vamp, knocking him down like a pin.

Zoe has told that story, too, and more than once, and it's almost like I was there. The mental image of a dirty, disheveled old man with Einstein's haircut engraved in my mind, and I can picture him face-planting in the middle of the lab and groaning while Zoe handcuffed him.

I lean toward her and whisper. “Are you going to beat him up?”

Zoe snorts. “I wish. But no. There’s a press conference at the library tomorrow night. Violet called to tell me the moment she found out,”—as in, Violet the librarian, who’s Amber’s sister and Zoe’s close friend—“She said the mayor’s being paid good money to lend out the space, so she can’t do anything to stop the event from happening. We’ve tried leaving negative comments on the ad, but they keep getting deleted, so we need a different strategy. And that’s where you come in...”

I frown on the inside and take a sip of wine on the outside. “Me?”

“You need to tell everyone the truth, Minnie. You can talk to animals. Everyone will listen if it comes from you.”

I’d grimace if I could.

No one in town knows I can talk to animals—except Zoe, Amber, Violet, and their men. And only because I had Agent Tiptoe help them apprehend a criminal, who ended up being Zachariah. Which is how he ended up in prison, and Natty came into my life.

But no one in town knows that. And even if they did, I doubt I’ll be able to speak up at the press conference and say what’s on my mind. Even with Formula M’s effects wearing off, I’ll probably still end up making a fool of myself.

But I can’t say any of that... so I cross my ankles, showing off my pink high heels, and let out a small, dainty ladylike yawn. Which I cover with my manicured hand. “I think I’ll pass.”

“You are not going to pass,” Zoe snaps. “I know it’s just that potion talking, Minnie, but I swear I’m going to track you down and drag you to the library kicking and screaming if I have to. I can’t do this without you. And I know the real you would do anything to stop fuzzies from being harmed. No matter what it takes.”

And she’s right. I can’t let those poor, innocent fuzzies end up as vampire food. We need to do whatever it takes to protect them.

Zoe takes out her phone and we work on my speech until the guys carry Natty and the pizza through the front door. It’s actually pretty good, and I actually start to believe I can do this—assuming I can get any of it out. And Zoe promises she’ll jump in if it looks like I need help.

“Minnie!” Natty scrambles down from Leith’s arms and rushes across the living room to give me a huge hug. “We have pizza!”

I hug him back. “It smells delicious.”

“De-vicious!” Natty cries, waking Snow.

The fuzzy rolls off Zoe’s lap, crashes into Natty’s legs, and then changes direction and rolls across the living room. He giggles and chases after her.

We set out the pizza, sodas, and Natty’s bottle of milk on the coffee table. I get Natty settled with a slice, Zoe puts on some cartoons, and the men dig in. Well, except Xavi, who stays by the door, texting someone a mile a minute.

Zoe flicks her wrist, sending the wine bottle and glasses flying to the kitchen, and a fork and knife for me flying out. Then turns to her mate. “Xav? You coming?”

Ghost snorts. “He’s been like this since we left.”

Leith grunts in agreement.

Xavi kicks off his sneakers. “That’s because I’ve got news. *Big news.*”

A bunch of women in Silver Springs finding fated mates type news? Does that mean I’ve found mine?

Zoe perks up. “What kind of news? Did Dr. Reddy have a heart attack and croak?”

My insides cringe. How could I be so shallow? All I can think of is finding a fated mate, when there are actual problems I should be worried about. Like the fate of the fuzzies.

Xavi’s phone buzzes and he glances down briefly. “Sorry, no. But guess what? Not a Vampire broke up! It’s all over Screech.”

I swear I can’t go half a day without someone mentioning that stupid band.

Zoe cringes, but for a whole other reason. “Oh no. Poor Amber!”

I feel another wave of guilt. Amber’s literally the band’s number one fan. She’s going to be gutted, and once again, I’m only thinking about myself. But then, I’ve always known I’m a terrible person. I shouldn’t be surprised.

Xavi grimaces. “Shit! I forgot about Amber.” At least I’m not the only one.

Leith swallows a huge bite of pizza. “Izaguirre here has been trying to get the inside scoop.”

Xavi nods. “No one knows why the band broke up. But I’m going to find out first.”

I roll my eyes. “I bet Damien Starr and his massive ego decided to go solo.”

I know I sound petty, but Xavi nods. “That’s the leading theory. That or he’s on his deathbed. A few people are posting that, but there’s no evidence.”

Formula M is weaker right now, so it’s calming effects are muted, and I start to worry about Damien Starr. Which only makes me more pissed off. If our roles were reversed and I was dying, he wouldn’t bat an eye.

Ghost rubs his chin thoughtfully. “The band members are all supes. Which means they probably have relatives in town. We could question them, see if that gives us any leads.”

I cut a small piece off my pizza, take a dainty bite, and dab my lips with my napkin. I could tell them exactly where they can find some relatives—namely Damien Starr’s, aka Danny Stravinsky’s parents—but I’d never invade his privacy like that. Not even after everything he’s done.

Plus, I don’t care about Not a Vampire or Danny or Damien or whoever the hell he is now. I have enough problems already. Like giving a speech in front of half the town so I can save the

fuzzies, seeing Delphine in order to break the curse, finding my maybe-mate, and taking care of Natty. And even that is more than I can handle.

Chapter 20



MINNIE

Natty, Snow and I spend the night at Zoe's—in a large guest bedroom with a full bathroom, running water, a flushing toilet, and a bed bumper so Natty and I can co-sleep without him tumbling out in the middle of the night.

Leith wakes up early and picks up a delicious to-go breakfast from Yes Now, Bob's—with waffles and ice cream, of course—and we all go over the plan to stop Dr. Reddy. I also tell them about my plans for the day, including Amber's plan to break the curse with Delphine's help.

“Oh, Minnie. I hope it works this time.” Zoe pulls me in for a hug. “You deserve so much better.”

Only she's wrong. I've been a failure since the day I was born, and I have long since given up hoping for *better*. Honestly, given how things have been going lately, all I have in my future is *worse*.

“I’m sure it will work,” I lie and search my Birkin for the vial with the diamond-shaped lid. “Come on, Natty. Time to go.”

Zoe levitates Natty’s wagon from the porch to the driveway, and Ghost levitates a giggling Natty into the wagon. I down the contents of my Formula M vial and head after them.

As I tug the wagon down the driveway, Natty turns around and yells ‘bye.’ At least one of us has manners.

I should do the same, especially since they let us spend the night, but Formula M doesn’t let me yell. It does let me raise my arm, but I end up waving like the freaking queen of England.

Since Snow is visiting Zoe for the day and I don’t have to drop her off at home, we head straight for Amber’s. I keep an eye out for fiery pink magic connecting me to my maybe-mate, but the moment I pull the wagon inside Jewels Cafe, I realize I have much bigger things to worry about.

Amber’s face is beet red, her blonde hair’s pulled back in a messy ponytail, and she’s sobbing into a handful of tissues. Julian, Wes and Chase all have bags under their eyes, and look equally distraught.

A heavy feeling settles in my gut, but a wave of calm courses through me. “What’s wrong?” I ask casually. “Is it the babies?” And then, as if I don’t already sound like I don’t give a damn, I add, “Hi, Julian. I love your shirt.”

Just kill me now.

Amber starts to cry harder. “The babies,” she says between sobs, “are fine.”

“Minnie, why is ’Bear doing that?” Natty asks, eyes wide.

I lean down and ruffle Natty’s hair. “Sometimes, grown-ups cry when they’re sad.”

Natty seems to think that over. “Does she have ouchy?”

Amber lets out another sob. “It’s just pregnancy”—sob —”hormones”—sob.

Wes pulls Amber into his arms and rests his chin on top of her head. “Not a Vampire broke up,” he adds, even though I already know.

And, with all my other problems, somehow forgot all about. Some friend I am.

“Minnie,” Natty raises his voice.

Wes raises his voice too, to be heard over Natty. “Amber’s been like this since she found out.”

“Ouchy,” Natty yells. “Does ’Bear have ouchy?”

“No, she’s fine,” I tell him. On the outside, anyway. Which makes me hate Damien Starr even more.

Not only did Damien hurt me, but now he’s hurt one of the nicest people in Silver Springs. And probably all because he thinks he’s better than everyone else—again—and decided to start a solo career. As if it wasn’t enough for him to abandon me the moment he realized I was just holding him back. Now he’s doing it to his band, and his superfans, like Amber.

I wish I knew where to find the jerk so I could tell him exactly what I think of him.

“It doesn’t help that none of us got any sleep,” Chase adds. “Latte kept howling *all* night.”

“It’s my fault,” Amber sobs.

“Of course not,” Chase says. “He probably just needs a few days to get used to his new home.”

Wes nods. “And he’s sleeping now. That’s a good sign.”

Amber lets out another sob, and Chase plants a kiss on top of her head. “I bet he’ll be fine by tonight.”

Julian nods in agreement. He exchanges a look with the other two men, and then gestures with his chin toward the stairs.

Wes raises an eyebrow.

Chase frowns.

I wonder if he’s trying to say they should go get Latte—or if he’s got news about Tiptoe—when Julian groans and turns to me. “Minnie, do you think you could watch the cafe while we take Amber upstairs?”

Oh. I bat my eyelashes at him. “For you, Julian, anything.”

He shoots a pointed look at the other guys, as if to tell them, ‘this is why I wanted you to say something, not me.’ Not that I blame him.

Wes scoops up a still sobbing Amber. “I think this calls for ice cream, and lots of it.”

She nods against his shoulder and Natty claps. “Ice cream!”

Chase scoops him up and follows Wes. Julian races after them, probably so he doesn't get stuck talking to me.

I figure this isn't the right time to ask how Tiptoe's doing, and get to work. I put away the wagon and my purse, put on my apron, and get ready to start the day.

It's slow at first, but then it starts to pick up. Every time the bell above the door jingles I look up, though I'm not sure who I'm hoping to see. Delphine, so we can try to break the curse? Or the chameleon shifter, who may or may not be my fated mate?

I slide a Mood Tea across the counter to Officer Liam, Violet the librarian's fated mate, and grab one of the signature Jewels Cafe mugs so I can get started on a pumpkin spice latte for the next person in line.

As much as I appreciate Amber giving me this job, I hate working at Jewels Cafe during PSL season. With the rumors still going around that they can help you find your fated mates, I swear half the town comes in to try their luck. Humans buy lottery tickets—single supernaturals drink pumpkin spice.

If I could work up a sweat, I would.

I just finish sliding three PSLs on a tray to a middle-aged woman named Barb who's new in town when Amber waddles downstairs. Her eyes are no longer red from crying, and she's brushed her hair so it falls in soft, blonde waves down her shoulders.

“Sorry about before,” she says softly. “It’s the pregnancy hormones. They get the best of me sometimes.”

I nod, even though I’m pretty sure pregnancy isn’t to blame.

“Do you mind if I change the music?” she adds. “I know you’re not a fan, but I really *need* this.”

I nod, and Amber grabs her phone. Damien Starr’s crooning over the speaker, and I want to punch his ‘innocent and sweet, wild and free’ ass. They’re the worst lyrics I’ve ever heard, and I don’t understand how Amber can keep listening to them.

She tries to sound perky when she announces, “Delphine should be here any minute now. We’ve been chatting on Screech.”

“What does she look like?” Since I deleted Screech, I can’t check. And honestly, I wouldn’t want to. Every time I go on the app, it’s just another reminder that my life is a complete and utter mess.

“Blonde and pretty,” Amber says, though she could just as easily be describing herself. “She kind of looks like a sorority girl. Oh, there she is!”

