

CURSED 3 DESCENDANTS



SHADOW
GAMBIT

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A.S. GREEN

CURSED  DESCENDANTS

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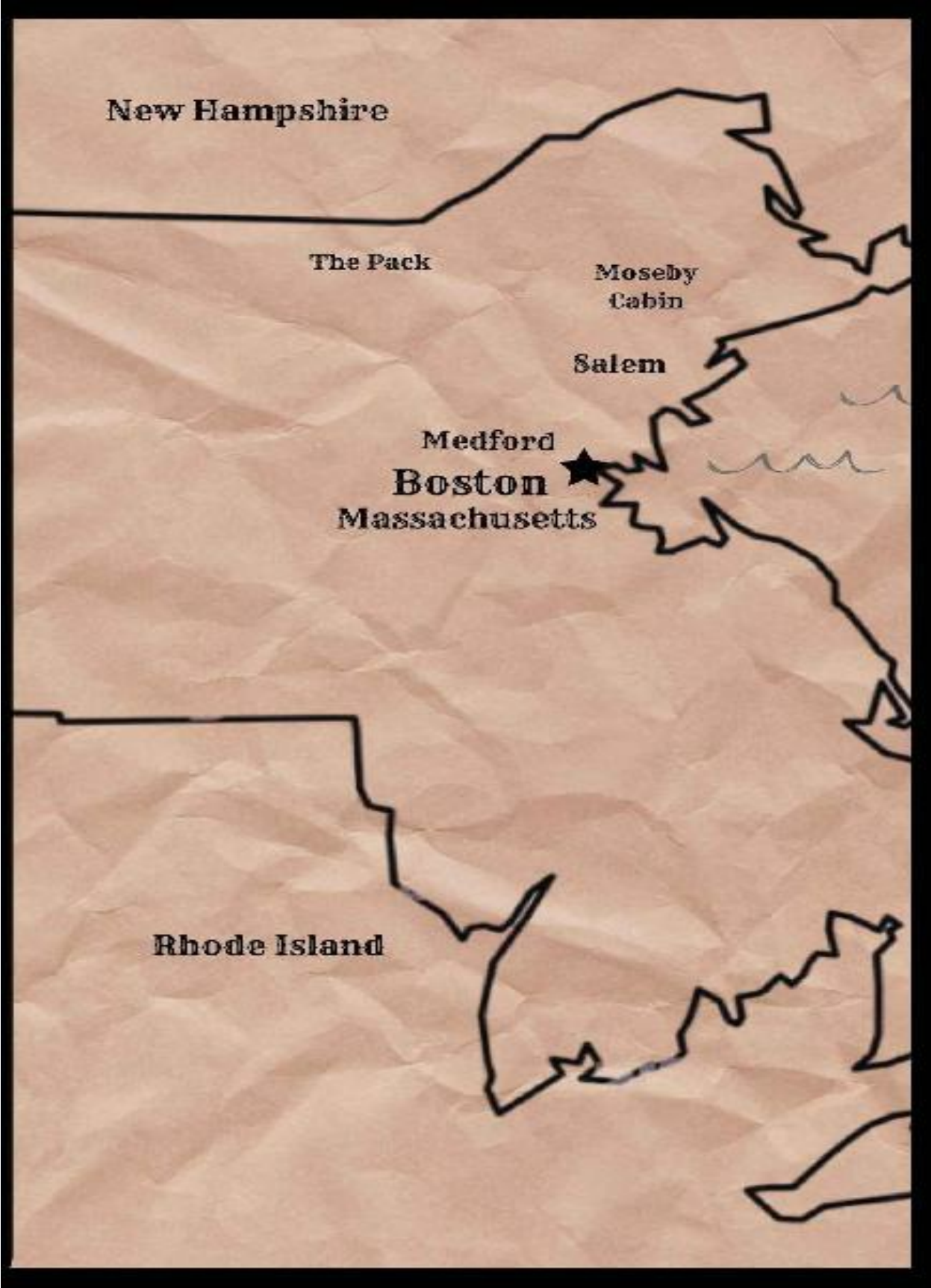
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New Hampshire

The Pack

**Moseby
Cabin**

Salem

Medford

Boston ★

Massachusetts

Rhode Island

CHAPTER
ONE

“I’ve done some crazy shit...” Stella Aldren said as she peeked out of the alleyway.