The source of Amber’s excitement crosses the street toward the cafe. She’s perfectly put together, her straight blonde hair falling past her shoulders, her blue t-shirt tucked into faded jeans. A huge gold pendant that looks like it cost a fortune rests on her collarbone, and I wonder if she’s using potions, too.

I just don't understand how other people manage to look good naturally.

The bell above the cafe doors jingles as she steps inside.

"Delphine, you came!" Amber cries.

Delphine looks a bit taken aback by Amber's energy—to be frank, I am too. She's clearly trying to compensate for the whole Not a Vampire thing, but the outcome is slightly less perky and more crazy.

Delphine gives her a polite, though slightly guarded, smile.

"How could I pass up a free drink?"

Amber grins. "You don't know how glad I am that you're here."

Delphine glances behind her at the empty cafe. Then she lowers her voice, as if there's an invisible customer lurking somewhere. Since it's Silver Springs, that's actually not outside the realm of what's possible. "I'm happy to help. It's not every day that someone actually *wants* me around. Because of my powers, I mean."

Amber nods. "So how do your powers work, exactly? Pepp didn't go into details."

Delphine fiddles with her gold pendant. "My powers nullify spells and magical beings."

I roll my eyes. "Sounds lame." Thanks, Formula M. Especially since her power sounds way cooler than my own. I bet if I could nullify magic, my mother wouldn't hate me.

“Don’t listen to Minnie,” Amber quickly jumps in.

“It’s fine,” Delphine says wearily. “It’s pretty much how everyone reacts, only sometimes worse.”

Amber shakes her head. “Not Minnie. She’s just nervous because it’s her curse we’re trying to break. Well, not her curse. She didn’t cast it. It was cast on her. And we’re hoping you can nullify it... um... how does that work exactly?”

“I can cancel out magic within a range of five feet or so.”

“So you’re like a living breathing ward,” Amber whispers. “A magic dampener. A *curse* breaker.”

The words *curse breaker* echo through the empty cafe, giving me hope. I may finally be free of Julian, once and for all. I won’t have to worry about going on the cruise, and I’ll finally be able to date. Maybe even fall in love... or find true love. But even if the chameleon is just the latest in a series of spells courtesy of Maude Montgomery, Delphine is still my ticket to *freedom*.

Chapter 21



MINNIE

Delphine gives us a shy smile. “I don’t know if I can break the curse, but I should be able to nullify it while I’m around.”

Amber nods. “So you... what? Just wiggle your fingers and poof? Curse gone?”

Delphine shakes her head. “I don’t cast. Magic just stops working whenever I’m around.”

Which is how I realize Delphine is a complete and utter fraud.

I’ve been inside the warded prison enough times to know what it feels like to have all the magic I’m carrying disappear. Formula M, Summer Spritz, Cloud 9 ½... they’re all still hard at work.

Amber, whose magic stopped working the day she conceived, seems to buy it, hook line and sinker. “I’ll message the guys and let Julian know he can head out. That’s how we test the curse—I’ll explain later. But first, how about a drink, on the

house? What are you in the mood for? Caffeine? Chocolate? Or maybe a pumpkin spice latte? They're always a classic."

Delphine smiles. "Chocolate and caffeine sound great."

Amber grins. "Hot, or iced?"

"Definitely iced."

"How about a chocolate cookie frappe then?"

Delphine nods, but I yawn. "Before you go giving away free drinks, you should know that Delphine is a fraud."

Delphine's gaze snaps to me. "Excuse me?"

"You're not a null witch. If such a thing even exists."

"Of course it exists. You think I want to ruin every one of my sisters' birthday parties and not even be able to be around my family without wearing this gaudy thing?"

I roll my eyes and mentally sing 'liar, liar, pants on fire.'

Delphine reaches for her expensive gold pendant. "This amulet nullifies my powers. Get it? Nullifies?" She chuckles, and my gaze locks on her necklace.

It looks nothing like the magic dampener, a necklace Amber has that does the same thing. Well, except that both pendants are round. Delphine's is made of gold, and the pendant is much larger. The dampener is bronze with a jet black stone set in the middle and is much smaller.

Delphine glances at the door. "Do you think we could go somewhere less public before I take it off? People tend not to react well when their powers stop working."

Amber nods. “We can go up to the apartment. Let me just make you that frap, real quick. And let me tell the guys.”

Amber pulls out her phone, sends a quick message to her mates, and gets to work on the frap. She finishes it while I’m still working on my Unicorn Hot Chocolate and makes herself a steaming hot mug of peppermint tea.

We’re all set by the time Amber’s mates come downstairs, Natty settled happily on Wes’s shoulders.

Natty squeals. “Minnie, look at me!”

I grin on the inside. “You’re so tall.”

Natty nods. “I’m three.”

“And I’m a bear shifter,” Wes adds, not to be outdone.

Amber quickly does the introductions, and then Julian gives her a quick kiss and heads for the front door with a wave. Chase gives her a kiss, too, even though he’s not going anywhere, and takes over behind the counter.

Wes turns to me. “We’re heading to the park, if that’s okay with you, Minnie.”

“Totally,” I tell him. Especially since I don’t want Natty around to hear me scream. Which hopefully won’t happen, if Delphine manages to break the curse.

Amber leads the way upstairs, taking her time with each step. Delphine follows suit, and I bring up the rear.

I can feel Julian getting further and further away, and my feet feel heavier and heavier. Not because he’s gone too far—he’s

still within a safe range—but because I’m freaking out and the waves of calm are doing nothing for me.

What if it doesn’t work? What if I’m in for a world of pain and disappointment?

I try to glance back down over my shoulder, but running isn’t in Formula M’s repertoire, so it forces me to keep moving.

When we get upstairs, Latte’s stretched out on the couch, fast asleep. Tiptoe’s curled up on top of him, snoring happily. The rainbow of jewels on his pink collar twinkle in the sunlight shining through the window.

We let them sleep and head straight for the spare room, which Amber and her guys have converted into a nursery. “It’s really coming along,” she says with a soft smile. “Wes and Chase painted the walls since you were last here, Minnie, and Julian put together the cribs.”

I take in the pale yellow walls and the amber-colored quilts on the sides of each of the cribs. “It’s so you.”

Amber beams. “I know, right?”

“When’s the baby due?” Delphine asks.

“Babies,” Amber corrects. “Triplets.”

Delphine’s eyes widen. “Oh, wow.”

“I know.” Amber rubs her belly. “They’re due on the twenty-ninth.”

“It’s a leap year,” I explain when I notice Delphine’s confused look.

Amber nods. “It only happens once every four years, so if the babies are born on their due date, they’ll only have birthdays every four years. Which means they’ll age four times slower. Isn’t that cool?”

Delphine frowns. “It doesn’t actually work that way. You’d probably just celebrate on the twenty-eighth...”

Amber bursts out laughing.

I roll my eyes. “Amber makes this joke every time someone asks when the babies are due.”

Amber nods. “Works every time. And they’ll probably be early, since they’re triplets. My doctor told me we’re probably looking at early February.”

While she and Delphine chat about the babies, I try to take a sip of my Unicorn Hot Chocolate. Formula M keeps my lips from touching the delicious-looking whipped cream, and I inhale the mouth-watering chocolaty aroma instead.

Amber clasps her hands together. “Julian’s taking the van. He’ll text me when he’s in place.”

“He’s about halfway there,” I add.

“Minnie can sense where he is,” Amber explains. “It’s part of the curse.” She crosses the room to her rocking chair, picks up the innocent-looking necklace resting on the seat, and turns to me. “Can I put this on you?”

I yawn. “Like I care.”

Except I do care. A lot. Now Delphine—a complete stranger—will get to see me without Formula M. And that isn't the half of it.

I've been in this exact spot dozens of times. Mostly while it was still a dusty spare room with a twin bed and an old, empty dresser. Then, when it was an empty room, the floor scrubbed clean, and the walls painted yellow. And finally while the nursery was starting to take shape.

And all those times have ended with me on the floor, writhing in pain.

I feel a sense of peace settle over me as calming waves course through me.

We didn't have a null witch then, I remind myself. We'd never even heard of one until now, so there's a chance this will work. And I have to at least try.

I set my Unicorn Hot Chocolate on the dresser and gather my hair up so Amber can clip the magic dampener necklace around my neck. I'd do it myself, but Formula M apparently has some self-preservation built in and stops me if I try.

The moment the clasp clicks shut, all the potions I'm on are no more. The effects of Formula M instantly dissipate, the calming waves coursing through me replaced by nerves. The potion-induced warmth of Summer Spritz goes away, and my skin goosebumps and I kick off my too-tall heels, which suddenly feel unbearable.

Delphine's eyes widen as she looks at me. "Oh, wow, I didn't expect that," she says.

Which means that the hair-straightening potion and makeup potions I've been using since the day before I left for the academy have all stopped working. And the fact that I slept in Zoe's too-comfortable bed, snoozed my alarm twice, and rushed through my shower without bothering to use conditioner definitely doesn't help.

I rub my arms and grab my Unicorn Hot Chocolate and take a huge, delicious sip. The sugar, chocolate, and whip cream melt on my tongue, and I barely contain a moan. Take that, Formula M.

Except that without it, the panic starts to grow, and I turn to Amber. "What if it doesn't work? It *never* works."

"This time is different." Amber gives my hands a squeeze. "Delphine's powers are so unique, there are only a few people in the entire world who have them."

I feel a wave of hope, but stamp it down. "And if it doesn't work?" I press.

Amber grabs the arms of her rocking chair and slowly lowers herself into it. "Then we'll find something else."

Delphine quickly jumps in. "I've never come across magic I didn't cancel out. I haven't tried a lot, though. I avoid magical creatures, mostly. Usually, supes don't take well to suddenly losing their powers."

I groan. "So it's not going to work."

Delphine purses her lips. “It might...”

“Or it might not...” I add.

Delphine shrugs. “Yeah, I guess it could go either way.”

“That’s *so* reassuring,” I groan.

Amber gasps. For a split second, I think she’s reacting to me, but then she touches her belly, a small smile on her face. “That was some kick. See? Even the babies think it’ll work. And worse case scenario, you’ll just come on the cruise.”

I must be super transparent without Formula M, because Amber’s face falls.

“Did you only agree to go because of Formula M?” she asks.

This is my chance. I can admit that I don’t have the money. *Come on, Minnie. Just say it. Tell Amber the truth. She’ll understand.*

Chapter 22



MINNIE

I take a deep breath. I need to tell Amber the truth now, while I'm wearing the magic dampener. Formula M won't let me explain later. This is my only chance.

I open my mouth, but Amber beats me to it. "You know we can't go if you don't." She pouts.

I square my shoulders. "Actually, I—"

"Please?" Amber begs. "It'll be so much fun."

Unlikely.

"You could relax by the pool."

Also unlikely, since there's no way I'm leaving Natty at the on-board childcare the way my mother always did with me.

"There'll be tons of delicious food."

Which Formula M won't let me eat.

“And there are so many fun things to do. Excursions. Games. Shows.”

Where I can go to watch Amber and her guys be all lovey-dovey. Fun, indeed.

“And it’s not a couple’s cruise or anything. Maybe you’ll even meet someone.”

I already met someone, not that Amber knows anything about that. And I don’t even know what he really looks like, because he kept shifting into other people. It’s probably just another curse of my mother’s. And honestly, even if it’s not, how am I supposed to date with Formula M and the curse messing things up every step of the way?

Amber seems to tell her arguments aren’t working, because she clasps her hands together in front of her chest. “Please, please, pretty please? You’d be doing me a huge favor. This babymoon is *really* important to me, Minnie.”

Which is what really gets me. “Okay, fine... if the null witch thing doesn’t cancel out the curse, I’ll go on your babymoon with you.” And suffer through it, because that’s the least I can do for Amber.

Except, I belatedly remind myself, I can’t afford it!

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” Amber cries. “I’d get up and hug you, but it takes so much effort to stand up and sit back down. Can I just give you an air hug?”

And, because Formula M isn’t much for hugs, I cross the room and give Amber a real one. It feels nice. Almost like we truly

are friends. Which we're not. Amber's just stuck with me. But maybe, if we break this curse, she won't have to be.

I turn to Delphine. "How's this going to work? You take off your necklace, and poof, curse broken?"

Delphine shakes her head. "I nullify powers while I'm around."

Amber runs her hands over her belly in slow circles, and I wonder if the babies are kicking again. "But there's a chance the effects could be permanent, right? That the curse won't come back once it's nullified?"

"It's not impossible," Delphine says, though she doesn't sound overly confident.

My stomach clenches. "Do either of you have any gum?"

Amber and Delphine both shake their heads.

I try to take slow, deep breaths instead. Even if the nullifying effects are temporary, maybe I can handcuff myself to her for a week. Amber and her guys go on the cruise. I don't die. Win-win. And I can always figure out how to convince Delphine after we make sure her powers actually work.

Amber's phone dings, and she glances at it. "Julian's got the Cleanly Den van parked—"

"At the edge of town," I finish for her. I can no longer feel him there, but it's where he's gone the other gazillion times we've tried this. Like the time Violet's mate, Cash, tried an ancient ritual he found in an old library book—no luck. And the time Amber was convinced that if I truly 'believe' the curse is

gone, it will be—didn't work. And when we sacrificed a necklace of my mother's that she forgot to take back after she disowned me—didn't do a lick of good.

Amber claps her hands. "Okay, once I give Julian the go-ahead, he'll start driving toward Scarborough. Delphine, the curse keeps Minnie tethered to Julian. If he gets too far, it hurts her, and she has to follow... or he has to come back. We've already marked how far he can get when Minnie's wearing the magic dampener... and when she's not."

I run my fingers along the black pendant. "It isn't strong enough to cancel out the curse, but it weakens it enough that I no longer feel where Julian is, and he can get a lot further away before it kicks in."

Delphine nods.

"We should probably test Delphine's powers first," I add. "Before Julian starts driving. Just in case they're not as powerful as the magic dampener."

Delphine reaches for her necklace. "Does that mean you want me to take this off?"

Amber and I both nod.

Delphine removes her necklace and all three of Amber's cribs collapse and fall to the floor.

"Oh, shit," Delphine cries.

Amber looks a little pale as she stares at the broken cribs.

I try for a joke. “At least the babies haven’t been born yet.”
Talk about lame.

Amber nods. “I think we’ll have to buy new cribs. Non-magical ones this time. Just to be safe.”

“Sorry again,” Delphine adds.

“No, Minnie’s right. It’s good that we found out now, before the babies got here.” Look at me, giving practical life advice.

Amber glances at me. “Do you feel any different?”

I shake my head.

“Okay, let me take off the magic dampener, and we’ll see if Delphine’s powers hold.”

I nod.

Amber unclasps the dampener. “How do you feel?”

“I... still can’t feel Julian. And none of my other spells are working.” I touch my frizzy hair. “Do I look any different?”

“No.” Amber grins. “You look perfect.”

I know she’s referring to Delphine’s magic, not my actual looks, but I still break into a grin. This might actually work.

This might actually work!

“Okay, I’m calling Julian.” Amber takes out her phone and makes the call.

Julian’s tired face pops up on the screen, and he yawns as he asks, “All set?”

Amber nods and turns the screen so we can all see Julian.
“We’re ready to go.”

Julian nods and starts the van. The engine rumbles to life and Julian says the same words he always does. “I’m going to drive slowly. Just say the word, and I’ll turn around.”

“We’re all good so far,” Amber tells him.

I nod. “I can’t feel where you are,” I tell him. “And all my other spells aren’t working, so Delphine is legit. Plus, all the cribs collapsed.”

Amber shows him the cribs, and he mutters something under his breath.

“Sorry,” Delphine says.

“Not your fault,” Amber quickly tells her.

Julian clears his throat. “Okay, I’m about to pass the first line.”

“That’s how far he can get when I’m not wearing the magic dampener,” I explain.

“Done,” he says. “Still doing okay?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“Keep going, Juli,” Amber adds.

We all grow silent as we wait. A few minutes pass, and then Julian says, “I’m about to pass line two. Should I keep going?”

I hesitate. But this is it. This is how we’ll know.

I square my shoulders. “Yes. I’m good.”

“I’m going as slowly as I can.” There’s a honk in the background. “Let me put the emergency blinkers on.”

They echo in the silence, marking each passing second that Julian moves forward without triggering the curse.

“I’m still okay,” I say, eyes wide. “Actually, I feel great. I think it’s working.”

Julian grins on the phone screen. “You okay if I speed up?”

I nod. “Yes.”

Julian keeps driving, and excitement takes flight in my belly. This is it. It’s working. It’s actually working!

Amber and I exchange a huge grin, but a split second later, her face falls. Delphine’s eyes widen, and I feel my nose start to run.

I reach up, and pull away my fingers covered in sticky, red liquid.

“Juli, stop,” Amber cries a split second later. “Turn around. Turn around!”

Nausea hits. I double over with a groan as my stomach cramps and my knees give out. Delphine falls on the floor next to me and reaches for my hands. It gives me hope. Maybe touching her will nullify the curse. Maybe...

But when our hands touch, nothing happens. Then, another wave of pain hits.

“Turn back, Julian. Now!” Amber shouts.

“There’s traffic,” Julian shouts back. “I’m trying.”

Honking echoes through the phone followed by the sound of tires against gravel. And then, the pain disappears as quickly as it came.

“I passed the line,” Julian shouts.

“I know,” I whisper softly. But I feel too drained to get up, or do much of anything except lie on the carpeted floor.

Delphine rubs my back, comforting me, and Amber slowly lowers herself next to us.

“Are you feeling better?” she asks softly.

I nod.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work.”

I nod again.

“I’m sorry, too,” Delphine adds.

“It’s okay. I didn’t really think it would. It’s a powerful curse, and I’ve been told it can only be broken by the witch who cast it...” I tell her. “Actually, that’s not really true.” And I might as well be honest, since she’s literally seen me at my worst. “I got my hopes up. Again. But... if your powers didn’t work, I really don’t think anything will.” Not unless *she* ever sets me free.

Which is less likely than winning the lottery, which is why I decide that tonight, I’m getting a ticket.

Chapter 23



MINNIE

The moment Wes and Natty get back, I settle the boy in the wagon and pull him outside. Of course I'm not looking where I'm going, so I crash straight into the wooden pumpkin spice latte sign that's in its customary place outside.

It clatters to the ground, the sound echoing down Main Street, and a few people turn to look. None of them are connected to me with a pink rope of magic, so at least my fated mate doesn't get a front row seat to the Clumsy Minnie Show.

"I can get it," Natty shouts.

He scrambles out of the wagon, like getting the sign is the most exciting task on the planet. I want to help, but Formula M won't let me. All I can do is examine my nails like a stuck-up idiot.

Amber chooses that exact moment to stick her head out of the cafe. "Everything okay? I heard a crash."

She glances at Natty, who grunts as he tries, and fails, to lift the heavy wooden sign. Amber takes a step forward, then changes her mind.

“Wes, honey,” she calls out. “Can I get your help?”

I feel an acute wave of embarrassment, which Formula M does a great job of hiding. Followed by relief that I’m standing around watching the bear shifter help Natty lift the sign, and not the heavily-pregnant Amber.

She smiles once the sign is back up. “No harm done.”

I yawn, help Natty back into the wagon, and head off without so much as a thank you to Wes. Natty waves goodbye, and I seem to be having a Queen of England day, since I give them the royal wave.

But on the inside, I’m so grateful for Amber. Even I wouldn’t put up with me, but somehow, she does. And judging by how things went with Delphine, she’ll be stuck with me for a long, long time.

Amber would honestly make a great friend, if I had friends, which I do not. I haven’t since the day Danny walked out of my life, and I probably never will.

She’ll probably hate me once she realizes I can’t afford her babymoon cruise. And I’ll freeze up during my speech to free the fuzzies. And I’ll probably never see the chameleon who may or may not be my fated mate.

“Minnie?” Natty interrupts. “You’re happy!”

He doesn't get it quite right, but I know what he means, and playfully tousle his hair affectionately. "You know what will make me happy? Singing."

He claps his hands. "Wheels on the Bus!"

We sing the song together, and my problems slowly float away. Formula M's calming effects probably help, too, but just knowing I have Natty makes everything a little brighter.

And I've a date with a prisoner to look forward to. Not that it's a real date. Only reason Zachariah sees me is because I bring his son for visits, but it's still the highlight of my week.

When we're almost at the spot where we typically drop off Tiptoe, Natty shouts, "Witch!"

"Witch, Witch, Scratch that Itch?" I ask, since the song is one of his favorites.

"No, witch!" Natty points at a tree in the distance. Next to it, I spot a woman wearing a black robe and a pointy black hat, carrying an old-fashioned broom.

I'm amused, even though I don't show it. "That's not a real witch. It's just a person wearing a costume."

"Why?" Natty asks in typical three-year-old fashion.

"Because real witches look like me and Zoe. They don't wear costumes, not unless they're going to a costume party and trying to be ironic."

"Minnie, look. Pretend witch," Natty points toward another tree, and I spot a second woman in an identical costume.

As we walk toward the prison, we spot a few more witches, and Natty starts to sing. “Witch, Witch, Scratch that Itch.”

He’s still singing it when we arrive at the gate where Marty with a D comes out to greet us. “ID, please.”

He chews his gum vigorously and I kind of wish I still had some of my favorite pink bubblegum. I stopped buying it when Natty started asking to try it, and crying whenever I said no. And since it’s not safe for him to have until he turns five, I won’t be trying it until Zachariah’s out of prison.

And then, he might decide to take Natty away, and I won’t get to see my little boy. So who even cares about gum?

I search inside my Birkin and pull out my wallet. Marty with a D makes a show of examining it and then nods. “Alright, Minnie Alexander. I’m a need to search your wagon before I can let you through.”

Hearing my new name announced so officially makes me smile, so I don’t even mind the search.

I can’t summon the excitement I usually feel when we step through the ward, since the failed attempt to break the curse is still fresh. I hurry through the usual routine, unload our stuff into the locker, watch Natty empty his pockets—a button, a leaf, and a yellow crayon—and follow him through the body scanner toward the double doors that lead to the visitation room.

I’m a bit distracted today, so Natty manages to break out of my grasp. He runs toward Zachariah while I chase after him, and a

few nearby guards shout half-hearted warnings.

Zachariah grins, gets to his feet, and pulls Natty into his arms. And that's when everything changes.

My feet stop aching. The slight chill always permeating the visitation room is replaced by a comfortable warmth. The effects of Formula M kick back in, and I'm suddenly aware of Julian's exact location in Jewels Cafe.

And a pink fiery rope of magic connects me to Zachariah.

I've always had a bit of a crush on the man, but I've never felt the pulse-pounding desire that courses through for the split second before everything goes back to normal. Well, prison normal. No Formula M, no Summer Spritz, and no Cloud 9 ½.