Her enemy turned lover, now partner in crime, Ethan Mather, stood behind her. His tall, strong body was kindly giving her the backbone she seemed to have left back at the Mosebys’ hunting cabin, their temporary hideout.

Across the street and three doors up was the North End tattoo parlor they were about to breach because down in its cellar was an armoire, and in that armoire was a grimoire that contained the countercurse they needed to get a centuries-old target off Ethan’s back.

Without that countercurse, Ethan would never be free.

“...but this is beyond nuts,” she concluded. “We should’ve used your contacts.”

“I have perfect vision,” Ethan said. “No need for contacts. And what good would corrective lenses do anyway?”

“*What?*” She gave him a quick glance. “I’m talking about *political* contacts, Ethan. You could’ve gotten the fire marshal to conduct an impromptu inspection. Or...a SWAT team could’ve stormed into the cellar, confiscated the armoire for us, and—”

Ethan chuckled. “I knew what you meant by ‘contacts,’ Red.”

Arrrrgh. She jabbed her elbow back in frustration, catching Ethan in his ridiculously hard abs. How dare he be so calm about this?! This was no time for jokes.

“But I don’t have SWAT on speed dial. My contacts are other business owners and special-interest donors,” Ethan explained. “Not government

agencies. Remember. I was only ever a *candidate* for governor.”

Stella adjusted her satchel’s strap across her chest and tried to pretend his words hadn’t driven a guilt-ridden icpick straight through her heart.

“Was” a candidate. Past tense.

Just that morning, they’d sat together in the Mosebys’ cabin and listened to a chipper, early-morning news anchor deliver the news that Ethan Mather, former Fortune 500 businessman and local philanthropist, had withdrawn from the gubernatorial race, citing “personal reasons.”

Those personal reasons being that she, Stella “Chaos” Aldren, had entered his life and fucked everything up.

Maybe it was a good thing that Ethan now knew he was a witch—a witch with powerful but still unpracticed magic. But he was also a witch with two competing covens hunting him down: her own, which wanted him dead, and another that wanted to torture him for information.

Not ideal circumstances for someone on the campaign trail, but it wasn’t just that.

She’d even gone so far as to disrupt the smallest pleasures in his life. Two days ago, for the first time since he was a kid, Ethan had missed his Saturday stroll through Boston’s Public Garden. He hadn’t had donuts with the local civic leaders, and he’d had to find a substitute to deliver meals to the elderly shut-ins he’d served for the last four years.

“I’m so freakin’ nervous,” she said. “If this doesn’t work... If we get caught... You need to get yourself out of there, and fast. Okay? Promise me.”

“Hey.” Ethan’s warm hand cupped her shoulder, and he turned her to face him. His navy-blue eyes sparkled with excitement, not fear. His jet-black hair held the perfect wave. Even his full lips curled up at the corners like today was no big deal and he’d penciled breaking-and-entering onto his weekend to-do list.

She appreciated his confidence in her, but she did have her limits.

“What have I told you?” Ethan asked in a quiet, soothing voice. “We’re in this together. We take care of each other. If one of us falls, we both fall. If one of us gets caught in a raging river, the other one dives in and pulls them out.”

“Right,” she said, as reluctant as she was grateful. The more often he said sweet things like that, the easier it was to forgive herself for all the turmoil she’d caused.

Though...it also made it harder to deny the inevitable: that they were

meant to be paired witches, that their magic had the potential to be fused, and irreversibly so, which would make his statement even more true.

If they were paired and one of them fell, they'd both go down together all right, in the most literal sense. That had been Stella's parents' fate. And now they were both moldering in the ground.

Stella shivered, hating the image.

Ethan gripped her arms and held her steady. "And...after the one pulls the other out of the river, they offer a warm towel straight from the dryer."

Apparently, Ethan was loving his metaphor. Either that, or he'd noticed her shiver.

"Thank you," she said. "I hope it doesn't come to that, but thank you."

"Of course," he said. "What would I do without you? Not to be overly dramatic, but you're my home now. There's no other place where I belong."

A wave of empathy flooded Stella's heart at the growing seriousness in his tone. It made her feel sad, but also more firmly connected. She and Ethan had both lost their parents when they were young.

Stella was six when her mother died from a magical experiment gone wrong, and days later, her father died of a broken heart—the natural fate of a paired witch who'd lost his mate.

Ethan's father disappeared when he was still a baby. His mother died of cancer when he was only seven years old.