The visitation room breaks into chaos. Some of the visitors dive under their tables, as if they'll somehow protect them. The two brothers who were arguing over pancakes and waffles on Wednesday are on their feet, racing toward the double doors. Some prisoners are charging the guards, while others are shouting spells, as if the ward might go down again at any moment.

Zachariah scoops up Natty a split second before I react. He cradles the boy against his chest as a prisoner with a shaved head and tattoos runs past, screaming at the top of his lungs.

The only person acting relatively normal is Alyssa, who's standing at Zachariah's shoulder and eyeing the chaos like a bodyguard. When we make eye contact, she raises an eyebrow

and smirks as she glances from me to Zachariah and back again.

“Everyone, sit down,” a guard booms and draws her taser. It crackles as she flips it on and holds it threateningly in front of her chest. “Hands on the table, where I can see them.”

That seems to break through the chaos. Prisoners and visitors climb back out from underneath tables. The pancake-waffle brothers shuffle back to their table with their heads bowed. A few prisoners test their luck and charge the guard, but the taser makes quick work of them. And one hulking man slams into the double doors, but three guards quickly subdue him. Prison break thwarted.

I take Natty from Zachariah and settle in my chair with the boy on my lap. Zachariah sits down across from us, palms flat on the table.

And then our eyes lock, and I can't seem to tear mine away.

Chapter 24



MINNIE

As the guards haul away the prisoners they tackled or tased, Zachariah stares at me, like I'm a complicated puzzle he's trying to figure out. "What just happened?"

I open my mouth to reply, when Natty lets out a whimper.

"Minnie?" the little boy whimpers again. His lower lip trembles and I place a kiss on top of his head.

"Everything's okay, Natty. You're safe."

Zachariah nods. "Minnie and I would never let anything happen to you."

Alyssa sits back in her chair. "Plus I'd shiv anyone who tried to hurt you."

"What's a shiv?" Natty says in a tiny, scared voice.

Alyssa answers in the kind of high-pitched, gentle voice people reserve for kids and pets, which somehow makes her

words even worse. “It’s a special toothbrush with a pointy end for stabbing—”

“Teeth,” I yell. “For stabbing teeth... to make them clean.” I cringe. Oh great, now I’m going to have to convince Natty not to hit his teeth with his toothbrush. As if that particular ritual wasn’t hard enough already.

But at least it seems to calm the boy down, and Zachariah looks around with a frown. “What the hell happened? I think I almost shifted, and you looked...” he stares at me. “Different.”

I start to blush, but then I remember the fiery pink magic connecting us. Somehow, I’d forgotten about it in the fray, but now it’s all I can think about. “Who the hell are you?”

Because I know for a fact it’s not Zachariah. The proof is in the pudding, or in this case, the magic. It’s no longer there now that the ward is back, but I saw it with my own eyes. And it’s only ever connected me to one man. Gorg, or Not Gorg, as the case may be. Whoever the hell the chameleon is, he’s now found a way to impersonate Zachariah, too.

His eyes widen and he seems very Zachariah-like when he frowns. “I’m a Bayan,” he says, referring to his supernatural species.

Would the chameleon know that? Probably. I bet it’s public record.

“Don’t play dumb with me,” I snap, tightening my grip on Natty. “I know you’re not Zachariah.”

“That’s Daddy,” Natty says.

I shake my head. “No, it isn’t.”

He leans forward. “Yes, it is. I mean, I am. I’m Daddy. I mean, Natty’s daddy. Fuck. Fudge. Minnie, what’s going on?”

“Fudge,” Natty repeats.

I’d laugh, if I didn’t know he was an impostor. “I know you’re the chameleon shifter. Gorg, is it? Or maybe Violet?”

His eyebrows knit together. “Did the ward do something to you?”

I roll my eyes and channel Formula M. “As if.”

Natty seems to lose track of our conversation and starts singing, “Witch, witch, scratch that itch.”

Alyssa chimes in, “And as amusing as this is, that really is Ri. The ward was only down for a millisecond. I barely even felt my powers. No one could have snuck in and swapped places with him that fast. Especially not a chameleon shifter. Plus, where would the real Ri have gone? We’re in a fucking prison.”

“Fucking prison,” Natty repeats.

I cringe and quickly jump in. “Don’t say that, Natty. That’s a bad word.”

Natty’s eyes widen and he turns to Alyssa. “You said a bad word, Lyssa. Don’t say that.”

“I won’t,” she says, but I honestly doubt she’ll last more than five minutes.

Zachariah—if he even is Zachariah—grimaces. “This is all my fault.”

I’m not sure what he means, exactly, but I nod anyway. It’s kind of nice for someone else to shoulder the blame for something for a change. Which makes me a horrible person, since that someone else is in prison and already shouldering a ton of blame. So yup, it’s all my fault once again.

I sigh and turn to Alyssa. “So you’re sure that’s... Ri?” I rarely use the nickname and it feels a bit odd, saying it aloud. Zachariah is the man I know. The one Natty and I visit. Ri is... the prisoner who stays behind bars after we leave. Which makes zero sense, when I think about it.

“That’s Daddy,” Natty adds and resumes singing.

Alyssa grins. “I have an idea. Why don’t you ask him some questions only Zachariah would know the answer to. At the very least, it should be entertaining.”

It’s not a bad idea. “Okay...” I mull it over for a second. “What’s Natty’s favorite food?”

Alyssa shakes her head. “I said entertaining.”

“Pizza,” Natty shouts.

“You’re not supposed to answer,” I tell him.

Zachariah leans forward. “And waffles with ice cream, right, bud? Ask me another one.”

“What was the color of the shirt Natty wore when we visited on Christmas?”

Natty doesn't say anything, considering last Christmas was a third of his life ago, and chances are, he doesn't remember.

I can't be sure the real Zachariah would, either. The only reason I do is because Natty refused to wear the Christmas sweater I got him, so Zachariah never got to see it.

Zachariah grins. "Yellow. With a firetruck on the front."

Alyssa shakes her head. "I really thought I'd be hearing some juicy secrets, not toddler fashion choices. You two really are meant for each other. Speaking of, why didn't you tell me the two of you were fated mates, Ri? I thought we were friends." She places her hand above her heart. "I guess I should have known, though, with the way Minnie never misses a visit, and the way you look at her. This one's on me."

"Fated mates..." Zachariah repeats the words, as if he's tasting them.

Alyssa shakes her head and turns to me. "Don't tell me you couldn't see the mating bond? That magic was brighter than a brand-new bullet vibe—" Her gaze shifts to Natty. "Vibeeeeeee...Shit, I got nothing to finish that."

Thankfully, Natty is still too busy singing to notice.

Zachariah's eyes lock on mine. "Did you see it?" he demands.

My cheeks flush as I nod. "I did."

And Zachariah doesn't say anything. He just gapes at me like he's seeing me for the first time.

“Visitation is over,” the guard with the taser shouts suddenly.
“Prisoners, back to your cells.”

“But it’s only been ten minutes,” Waffle Brother—the one in orange—shouts.

“Should have thought of that before you tried to run for it,” the guard shouts back.

I go through the motions, hug Zachariah goodbye, and lead Natty back to the lockers. I load up our wagon on autopilot, but the whole time, I can’t seem to get Zachariah’s shocked, wide-eyed look out of my mind.

The moment we exit into the courtyard, Natty jumps up in his wagon. “Witch, Witch, Scratch that Itch,” he shouts.

I look up and gape at the two dozen people gathered in the courtyard. They’re all wearing black robes with matching pointed hats. Their hands are cuffed behind their backs and a bunch of brooms lie discarded on the ground at their feet.

I pull Natty’s wagon to the gate, where Vigga’s standing next to Marty with a D.

“You missed the event of the century,” she says, eyes bright.

“What happened?” I ask, staying just inside the warded gate in case I want to ask follow up questions, and holding on to a fistful of Natty’s shirt, since he’s leaning out of the wagon, trying to get a better look at the witches.

Vigga grins. “The witches tried to take down the ward, but it only worked for like a second, and then they fell from the sky.”

“No, what happened is a bunch of F-U-C-K-S thought they could break in.” Marty with a D spells it out for Natty’s benefit. “Well, we showed them. The Silver Springs Penitentiary is impenetrable.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Isn’t penetrate literally in the name?”

He pauses. “Huh. Never noticed that.”

Vigga grins. “Good one, Minnie.” Then she breaks into a rendition of ‘It’s Raining Men’ except in her version, it’s raining witches.

Her voice echoes behind us as we head into town, Natty now singing ‘It’s Raining Witches.’ But my mind drifts back to Zachariah.

He may be my fated mate, but that doesn’t mean he has feelings for me. And that’s now, when he knows literally none of my problems. I’ve never told him that Natty and I are squatting at the bakery, or about my reliance on Formula M, not to mention the curse. And possibly a chameleon fated mate in the mix.

There’s no way in hell he will be interested when he gets out of prison and gets to know the real me. And even if, by some miracle, he is... I can’t date. I can’t even use a vibrator without thinking about Julian. How am I supposed to fuck a real man? I’d probably just ruin things by screaming Julian’s name.

Chapter 25



MINNIE

Natty munches on some crackers as we head back into town. I have some time to kill before the speech from hell, so I detour by Jewels Cafe to get Tiptoe... and hopefully some free lunch.

The moment Amber spots us, she waddles around the counter at top speed. “I heard the prison got swarmed by witches. Are you okay?”

“They were *pretend* witches,” Natty says.

Amber shoots me a questioning glance and Chase looks up from his laptop.

“Long story.”

Amber frowns. “Why don’t you ever check your phone? I was worried.”

“I forgot to charge it.” Even though I stayed at Zoe’s, where I had access to working electricity. But it’s not like anyone ever

texts me—unless there are witches literally falling from the sky.

“Can I charge it?” Natty asks, even though I’m pretty sure he has no idea what that means.

I ruffle his hair. “Sure thing, bud.”

Amber shakes her head. “I don’t know how you do it. I can’t function without my phone.”

I shrug. “It’s whatever.” Which is much better than saying I don’t have any friends I can text, Screech just makes me depressed, and cute animal videos just make me wish I had full access to my powers.

“Come on. We can plug it in upstairs. Juli can watch the counter.”

“I’ll be right out,” he shouts from the back room, and I’m really glad he didn’t pop out so we could exchange awkward hellos. I’m even more glad he’s not up at the apartment.

“Wes is making lunch,” Amber says as we slowly make our way up the stairs. “Are you two hungry?”

“I’m hungry.” Natty rubs his belly.

I grin on the inside. “Me too.”

I plug in my phone, turn it on, and spend at least five minutes trying to convince Natty to use the bathroom and wash his hands. Amber helps, and when we finally get back to the living room, Wes serves us heaping plates of stew.

“No onion or garlic in this stew, and only minimal salt,” he says, bringing out the pet-friendly stew in an egg dish for Tiptoe.

The mouse’s collar jingles as he races over, but he doesn’t seem bothered by it, so it’s the least of my problems.

Chase grabs two bowls, and heads for the door. “I’ll eat downstairs with Julian.” Which is probably as much a relief for Julian as it is for me.

Natty and I aren’t the best lunch guests as it is. Formula M only lets me take dainty bites, so I barely make a dent in my food, while half of Natty’s ends up on the floor. Eating with a three-year-old is a messy affair.

This time, though, Latte’s around to scarf it all up.

“More. More!” the pup begs, licking the floor clean.

“We should have called him Mop,” Wes says with a grin.

“Or Baby,” Amber chimes in. “You know, because he was crying all night.”

Latte wags his tail happily.

“Why were you crying all night, Latte?” I ask.

The puppy doesn’t reply. Stupid Formula M.

I try again. “You couldn’t sleep, Latte?”

Latte barks. *“Dark.”*

It all clicks. “Latte’s scared of the dark.” Probably because Julian and Chase put the poor pup in a gift box to surprise Amber. “Maybe you could get him a nightlight?”

Amber and Wes instantly agree and shower Latte with extra attention—and stew. When we're done with lunch, Natty claps his hands. "Licious!"

"Simply divine," I add. "Wes, darling, you truly have outdone yourself."

Darling? Really, Formula M? Really? First I'm hitting on Julian, and now I'm calling Wes darling? Enough is enough!

But Amber's eyes twinkle, and I'm glad she's amused, not annoyed. And she doesn't even seem to mind that I compliment the way Julian's jeans hug his ass when she and I get downstairs.

"You do look hot, Juli," she teases as the door above the cafe jingles, signaling the arrival of a customer.

I look up, and my eyes grow wide. A middle-aged man who has seen a few too many office days walks into the cafe. He's got a receding hairline, beer belly, and silver-rimmed round glasses. There are bags under his eyes and his suit and briefcase are worn out. He looks like he needs a winning lottery ticket almost as much as me.

But what catches my attention is the pink fiery magic running from his chest to mine.

"Oh, man..." Julian shakes his head as he gapes at the mating bond. Which means that I've got five minutes, tops, before Amber, Chase and Wes all know I have a fated mate who looks like an accountant on the verge of burnout.

If Amber is confused by her mate's reaction, she doesn't show it. "Welcome to Jewels Cafe. Can I get you something to drink?"

"Actually, he forgot his wallet," I say, sounding bored. "Or was it your phone?"

His eyes widen. "You recognize me?"

I roll my eyes. "Snakes and a cardigan don't fool me."

He nods, looking resigned—a look that, given the body he's currently in, he pulls off well. "Minnie, we need to talk."

"About what?" I ask, my mind racing while I look bored.

"In private." He grabs my hand and pulls me out the door.

My heart starts to race, and Formula M pumps me full of calm.

Amber shouts after us, Julian calls out her name, and then the door slams shut, silencing them both.

My maybe-mate pulls me down the street and into an empty alley. It's a lot like the one where Natty and I wait for the invisibility spell to wear off, so I'm pretty sure no one will notice us, and Formula M won't let me scream.

I should probably be worried about being murdered, but I'm calm as a cucumber. What's the worst that can happen? He tells me he's my fated mate, and that we're meant to be? Or he admits Montgomery put him up to this, and he's about to remind me of the power she holds over me?

But instead, he does something completely different. He shifts...

...into Danny Stravinsky.

Who's Damien Starr to literally everyone else in the world, except maybe his parents.

Rock star. Former lead singer of Not a Vampire. Man with the world's biggest ego. Abandoner of friends. Breaker of hearts.

He backs me up against the wall, and my heart pounds in my chest. There's so much of the boy I once knew in his face. Those eyes, that smirk, those cheekbones. I can't get over how *familiar* he seems, and yet how foreign. And I can never forget that he ditched me and my 'unclean' wonky magic for a better life.

But he also looks like a different person entirely. All grown up and hot as hell.

No, wait, definitely *not* hot as hell. Lame. I meant lame.

His distressed leather jacket is so overrated, and I can't stand the way it clings to his muscular frame and how his faded tee is tight enough to hint at defined pecs and six-pack abs. I hate his black skinny jeans, slightly torn at the knees, that lead down to worn-in combat boots. And I'm so not attracted to his slightly tousled hair, or the dark eyeliner that emphasizes his eyes. Who does he think he is, dressing like this off the stage?

It's probably not even him. Just another shifted form. Because there's no way Damien Starr would come find me after all this time, or turn out to be my fated mate.

My mind is still racing when he reaches inside his leather jacket. For a split second, my crazy brain screams gun.

That is, until he says, “Minerva Montgomery, will you marry me?”

Then, I expect a ring, but he holds up a ziplock bag with a slightly yellowed, faded piece of paper inside. The marriage contract Danny and I drafted up when we were kids.

And all I can think is that he really is Damien Starr, and not just another chameleon trick, and he is my fated mate.

Chapter 26



DAMIEN

I'm not sure what I expect. Maybe for her to laugh in my face and say, 'hell no.' Or at least for some shock to register on her face at the sight of our marriage contract, drafted in crayon when we were seven, and signed in blood—her idea, not mine, because she's a Montgomery.

But Minnie doesn't look the least bit surprised at my blast from the past. She just rolls her eyes. "Well, if it isn't Daniel Stravinsky."

"I go by Damien Starr now." Ever since I was sixteen and my agent told me the only type of music I'll ever be known for as a Stravinsky is classical and I might as well take up violin. I figured it was easier to change my name, and Damien Starr stuck. Suits me more than Danny, the nerdy little kid who never fit in.

"And I go by Minnie Alexander now." Minnie examines her fingernails, and a wave of annoyance courses through me.

She's changed so much since I knew her. She used to be vibrant and full of life, and now she's the same spoiled socialite witch as her mother. Like two peas in a pod.

I want to tell her exactly what I think of her, but considering I just proposed, it probably wouldn't be such a bright idea. I *need* to marry Minnie. I don't have a choice. Not unless I want to live in a gilded cage.

I hold up the marriage contract a little higher. "Remember this?"

She shrugs. "Not really."

I know she's lying. She has to be.

I remember that day like it was yesterday. The two of us were up in my treehouse, a box of crayons between us, when Minnie told me we needed a contract to make sure we were friends forever.

"Nothing is official unless there's a contract involved," she'd said, or some bullshit like that.

Next thing I knew we'd drafted it, swearing that she'd be mine and I'd be hers. Forever. And then, the next day, she was gone.

I tap the paper through the plastic bag. "That's your blood and mine right there."

Minnie still sounds bored. "Is it?"

"Minerva Montgomery and Daniel Stravinsky..." I start to read.

"Are dead."

“Excuse me?”

“You’re Damien Starr and I’m Minnie Alexander.” She shrugs, like it’s no big deal. “Minerva and Daniel were kids who stopped talking years ago. They’re gone.”

“Changing your name doesn’t change who you are,” I snap.

Except I’m wrong. Damien Starr is a confident rock star who’s found fame and fortune. Daniel Stravinsky was a wimpy boy who was head over heels in love with his best friend.

And I’m not the only one who’s changed...

Minerva Montgomery was filled with joyful energy. Everything about her was loud, from her laughter, to her huge smile, to the way she reacted to the smallest surprise. She loved nature, and would race after any animal she met just to have a chat.

I loved watching her in those moments, arms flapping like bird wings, or butt wiggling like a dog’s tail. And I thought she’d always be there for me. I thought it would be the two of us until the end.

But instead, she turned into Minnie Alexander, a spoiled witch who only cares about herself. And she changed long before her name did.

Minnie rolls her eyes. “Can I go now? I’ve got places to be, you know.”

“After you agree to marry me.”

“Yeah, not happening.” Mini examines her pink fingernails, and I have the urge to grab a loofah or nail file or whatever it is people use to remove nail polish on them and scrub the polish off. I’d ask my band mates what they use... if we were still talking... but we’re not, and Minnie had better marry me so I can get them back.

How the fuck am I going to pull this off?

I hate her guts. I hate her nails. I hate her shoes. I hate her skin-tight dress, even if it does hug her curves and makes me want to run my hands... fucking hell in a handbasket that masquerades as a fancy-ass pink purse that reminds me of the one her mother used to lug around. I fucking hate this new and un-improved Minnie so much, I’m not sure I’ll be able to force out my vows, even if I have no choice.

Her only redeeming quality is that she’s hot as hell, but her attitude manages to douse any arousal I feel faster than the ice baths the band and I did for our *Mer Me Hard* music video.

But I’d rather be married to the annoying as hell woman in front of me than the one waiting for me if I don’t, so I press on. “I’ll pay you.”

Because if there’s something a spoiled socialite like Minnie would appreciate, it’s cold hard cash.

Once again, I make the mistake of expecting a reaction. I don’t get one.

Minnie would make one hell of a poker player, I’ll give her that. Maybe she can school a poker player or three any time

she likes, and *that's* why she's not the least bit interested in the money I have on offer.

Or maybe it's because her parents are loaded, and already pay for all the designer clothes her little heart desires...

I already know she doesn't need her fucking job at the cafe. She just wants an excuse to be near her precious Julian.

But there must be something she can't put on Daddy's credit card. Something her parents don't approve of. And I'm here to deliver.

Only she bursts that bubble real quick. "I don't need your money."

I raise an eyebrow and cross my arms in front of my chest. "Ah, so that's why you work minimum wage."

She shrugs. "It's a hobby."

Called it.

"Is your hobby throwing yourself at Julian?"

She yawns. "Whatever."

I resist the urge to strangle her and decide to switch tactics.

"How did you recognize me?"

She doesn't reply.

"You knew I was the gorgon, and Violet, and you recognized me as the accountant. How?"

She shrugs. "You have a tell."

Fuck. She really could school someone at poker. Probably does, on the regular.

I place a hand on the wall behind her. “There must be something you want. Name it, and it’s yours. All you have to do is marry me.” And save me from a fate worse than death.

Then I can ditch you and your annoying ass and go back to living my life.

Chapter 27



MINNIE

I hate to admit it, but Damien Starr is even hotter in person than he is in the photos he constantly posts on Screech. Could he be more vain? Not that I stalk his profile or anything. Especially considering I deleted the app ages ago. But every once in a while, Amber's got it up on her phone, and I can't help but sneak a peek.

Damien towers over me, a cocky smile on his lips. The longer I spend near him, the more I want to kiss it away, but Formula M keeps me from leaning in. *Thank the goddess!*

I lounge back against the brick wall as if nothing is the matter. As if it doesn't hurt to see the man Danny grew up to be. As if it doesn't bother me that my childhood friend was too embarrassed to be seen with me.

Being with him, like this, feels so familiar and so *right*. And yet so foreign and so *wrong*. And it hurts so much more than I thought it would.

I avoided him like the plague when Not a Vampire came to Silver Springs several years back. But not because I expected it to be this hard. I just didn't have the energy to watch him pretend he didn't know who I was.

Instead, I pictured a different reunion. One where I'd be on the arms of a handsome prince and Damien would fall to his knees and beg for forgiveness. Or he would proclaim his undying love, and I'd tell him 'too bad, I've moved on.' What? A girl can dream.

And I have moved on, because I'm not falling for his act twice.

"Come on, Minnie. Think about it. You could marry a famous rock star. You'll be all over the tabloids, and all over Screech. As popular as it gets."

The thought of that much attention makes me want to throw up. I examine my perfectly manicured nails. "Tempting, but I'd also have to be married to you... so pass."

Minnie - One Gazillion

Damien - Zero

He growls, and the sound sends a shiver down my spine. He's got one palm flat on the wall next to my head, and he leans forward, crowding me. Not giving me space to breathe.

His closeness sends my body into overdrive, but Formula M counteracts all his Damien-y effects, and keeps me indifferent. Keeps me *safe*.

But it also doesn't let me react. At all. Even my heart refuses to race, which somehow makes things worse. It doesn't leave me with anywhere to channel all the nervous energy I feel.

There's nowhere for all this attraction I feel toward Damien Starr to go.

It makes me feel all the more out of sorts. But the more I feel off, the more Formula M doubles down. Which leaves me with no escape.