"Your home is bigger than just me," Stella assured him.

Ethan snorted. "I don't even have a coven. Not really, anyway."

Well, that was true. They were both adrift when it came to that, and no witch excelled without a community. Maybe he'd been right. Without Ethan, did she have a home, a place where she belonged?

Stella leaned into him, pressing her cheek against his broad chest. The feeling she got whenever they touched, whether it was a brush of his fingers or the slide of his tongue, made the magic surge in her chest.

The rush of power more than hinted at their combined potential. It insisted that she get out of her own way and quit letting fear rule her life.

Ethan combed his strong fingers into the sides of her auburn hair.

"You're a very powerful witch, Stella."

She nodded against his chest. Her magic had always been powerful, but it lacked endurance, always fizzling long before she wanted it to.

Ethan pulled her head away from his chest so he could kiss her.

As soon as their lips touched, they both inhaled loudly, their bodies

tensing as their connection exploded. Ethan tasted divine. He always did. And his kiss tied her insides into complicated knots.

When she finally pulled back from the kiss, Ethan's mouth remained open and soft as if he were as dazed by his reaction to her as she was to him.

"I will never, ever get used to that," he said, telling her what his expression had already confessed.

Stella smiled and pulled a tiny, white fluff of a feather from his hair—likely an escapee from the down pillows on their borrowed bed.

Her stomach squirmed pleasantly as she remembered their mattress adventures the last couple of days. After their latest escape, they'd both had a lot of pent-up energy to burn.

"It would be nice if it could always be like this," Stella said.

Ethan's lips quirked. "By 'like this' do you mean hunted? Unable to live our lives?"

Stella felt the smile slip off her face.

Ethan picked her up and turned toward the opposite side of the alley. She wrapped her legs around his waist, and he pressed her against the brick wall.

"Or did you mean," he said teasingly, "on the run with no way out except to steal another coven's spell book, work out the logistics of a countercurse, and try not to get killed in the process?"

Stella nipped his bottom lip. "Quit acting like this isn't serious."

"I know how serious it is," Ethan said, grinding into her. "But I can't help it if humor is my defense mechanism. Now, before you bring my magic to its boiling point and we end up having sex in an alley in broad daylight—"

"That's not going to happen," she assured him. Ethan might drive her mad in all the best ways, but she did have a modicum of self-control.

"Good," he said on an exhale. "I may be out of the campaign, but I still don't need a public scandal. How about we get going with your invisibility spell?"

"First," she said, "one more walk-through of our plan. I do the invisibility spell then—"

"We slip into the tattoo parlor," Ethan said, brushing his lips against hers. "I create a distraction while you sneak into the cellar, break open the armoire where the Boston coven keeps their grimoire, steal the book, and we make our smooth getaway."

"It might not be quick," she said, reminding him of the warning she'd given several times before. She didn't know any spells for breaking into

magically fortified armoires. It could take several minutes. It could take hours. She might strike out completely.

“I’ll make sure you have all the time you need. Now, about that invisibility spell?”

Stella sighed. It was time to get going.

Ethan loosened his hold on her, and she let her legs fall from around his hips.

As soon as her feet hit the ground, she pulled a small plastic bag of dirt from her satchel and emptied it onto the asphalt, making a little mound in the center of the alley.

Next, she reached into her satchel and pulled out a thick, round candle. She placed it on the ground four feet south of the dirt pile and lit the wick with a snap of her fingers.

She and Ethan positioned themselves between the dirt and the candle, then, with a flick of his hand, Ethan conjured a palmful of water and decanted it into a red Solo cup Stella had brought along. He placed the water on the ground to his left.

That done, he stuck out his hand toward the eastern side of their four-point elemental compass, made a gesture that looked like he was screwing in a lightbulb, and conjured a mini tornado in his palm.

He really was a natural.

“Now, you,” Ethan said.

Stella held up her hands and closed her eyes. “*In virtute terra, aer, ignis, et aqua. Sinit evanescere.*”

Stella felt the warmth from the candle as its flame flared higher and brighter, then the heavy weight of the spell draped over them and wrapped tightly around their bodies as if cinched with a sash.

When Stella opened her eyes, she was gratified to see that Ethan was gone. Or rather, that she could see straight through him to the other side of the alley.

She looked down at herself and saw nothing but asphalt and the candle, dirt, and water.

“Whoa,” Ethan said. “I know you’re there, but I can’t see you.”