My feet refuse to walk away.

My hands refuse to shove Damien's chest.

And as he starts to lean in, I realize there is nothing I can do to stop him from kissing me.

I also realize that I don't want to.

Please kiss me, Damien! I want to feel a man's lips on mine. I want to know what it's like to kiss someone.

His hot breath caresses my mouth and I crave him with every cell in my body. I *need* to kiss him.

My lips move. "Thanks, but no thanks."

Damien instantly pulls away, leaving me feeling bereft. Leaving me silently begging for his lips, knowing I'll never get to feel them against mine. Knowing I'll never get to taste him, and just how much I want to.

Damien scowls. "It can be a marriage of convenience."

Frustration is practically leaking off him. The man is clearly used to getting whatever—and whoever—he wants. He never

had to deal with disappointment in his life. He wasn't raised by Maude Montgomery. He never had his heart broken after his best friend ghosted him. He never felt shackled by a potion. He has never known what it was like not to be good enough.

All those feelings grow inside me, and Formula M shoves them down as far as they'll go. I wonder, for the gazillionth time, how much more I can take. Will I reach a point when all those bottled-up feelings explode, and not even Formula M will be able to keep me whole?

Damien groans. "Look, Minnie, I wouldn't be asking if I had any other choice."

I roll my eyes, even though what I really want to do is cry. "Are you saying no one else is willing to marry the great Damien Starr?"

"I can't marry anyone else," he snaps. "It has to be you."

My gaze drifts down to the pink, fiery magic connecting us.

It has to be you...

How many times have I longed to hear those words? How many days did I spend waiting for him to call me? Hoping that he'd tell me he made a mistake? That it's always been me? That he *needed* me?

Why? Why? Why?

My mind screams it so loud I'm sure he can hear me. I *need* to know why. Why now? Why is he here? Why does it have to be me?

But the words won't leave my mouth. I'll never know. I'll never know because Formula M won't let me.

It stamps down the rage I feel toward it, until there's just a sliver left, deep down. I barely even feel it anymore. I hardly even care.

Damien lowers his voice to a whisper. "I need you to honor this marriage contract. Please."

Please.

The word echoes through the empty alley and floats up into the sky.

"No." I don't say it. Formula M does.

Tell me that you love me, I silently beg. Tell me you've never stopped loving me. Tell me that I'm the only one for you. Tell me you can't live another second without me.

I wouldn't believe it if it weren't for the mate bond. It must be real. Maude Montgomery would have no reason to make me think my childhood best friend—the one she never liked—is my fated mate. She hates rock stars. And she hates convicts even more. She'd never bond me to Zachariah.

Unless she's trying to mess with me...

Is this another punishment for letting Julian get away? But why?

Why? Why? Why? "You should go." I sound bored. I always sound bored. The perfect society witch.

I hate it!

I'm so tired of sounding bored. I'm so tired of taking Formula M. I'm so tired of Maude Montgomery's games. Of the stupid curse I'll never be able to lift. Of the pain.

"Come on, Minnie. There must be something you want. Something I can give you in exchange for marriage. Name your price."

Fix my life, I think, but even Damien can't do that. Can he?

He could pay for the cruise I can't afford. He could shell out the two hundred thousand dollars it would take to pay for Formula M 2.0. He could buy the bakery and get us water and electricity. And maybe, just maybe, he could finally admit that he's always loved me. That he made a mistake, but he regrets leaving me behind.

"Not in a million years, Damien Starr."

Because who am I kidding? I could never say yes. Formula M would never let me. And I should be glad. It saved me from being a gold digger who marries a man she's never stopped loving, but who never truly loved her, because she can't get a decent job.

And despite all the things wrong with me, at least I've never sold myself...

Damien scowls at me, shoves away from the wall, and shifts into a yeti. He breaks into a run, down the alley, onto the street, and I let him go. It's not like I have a choice.

But I can't help wondering... if I stop taking Formula M, could I marry him? Or would the curse prevent me from

marrying a man who isn't Julian?

Chapter 28



MINNIE

The moment I get back to Jewels Cafe, Amber rushes around the counter to greet me. “Minnie, tell me everything!”

I wave my arm dismissively. “There’s nothing to tell.” Then I bat my eyelashes and giggle. “Hi, Julian.”

“Oh no you don’t. We need to talk.” Amber grabs my hand and tugs me toward the stairs.

Well, that doesn’t sound ominous at all. But what am I supposed to do, get myself uncursed so I can stop flirting with Julian?

Amber pulls me past Chase, who’s so engrossed in whatever he’s typing on his laptop, he doesn’t even look up. “The muse strikes when the muse strikes,” she says absently. “The same is true for a lot of things, apparently.”

Like ex-best friends who pop into town and offer you money in exchange for marriage when they could have their pick of women.

My mind is still on Danny turned Damien when we get upstairs. A delicious aroma wafts through the apartment, and I hope Wes made enough for everyone. I'm also a little jealous that Amber has a mate whose hobbies are to cook, clean, and play with kids—I never thought men like that existed, but the proof is in the bear shifter.

He's on the living room floor with Natty. They're both laughing as they build a tall tower out of blocks, while Latte circles around them, barking and wagging his tail. Tiptoe's on the pup's back, hanging on to the pup's fur, pink collar jingling.

All four of them shout hellos as Amber tugs me through the living room, down the hall, and into the nursery. She shuts the door. "I'll get the magic dampener. You dish. Juli told me about the mate bond and I want to hear every detail."

At least she didn't bring me up here to yell at me for hitting on Julian.

It's not the first time Amber's gotten the dampener so we could chat, but what the goddess do I say? That my fated mate is Damien Starr? And by the way, he's a complete 'hole with a capital ass,' as Zoe likes to say. And oh, Amber, you should stop fangirling all over him at every opportunity because his ego is inflated enough already?

By the time Amber snaps the magic dampener around my neck, I'm still drawing a blank.

Amber tosses two pillows from the windowsill onto the carpeted floor next to the broken cribs. We sit down, and then

she turns to me, eyes sparkling. “First thing first. What’s his name?”

It’s not like I can tell her it’s Damien Starr. “Danny.”

“Danny...” she repeats. “What’s he like?”

Cocky, arrogant, self-centered. “Confident. Self-assured. Knows what he wants.”

Her eyes widen. “He looked... more like the intellectual type.”

“He’s a chameleon shifter, like you.”

She gasps. “Oh my goddess! Now it all makes sense.”

I nod. “Remember the gorgon who was in here a few days ago?”

Amber’s eyes widen further. “He shifted into the gorgon? And kept up the form for hours?!”

I nod.

“What does he really look like? Is he hot? Are you attracted to him? Of course you are! He’s your mate! Do you want to marry him and have his babies?”

“He wants to marry me.” I blurt it out before I can think better of it.

Amber’s jaw drops. “But you just met.” She shakes her head.

“No, that doesn’t matter. You’re *fated mates*! How did he ask? What did you say?”

My heart starts to pound quadruple-time, and I have to remind myself to breathe.

Breathe.

Breathe.

“Minnie?”

Oh right. “I said no.”

She gasps. “You did not.”

“I did. But he wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Oh my.” She fans herself. “When are you going to see him again?”

“This weekend.” Which is an outright lie. A part of me hopes Damien packs up and leaves town. Another hopes he actually refuses to take no for an answer... and professes his undying love... and tells me he’s sorry, he made a mistake, and he hasn’t been able to stop thinking about me since the day he ditched me for a better life.

Amber claps her hands and starts grilling me about details. What he wore: leather jacket, hot. Combat boots, yum. Where we talked: narrow alley, promising. With my back pinned against the wall, whoa.

“Okay, next time he proposes, you’ve got to say yes,” Amber practically shouts.

I nod, even though I know it’s not happening.

She grins. “You better. That man sounds smoking hot.”

“Do I have competition?” Wes opens the door and peeks inside. “Sorry, shifter hearing. And Minnie, your phone’s ringing.”

He holds it up.

I shrug. It's not like anyone ever calls me. "It's probably spam."

"It's the prison."

I gasp. "Pick it up. *Pick it up!*"

Wes taps the screen. "Hello? Just a moment." He hands me my cell. "It's Natty's dad."

"Zachariah?" I ask in surprise.

"Who the fuck was that?" he demands.

His angry, possessive tone does something funny to me, and I sound breathless when I reply. "Amber's mate, Wes. I'm with Amber right now."

"Hi, Zachariah," she calls out.

"Oh..." Zachariah says.

"So, who was it?" Vigga calls out in the background.

"Her friend's mate. I'm so glad I reached you, Minnie. Third time's the charm."

"Enough small talk," Vigga snaps. "Only reason I'm letting you make this call is because I like Minnie and that adorable boy of yours."

The way she says it makes it sound like we're one big happy family. Could we be someday? Would Zachariah want that? And would Formula M let me?

“Minnie...” Zachariah says my name in that deep, sexy way of his and I feel another wave of panic.

What if he wants to talk about the mate bond? I’m not ready for that! Especially with Amber and Wes in the room.

As if reading my mind, Amber pushes herself to her feet. “We’ll give you some privacy,” she whispers.

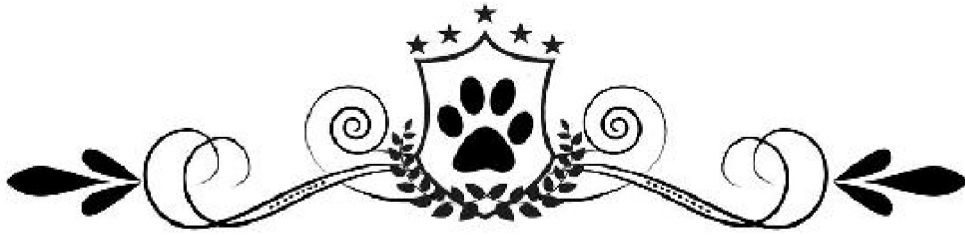
But that doesn’t make things any better. If anything, it makes things worse. I’m not ready to talk about our future. Then I’d have to explain how different I am outside the warded prison. And how I act every time I’m around Julian. And the fact that I’ll have to follow him around for the rest of my life. Not to mention the fact that I’ve been raising his son in the boarded up, dusty bakery my parents sold to a developer when they disowned me. Fully knowing a crew might show up to renovate it or tear it down at any moment.

And the thought of bringing all that up literally makes me want to throw up.

I take in a deep breath. “Did you want to talk to Natty?” I ask quickly.

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you.”

Chapter 29



MINNIE

My heart leaps. Then sinks. Zachariah wants to talk to me. To *me*.

I take a deep breath, then another.

“Tell her already,” Vigga complains in the background. “Marty with a D is taking over in a couple minutes, and that guy’s got a stick up his butt longer than the queen of England.”

I hadn’t realized sticks were measured in queens, I think idly. Now that my phone is charged, I’ll have to look it up.

I think I’m going insane.

“My parole hearing was moved up,” Zachariah says.

It takes me a moment to wrap my mind around what he just said. “What? To when?”

“Monday.”

I gasp. “Monday? As in this Monday?”

“Yes. This Monday!” I can hear the excitement in his voice. “I don’t want to get ahead of myself, or get your hopes up, or Natty’s. Don’t tell him until it’s a sure thing. But there’s a really good chance I may get paroled.”

“It’s pretty much a done deal,” Vigga shouts. “Prison’s overcrowded with all the witches that rained down this morning. Once they’re sentenced, some of them will be moved to other prisons, but until then, a few of the good ones are getting out. Like your Ri. Pardon me. Zachariah. Keeping it fancy, huh?”