“It’s an invisibility spell, Ethan. We’ve done it before.”

“I know, but it’s still really weird.”

Stella glanced toward the end of the alley. “Let’s hope my magic has enough stamina to last for however long this is going to take me.”

“You said your spells have been lasting longer than they ever have.”

That was true. Ever since she met Ethan, her magic had found its heart, and her stamina had improved. Didn't mean she didn't worry.

Stella scrubbed the sole of her shoe through the mound of dirt, then blew out the candle and kicked it toward the wall. No need to leave evidence of the spell behind, just in case another witch should stroll by.

Ethan dumped out the water and chucked the cup into a bin.

“All good?” he asked.

“Good as it's gonna get.” Stella peeked around the corner of the alley and focused on the tattoo parlor's familiar black lacquered door.

“Then let's go,” Ethan said, his breath ruffling the top of her hair. “Daylight's a-wasting, Red. We've got a curse to break.”

CHAPTER
TWO

Ethan strode out of the alleyway, brushing Stella's elbow as he passed and making the magic crackle between them. It was a mixture of adrenaline, anxiety, and power—a potentially lethal combination, but for whom, Stella didn't know.

With each step, she remembered her three prior visits to this rotting place. The first time, she'd been invited. The Boston coven was casting a circle to help a newborn baby with a heart defect. They asked her to lend a hand with the healing spell.

The third time, she'd come with her coven to confront the Boston witches about their intent to practice a kind of blood magic that would resurrect the dead. That was back when Stella's coven still thought she intended to kill Ethan. That visit had gone horribly awry.

But it was the time in between those two that weighed most heavily on her now. She'd been invited then, too, but she'd gone under the pretense of helping the Boston coven find their lost athame—a magical dagger that she herself had stolen from Ethan's apartment and which was now lying at the bottom of her satchel.

It was on that second visit that she'd gotten her one and only glimpse of their grimoire. Its blood magic had been enough to curdle her stomach. She didn't look forward to getting so close to it again, but she had no choice.

Ethan's future lay in the promise of its blank pages—pages that could only be read when touched with blood drawn by the Boston coven's athame.

“What's that smell?” Ethan asked as they got within a few feet of the tattoo parlor's front door.

It was the sweet, rotting-apple scent of decay. Evidence that the grimoire

and its dark magic were still inside the building. Stella had come to expect the scent so, this time, she'd barely noticed it.

"Blood magic," she said, surprised that Ethan was picking up on it. "Now listen, when I open the door, the workers will rush over to close it. They won't be able to see us, but our bodies still have mass, so get the hell out of the way."

"Which direction should we go? I can't see you. I don't want to run into you either."

"Go right." Stella grabbed the door handle.

"Hey," Ethan said.

"What?" she asked, surprised by the warmth of his hand wrapped around hers.

"I know I was making jokes before, but... Just be careful. Okay?"

Stella couldn't see his face, but she felt the weight of his words and the weight of his body as his searching fingers found her shoulder and worked their way up her neck to her cheek. He clutched her to his chest and kissed her forehead.

She closed her eyes, letting his body heat sink into hers and the warmth of emotion seep through her skin, filling up all the little empty places that still remained.

"You too," she whispered. Then, giving his hand one final squeeze, she threw her weight against the heavy door.

It opened, scraping against the floor.

Stella and Ethan darted inside, veering quickly out of the way.

As predicted, a female tattoo artist whose body was wildly decorated in vibrant floral art yelled, "What the hell?!"

She switched off her tattoo gun and rushed to the door, putting her shoulder to it and pushing it closed.

"That's weird," said one of the other artists—a young bearded man with gauges in his ears. "Never seen that happen before. I nearly pulled a muscle trying to get the door open this morning."

"That's because it's warped at the bottom," the female artist said.

"Well, I know *that*," the bearded artist said. "I was just making commentary."

They switched on their tools again and got back to work—she, designing a floral motif on a young woman's calf; he, doing a black and white portrait on an older man's arm.

Stella made a beeline for the cellar door, trusting that Ethan would create the necessary distraction. As they'd previously discussed, he tossed a cupful of ballpoint pens off the counter and toward the wall that was opposite the cellar door.

Unfortunately, the buzz of multiple tattoo guns drowned out the high-pitched clatter of pens. No one looked.

Stella wasn't sure what Ethan was going to do now—especially when they couldn't talk or even make eye contact—but clearly he needed a Plan B.

“How's that?” the bearded artist asked his client. He turned off his gun and took a step back. His foot rolled over one of the pens, and he finally noticed the mess on the floor.

The client checked out his new ink while the bearded artist said, “For fuck's sake. What's going on today?”

“Just pick 'em up,” the female artist said, barely glancing up from her work.

Neither of them, nor their clients, commented when Stella opened the cellar door. With any luck, they wouldn't notice it close either.

At the top of the stairs, Stella waited for her eyes to adjust to the dark before descending into the antechamber. She wished she'd never started thinking about the first room in that way. *Antechamber* sounded more ominous than it needed to be. She could have called it the pallet room given the stack of pallets at the base of the stairs.

An insect scurried over her hand on the railing.

She flicked her hand to get it off, then felt for the light switch on the stone wall. The room illuminated, and light reflected off the broken bits of mirror she'd noticed on the dirt floor the last time she was there.

She set her gaze on the door on the opposite wall. Dark magic pulsed from the other side, and the scent of rotting apples cloyed her senses.

She steeled herself for the work ahead. She was no locksmith. She had just the barest idea about how to crack a combination lock. And while she had a few ideas of what spells might work, she wasn't so naive as to think there wasn't already a protective counterspell in place for just that possibility.

“Here we go,” she murmured.

When she opened the door, dark magic throbbed in the air around the armoire, greeting her like a long-lost friend.



Meanwhile...

ETHAN MATHER STOOD AS FAR AWAY from the action as he could, not wanting to accidentally bump into one of the tattoo artists or their clients. This wasn't as easy as it sounded. The tattoo parlor was small, and there were a lot of things to bump into, especially when his adrenaline made him want to pace.

It went against his grain to be merely a lookout. His gut told him he should be down in that cellar with Stella. It grated on him to have her so far out of reach, out of sight even.

Every few seconds, his gaze slid to the cellar door. Rationally, he knew it would take her a while to get the job done. She'd told him as much. It could be an hour, maybe more, before she had the Boston coven's spell book in hand. Still, he couldn't help hoping for a miracle.

He set his hand on the sales counter and curled his fingertips against the wood. He had a good view of the door and the window from there, including some of the street.

He was familiar with two of the witches Stella was worried about. He'd seen them for himself when they busted into his campaign headquarters. Stella had given him physical descriptions of the other two. If any of them—or anyone else for that matter—made their way toward the cellar door, he'd beat them to it and send out an alarm.

He looked down at his hand on the counter. The cut he'd gotten on his finger was nearly healed. He'd scraped it on the fire escape when he and Stella had been forced to bolt out the back of her magic store. The angry red line was now the barest of pinks. It was—

He turned his hand over and scrutinized the size, shape, and color. He shouldn't be able to see any of it.

He looked down at his body. There were his legs, his shoes...still semi-transparent, but Stella's invisibility spell was wearing off quickly.

Shit. This wasn't part of the plan.



“FUCK THIS LOCK.” Stella grabbed the heavy chain and jerked down. The chain clanked, but that was all. After an hour, she’d made zero progress.

She’d tried every opening spell she knew. She’d gone so far as to blast the armoire with fire. When magic hadn’t worked, she’d broken all her nails trying to manually pry off its hinges. She’d hacked at the wood panels with a broken slat from one of the stacked pallets. She’d even tried to pick the lock. But nothing breached the armoire.

Its doors, its hinges, its chain...they were all magically insurmountable. Whatever protective spell was on this thing, it was a doozy.

“Deep breath, Stella.” Sometimes there was no one to give you a pep talk but yourself. “Deep breath. You’ve got this.”

She gripped the strap of her satchel, then filled her lungs before letting out all her air in a slow release. Maybe all she needed was a fresh perspective.

She stepped back and looked up at the armoire’s full height. It was several inches taller than Ethan, the height of a standard door. It was made of solid wood—mahogany probably, judging by the stain—with inlaid gold lines that outlined the two vertical panels in each rectangular door. A fleur-de-lis carving decorated the center of each of the four panels.

The varnish was worn off in several places. Overall, the armoire looked a little worse for wear, but it had likely been the focal point of a genteel living room at one time.

Stella felt a little bad for it, now being in a cellar and housing such a dark book of spells. Even though the countercurse she was after was good magic and exactly what Ethan needed, there was no doubt in her mind that evil lurked within the book’s other blank pages. The smell of rot alone proved her theory.