My heart and stomach leap, sink, and leap again.

Zachariah could get parole and be out in a few days. And now that we know we’re fated mates, maybe there’s a chance we could make a relationship work. Assuming he can stand Formula M me. Or at least, maybe he’ll let me stay in Natty’s life? Assuming he doesn’t tell me to go to hell when he finds out where I’ve been living with his son.

“It’s just me and a few guys,” Zachariah explains. “Alyssa’s still got one more year, and she doesn’t want parole.”

“That’s too bad.” Though a bit of that is relief. It’s not like I’m jealous of Alyssa. I know she’s not interested in him, and she was genuinely happy when she saw our mate bond. Plus, she’s been looking out for him in prison, and I owe her. Big time. But a part of me doesn’t want to share. A part of me wants Zachariah all to myself.

“Once I’m out, I’m going to need a place to stay,” Zachariah adds. “And I was hoping I could crash at your place.”

The boarded-up bakery? Shit. Shit. Shit!

A few seconds pass in silence. “Just until I get back on my feet.”

“Way to romance the girl,” Vigga hisses in the background. “Promise to cook, clean, and give her lots of orgasms. Then you might stand a shot.”

“I’ll help around the house,” he says. No mention of orgasms. “And I’d like to be near Natty until I get custody back.”

It feels like the floor falls out from under my feet. Custody. He’s going to regain custody. And then, he’ll leave me behind.

“I wouldn’t ask if I had anyone else,” Zachariah adds. “It won’t be for long. And I swear if you get uncomfortable with me there, even for a second, I’ll leave.”

“Okay,” I whisper before I can think better of it. It’s the desperation in his voice that does it. He doesn’t have anyone else. He *needs* me.

“Did she say yes?” Vigga demands. Zachariah must nod, because she says, “See? Told you it would work out.”

A door slams in the background, and Marty with a D shouts, “What the hell, Vigga? This isn’t a payphone at a diner! Rules are here for a reason!”

“What the fuck’s a payphone?” Vigga demands. I can’t tell if she’s serious or just messing with him, though.

“Sorry, I have to go,” Zachariah says quickly.

“Tell her the time,” Vigga shouts.

“Right. Hearing’s Monday at eleven. I’d love it if you and Natty could come. Don’t tell him I might get released, just... bring him? Please?”

The line goes dead before I can reply, and for a long moment, all I can do is stare at the phone, the weight of Zachariah’s news pressing down on me.

I don’t know how long I stay on the floor before Amber comes in. “Minnie? You okay?”

I nod. There’s awe in my voice when I finally say, “Zachariah’s getting paroled.”

“Oh,” Amber breathes. “Natty.”

I nod.

She sits down across from me and we just talk. I tell her that even though Zachariah won’t get custody back right away, I may lose Natty much sooner than I’d planned. Hopefully, I’ll still be in his life, even if I won’t be his guardian anymore. And how much better things will be if Natty can have his dad for more than two hours a week.

“You can borrow the magic dampener,” Amber adds. “That way, you can really talk.”

I nod. And if Formula M was my only problem, it might be enough. But I can’t tell Amber I’m living at the bakery... and I’m not ready to tell her that Zachariah’s my fated mate. She’ll just get excited, and I don’t think I can handle that right now. I can’t get my hopes up when it might not work.

Amber yawns. “Sorry. Being pregnant makes me tired. But I’m here for you.” She places a comforting hand on mine.

I force a smile. “Thanks, Amber. It means a lot.”

And it almost, *almost*, feels like we’re friends.

I jump to my feet. “I think what you need is a nap.”

“Now that you mention it, I wouldn’t mind resting a bit before Zoe gets here. She called while you were out, and we decided to all walk down to the library together.” Amber slowly rises from the floor, and I hold out my hand and help her the rest of the way. “But I need to take over downstairs. Juli offered to pick up a nightlight for Latte, but Chase is probably still writing—when he gets in the zone he can be at it for hours—and Wes needs to stay upstairs to keep an eye on dinner.”

“I don’t mind covering. I don’t have any other plans... As long as Julian leaves before I come downstairs.”

Amber grins and pulls out her phone. “That can be arranged.”

The moment she gives me the all-clear, I head downstairs. The benefit of working is I don’t get much of a chance to think. Or worry. And because Amber removes the magic dampener before I go, I feel calm enough to handle anything.

The cafe’s busy, which is a great distraction. Wes and Natty come down briefly to watch the counter while I go upstairs and help myself to cream of broccoli soup and pasta—in small dainty bites—and then I head back down so they can go play.

And try my best not to think about the impending confrontation with the crazed vampire doctor and hater of

fuzzies.

The bell above the cafe dings some time later, and Zoe marches in. “Minnie. Good. You’re here. Where’s Amber? It’s time to go!”

A heavy feeling settles in my gut and Formula M takes over. I gesture at the line in front of the counter and roll my eyes. “I’m kind of busy.”

Zoe looks around, spots Chase typing away at his computer, and makes it levitate.

“Hey!” he shouts, jumping up to grab his laptop. He spots Zoe a second later and scowls at her. “Not funny!”

“Wasn’t meant to be,” she says, circling the bar and grabbing my arm. “I need to borrow Minnie. Cover for her. And where is Amber? We have a crazy vampire to stop.”

Chapter 30



ASHOK

I step onto the stage and try to figure out what the vampire equivalent of prayer might be. As if anyone would listen to mine.

I clear my throat. *Soulless creatures of the night*, rests on the tip of my tongue, but I know those aren't the right words. And the higher-ups would not be amused. They wrote my speech to appeal to our target demographic, and straying from the pre-approved words would ruin everything I've been working toward.

Don't trust your gut, Ashok. Your gut has led you astray since the day you were turned.

And, if the agency is to be believed, vampires aren't soulless after all.

I clear my throat and start with my rehearsed speech. "My fellow supernatural residents of Silver Springs."

The supernatural residents in question don't look very friendly, and panic courses through me. I'd been expecting a few animal rights activists, but half the people in the room are holding up signs that read 'Free the Fuzzies,' and they're glaring at me like they wish I'd be one with my name and turn to Ash.

My gaze keeps drifting to one in particular, a redhead wearing a skin-tight pink dress that's under some sort of magic that makes it reflect light. It creates a warm, pink glow around her, which is extremely distracting, but no one else seems the least bit bothered. Then again, no one's gaping at the yeti in the third row either.

But what really draws me to the redhead isn't her outfit—it's the fact that she's hands down the most gorgeous woman I've ever laid eyes on. Her hair is thick and silky and begging to be touched. I want to cover her glossy, full lips with mine and get lost in her gorgeous green eyes while I fuck...

Oh shit, my fangs. I feel them pressing against my lower lip and quickly pop them back in.

I also realize I'm packing a semi, and focus my attention on the yeti. Nothing gets rid of a boner faster than the sight of a hairy white man.

It doesn't matter how floored I am by the woman in pink. She's clearly out of my league... both now that I'm a vampire, and back when I was just the kid genius everyone wanted to admire but no one ever wanted to date or befriend.

That and she's holding up a 'Free the Fuzzies' sign, just like half the people here, including the blonde and brunette sitting on either side of her.

It reminds me of all the lame 'walked into a bar' jokes Dadaji—my paternal grandfather—used to tell me.

The brunette actually looks sort of familiar, but I have no idea where I might have run into her. And it doesn't really matter. I need to focus. I'm here for a reason. To stop vampires from feeding on humans. Not to spring boners at the sight of redheads.

It's why the agency funded my research instead of putting me behind bars. It's why they brought me here to Silver Springs. It's why I'm standing on this stage. They believe in me.

I can do this. I can convince them to purchase their own fuzzies. I can switch the vampire world to a more humane way of feeding, one creature at a time. And then, maybe I'll finally be able to look at myself in the mirror again.

If I could, which I can not. Because apparently I come from a lineage of vampires who don't have reflections—while others in the room may not be so unlucky.

Someone in the audience coughs. Someone else scratches their head, the sound of nails against skin echoing through the otherwise silent room.

Say something, Ashok.

I clear my throat again and try to take a deep breath. All it does is remind me I'm a vampire and I don't need to breathe.

Fang darn it!

Every pair of eyes in the room bores into me, and I mentally thumb through my arsenal of public speaking tricks. The only one that comes up is my dadaji's advice—which he offered to me when I was defending my postgraduate thesis at seventeen.

Picture the audience in their underwear.

It worked with the three professors, and it's all I've got.

My gaze instinctively snaps to the redhead, my cock stirs, and I quickly shift my gaze to the front row. It seems wrong to start with the scowling librarian, since she's holding hands with her even less friendly-looking assistant, and I don't think he'd like me picturing his girl half-naked. I'd rather not see him scowling in boxers or briefs, so I quickly move on.

My gaze lands on a little old lady who's cozied up on the lap of a guy my age. His outfit screams sixteenth or seventeenth century with that flashy red and gold doublet and breeches. A cop is seated to her left, massaging her feet, and a guy straight out of Victorian England is on her right, holding her hand, a top hat resting beneath his chair. Despite my brief obsession with British history when I was eight, I can't even begin to guess what kind of undergarments they might have on. I also have no desire to picture granny panties, and mentally undressing a cop is probably illegal.

My gaze snaps back to the redhead in the glowing pink dress, and then quickly away. I move my eyes over the second row, then the third, and the fourth. I don't want to know what half of these creatures are packing, or whether it can be contained

in their underwear or if they like to go commando. Hell, I've never been one for underwear... shit's itchy and inconvenient, and picturing the audience wearing it makes me wonder if their balls are itchy. Do yetis have balls?

"Fuck, focus, Ash, forget about yeti balls," I mutter under my breath.

"Did he say just say something about yeti balls?" the little old lady in the front row asks the room at large.

A woman in a hoodie in the back row snickers. "They better not smell like yeti balls."

I break into a sweat. Or I would if I could sweat. Apparently vampire skin is cold and not conducive to panicked sweating. Literally the only redeemable quality of this new existence, except maybe immortality—and even that I could do without. An endless life of guilt. An endless life of loneliness. An endless life without purpose.

Except, I do have a purpose, I remind myself. To sell some fuzzies.

"That's what they look like," I tell the audience, and don't bother praying they believe me. Prayer is reserved for creatures who deserve it. All that's left for me is redemption. "Yeti balls." Or Tribbles from Star Trek, but I've been told not to mention that under any circumstance, since polls show it would reduce the likelihood of a vampire wanting to bite them. "But I like to call them fuzzies. And no, they don't smell like balls."

There are a few snickers.

And if I wasn't dead, I'd sigh in relief when Barb pushes a button, and the first slide comes up. Cages and cages of my redemption.

Chapter 31



MINNIE

I can't stop staring into Dr. Ashok Reddy's deep, dark eyes as his soft, comforting voice echoes through the library's meeting room. With the fancy title, I expected him to be in his fifties, but he looks around my age... and all I can think is how could someone so hot be so evil?

He makes my heart race. He makes me want to shove the audience listening to his horrible speech aside and throw myself in his arms. I want to run my fingers through his jet-black hair, and pull his head down so I can feel his lips against mine. And with each thought, I hate myself more.

I don't hear a single word he's saying, but I know he's spouting lies. The slide on the screen has fuzzies in 'cages' that look more like VIP lounges. The clear walls reveal plush beds, gold food and water bowls, and even wall-mounted screens with FuzzyTV—travel videos from around the world to keep them entertained. It's a far cry from the metal box Zoe

bowled at the monster two years ago, and I know it's just a distraction from reality. The fuzzies are being sold as *food*.

Almost every vampire in the room knows the whole thing's a farce. Zoe and Amber compared notes on the walk over, and it sounded like they managed to reach out to practically every vamp in town between them.

Only reason no one's shouting 'liar' and 'monster' is because Violet made the rules clear. We're allowed to peacefully protest by holding up our signs. We are not allowed to disrupt the library program, or we'll be asked to leave. And everyone wants to stick around to say their piece. Including me.

I need to stop him from brainwashing good, honest vamps into feeding on their pets. It's disgusting, and I'm not going to let him get away with it. *No matter what!*

I hold up my 'Free the Fuzzies' sign higher, but the pink rope of magic that connects me to the crazy vamp on the stage mocks me with its fiery glow.

I yawn. Then yawn again.

All the witches in the room can see the fiery magic, and they keep staring at it like they've never seen a mate bond before. Which, in a town like Silver Springs, is absurd. All three of Zoe's mates are here, and turquoise mating bonds connect her to each of her men. Librarian Violet and her bear shifter assistant, Nole, are connected with a purple bond, and purple magic links her to the troll cop, Liam, who's watching the exit. Then there's the older vampire Violet, and her three mates, too.

Honestly, the entire room is a mix of mate bonds, and yet no one's paying attention to any but mine.

Another yawn slips from my lips. Dr. Ashok Reddy notices, and I swear the man blushes. I should be proud of myself for insulting his riveting talk, but now he's staring at me, while all the witches are staring at our mating bond, and my heart is racing a mile a minute. Which just makes everything ten times worse.

The only consolation is that there aren't too many witches in the room, so the majority of the audience is blissfully unaware. They think everything is going as planned, and wait for our turn to speak.

Dr. Ashok Reddy finally turns to the audience. "Any questions?"

Xavi raises his hand, and the mad scientist gestures at him. "Yes? The gentleman in the blue shirt."

"Xavi Izaguirre, independent blogger, formerly with the Silver Springs Herald," he introduces himself like we're at a press conference, not the library meeting room. "Dr. Reddy—"

"Just call me Ash," the mad scientist tells him like they're old friends.

Sapphire snorts. "Ash Reddy? It's like he wants to get his ass staked. Hmm... I wouldn't mind getting my ass staked, if you know what I mean." She elbows Wim, her wolf shifter mate.

"It's like he's trying to make our jobs more difficult," Liam mutters, one hand on his weapon, eyes scanning the room.

“Tell me about it,” another cop mutters.

Amber giggles and nudges my shoulder. “Isn’t it a terrible villain name?”

She glances at Zoe and me for backup, but those of us who can see the mate bond are too distracted to pay attention to Dr. Ashok’s terrible nickname.

Amber giggles and says “ready, set, ash” in a peppy, cheerleading voice.

Xavi clears his throat. “Is it true that you’ve been experimenting on animals?”

Ash Reddy clears his throat. He seems like he’s about to answer, and then recites a line he’s obviously memorized. “My goal is to better the lives of vampire-kind by creating a more ethical food source.”

Xavi raises his hand again, politely waiting until Ash Reddy points at him. “Is it true that you’re causing pain and suffering to your so-called food source, the adorable fuzzies we see on the screen?”

This time, Ash Reddy runs his hands through his hair. His lips move, but no sound comes out. It kind of looks like he’s counting to ten under his breath. Then, he says, “I’ve engineered fuzzies to be a willing food source.”

“What does that mean, exactly?” someone from the audience calls out.

“It means that they enjoy getting bit.”

Which is my cue.

“You’ve got this,” Amber whispers, holding up the magic dampener. “Ready?”

I nod.

Zoe fixed me up with a hair straightener and some real makeup in the library bathroom when we first arrived, so I won’t look like a complete mess without my spells. And no one will notice if my nails are unmanicured when I give my speech.

Amber clips the necklace shut and all the spells, including my ability to see the mating bond, disappear.

I jump to my feet. “Fuzzies do not *enjoy* getting bit,” I shout. “Getting bit *hurts*. It’s *traumatizing*. You’re causing fuzzies to suffer.”

“Actually, you’re wrong about that,” he says smugly.

Outrage courses through me. How dare he spread his lie and encourage the kind, caring vampires of Silver Springs to bite fuzzies?

But he isn’t done. “I’ve been performing brain scans, and they’ve revealed something fascinating about fuzzies. The pleasure centers in their brains light up like fireworks when a vampire bites them. My neurological work is indubitable proof that they absolutely love it.”

The way he says indubitable makes me want to punch him in his smug, fancy vocab loving face.

“Fascinating...” Roman, who works at the aquarium, pushes his glasses up his nose. I know for a fact that he’s a vampire, just like his outgoing twin, Levi, who’s a regular at Jewels Cafe—so the glasses must be for show. “Can you tell us more about your neurological work?”

That gets Ash Reddy going, and he launches into a bunch of science speak that goes way over my head. As if he thinks he’ll be able to confuse the sweet, caring vampires of Silver Springs into biting fuzzies. Well, I’ll show him.

“He’s making it all up,” I shout, my heart pounding in my ears so loud I’m sure the entire vampire population of Silver Springs can hear it, and probably the rest of the supernatural community, too. “I can talk to animals, and I know for a fact that everything you’re saying is a lie.”

Violet the elder spins around in her seat. “Since when can you talk to animals?”

“Why are we even listening to her? She’s a bitch and a liar,” Rose, who runs Club Vee with her vampire mates, shouts. And I deserve it for the horrible things I’ve said to her, all because of Formula M.

“Zoe, you need to speak,” Rylie Storm, a biker who adores animals, shouts. She holds her ‘Free the Fuzzies’ sign higher. “Tell everyone about Snow.”

More voices join in until everyone’s talking all at once. My chest starts to hurt and I realize that I’ve forgotten to breathe. And unlike the monster currently spouting lies, I *need* to.

I take a giant breath, then another, and another. I can't seem to suck enough air as the vampire in question manages to regain control of the room and continues to spout lies.

I need to tell him he's a fraud—that I've heard the truth, straight from the source—but I can't even get enough air to speak.

Chapter 32



MINNIE

Dr. Ash Reddy turns to me. “Are you alright?” he asks. And the worst part is he sounds genuinely concerned.

How dare he sound like he cares? How dare he act like this kind, caring scientist with all this research to back his case, and make me look like some crazy lady claiming she can talk to animals while clutching her chest and hyperventilating like a pathetic, useless weirdo?

Pathetic. Useless. Weirdo.

The words echo in my head and I react on instinct. I run.

I race out of the room and stare around the mostly empty library. Natty’s laughter echoes from the children’s section—where we left him with Wes—and I race towards the aisle furthest from him. The romance section, where the little boy won’t notice I’m falling apart.

I collapse on the carpeted floor, and then Zoe’s suddenly there. “Here, let me take off the magic dampener.”

“No,” I cry, moving away from her. I can’t bear the thought of losing myself right now. Of letting Formula M take over, and being forced to shove my feelings down deep.

I can’t. I can’t. I can’t.

I let out a sob.

I feel like I’m going to explode.

Zoe kneels down on the carpet in front of me. “Take a deep, slow breath, Minnie,” she says softly. “You’re safe. It’ll pass. You’ll be okay. Just focus on breathing.”

And then Amber’s suddenly there too, slowly lowering herself to the ground. “Should I take off—”

“I asked,” Zoe jumps in. “Minnie said she wanted to keep it on.”

“Are you sure?” Amber asks. When I don’t reply, she adds, “We’re here for you, whatever you want to do, Minnie. If you want me to take it off, just say the word. If you want to keep it on, that’s fine too. I promise it’ll be okay.”

Zoe and Amber help me breathe, and I inhale then exhale and inhale and exhale until I don’t feel like my chest is about to explode, or I’m about to burst through my skin. Until I’m aware that despite the faux-concern the monster showed me in there, asking if I was alright like he actually cared, it was all an act.

If he was truly my fated mate, he would have come after me.

If Danny was my fated mate, he wouldn't have left me when we were kids.

"No," I whisper. "He can't be my mate."

I don't even know if I'm talking about Dr. Reddy or Damien.

"Of course he's not your mate," Zoe pats my hands.

"Who's not your mate?" Amber asks. "Danny?"

"Who's Danny?" Zoe demands.

I shake my head and tears spring to my eyes. "I'm not a monster."

"Of course you're not." Amber grabs my hands in hers.

"He's the monster, Min," Zoe adds. "Not you."

Amber frowns. "He?"

I nod and hiccup. "There was magic. Pink magic. Between me and h-him."

"Dr. Ash Reddy," Zoe adds.

"What kind of name is that?" Amber mutters. "Does that mean you think he might be..." She can't even say it.

I whisper the words. "Fated mate."

Zoe shakes her head. "The magic is wrong. It has to be. There's no way you're mated to someone who hates animals."

I nod, holding on to that sliver of hope.

"There haven't even been any new fated mate bonds in Silver Springs in years," Zoe adds. "Not since right after I found my guys. So something else must be happening here."

“So he’s not my mate,” I say hopefully. But then my mind jumps to Zachariah, who may not be my mate either, and my heart hurts.

Zoe squeezes my hands. “Are you attracted to him?”

Automatically, I ask, “Zachariah?”

“No. *Him.*” She gestures at the door, and I watch Dr. Reddy rush out, flanked by two guards. He starts to look in my direction, but one of the guards says something, and he changes his mind. And then he just walks away, like I mean absolutely nothing. Because that’s probably the truth. He’s crazy and evil and whatever this magic connecting us is, I’m not falling for it.

Once he’s gone, Zoe turns to me. “Why did you think I was talking about Natty’s dad?”

I grimace. “He might be my fated mate, too.”

Amber gasps. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I only just found out. And I just wasn’t ready to talk about it.”

I expect Amber to get mad, but she just nods, like it makes perfect sense.

“We don’t know if that’s a mate bond either,” Zoe says, voicing my greatest fear. “And who’s Danny?”

Amber replies before I get the chance. “A chameleon shifter Minnie met at the cafe this afternoon. He asked Minnie to marry him.”

Which isn’t the whole truth, but close enough.

“So three men,” Zoe says thoughtfully. “And magic connects to you to all three.”

I nod.

“Are you attracted to them?”

I nod again. “I can’t help it. But that doesn’t mean anything. It can’t.”

“Of course not,” Zoe says soothingly.

Amber nods in agreement.

“Maybe it’s another curse,” I add. “Like with Julian. I’m attracted to him,” I grimace and glance at Amber, “but it’s the curse. It’s not actually me.”

“So you think it’s your mother’s doing?” Amber asks softly.

I nod. “I don’t think it’s a mate bond. I think it’s a mortal enemy bond.”

Because when I think of cocky, arrogant Damien Starr, who broke my heart, Dr. Ashok Reddy, who tortures fuzzies, and Zachariah, who’s going to take Natty away from me, it’s the only thing that makes any sense.

The three men I’m fated to despise for the rest of my life.

My enemies.

My fated hates.



To be continued...

Minnie finds her happy ending in *Minnie 2: Double Double Toil and Trouble*.

Thank you for reading *Minnie*! I hope you enjoyed Minnie's story so far. To spend more time with her and her guys, read *Minnie 2: Double Double Toil and Trouble* by Mia Harlan.

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About Mia Harlan



MIA IS A USA Today & International Bestselling Author who writes quirky romance guaranteed to make you laugh.

A librarian by day and author by night, she lives in Canada with her husband (who's definitely NOT a vampire) and their Mini Mortal (who doesn't have fangs).

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