“Okay...so you didn’t like my opening spell, and you’re immune to heat.” She spoke to the chain around the armoire as if it were a sentient being. As if it were listening.

“Maybe I should just blow you up. How’d ya like that, buddy? *Hmmm?*”

Neither the chain nor the armoire said anything in response.

Not that she thought they would.

If they could, they would have totally called her bluff. Explosions weren't exactly the definition of flying under the radar.

Stella drummed her fingers against one of the armoire's doors, thinking.

Whatever protective spells the Boston coven had put on it, the only thing busting through its doors would have to be one monster of a spell.

The monster of all monsters.

Stella chewed on the side of her thumbnail as her mother's voice echoed in her head with words spoken long ago: *Monsters come in all shapes and sizes, Stella. The most dangerous are the ones who look the most like you.*

Stella tipped her head back to look up at the armoire. Electric light reflected off the double doors' gold inlay.

She frowned, turned her head slowly toward the antechamber, then back to the armoire.

That second time she'd visited, Antoinette had turned her around so she couldn't see how Jean-Paul opened the armoire, but she hadn't heard any clicks or sounds she would associate with a lock.

She remembered how irritated Lovey had been the first time she'd visited—not only by Stella's presence, but also by the actions of the younger coven members.

Even the littlest thing had set her off. Maddy had just opened her compact mirror, and Lovey had reached out and snapped it shut. Maddy had looked positively ashamed.

Maddy had just opened her compact mirror...

Stella turned toward the antechamber again.

"No," she whispered. That couldn't be it. Could it?

The most dangerous monsters are the ones who look the most like you.

She rushed out of the room and grabbed one of the broken pieces of mirror that lay on the dirt floor.

She didn't know the words to any more opening spells. All she could do was close her eyes and hold the mirror up to the armoire, reflecting its image back on itself.

Her heart pounded in her ears—so loud that, at first, she didn't hear the click or the first slow slide of the heavy chain.

But then, her eyes snapped open, and the chain slunk through the door handles and serpentine onto the floor.

Stella's chest heaved. Slowly, she took two hesitant steps closer. She curled her fingers around the armoire's handles and pulled with all her might.

The doors groaned, but eventually opened. Inside was the book of spells. The Boston coven's grimoire. Just like before, it sat alone on a shelf in the otherwise empty cupboard. Its magic throbbed, like a thumb that had a string tied tight around its tip.

"I don't believe it," she whispered. "I did it."

Voices upstairs snapped her out of her awestruck haze.

She snatched the book off the shelf, shoved it into her satchel, and raced up the stairs. When she reached the top, it was all she could do not to throw the door open. She wanted out of that cellar so badly.

Somehow, she managed to steel her nerves and merely open the door a crack.

Three heads turned in her direction. The female tattoo artist. The bearded artist. And Ethan.

The woman—for reasons Stella could not fathom—had Ethan in her tattoo chair.

Ethan had his sleeve rolled up to his shoulder, and his arm was bandaged. What was he doing? Getting inked?

Ethan's navy blue eyes widened, imploring her to play along, but she had no idea what game he was playing. She searched his face for some kind of clue. His...*face*?

The bearded tattoo artist stood behind the sales counter with his eyes narrowed on Stella as if she were...as if she were...

She looked down at herself. The invisibility spell had worn off. She didn't know when it happened. Maybe it was the book's fault. Maybe just by touching it, it had unraveled her magic.

"Who are you?" asked the man behind the counter.

"How did you get down there?" asked the woman. "I didn't see you come in."

"Ethan," Stella said, ignoring their questions. "We gotta go."

Ethan rolled down his sleeve and hopped off the table.

"Not so fast!" The woman blocked Ethan's path, preventing him from getting to the door. "You've still got to pay for that."

The front door pushed open, and chaos strolled in.

CHAPTER
THREE

Jean-Paul, one of the Boston witches, wore his typical grease-stained jeans and white T-shirt. A pack of cigarettes was rolled into one of the short sleeves. His eyes met Stella's, then narrowed. "What the hell are *you* doing here?"

"JP?" the female tattoo artist asked. "You know these guys?"

"Guys?" Jean-Paul asked, emphasizing the plural while turning toward her. Only then did he notice Ethan's presence in the room. Jean-Paul's eyes widened, and he whispered, "Holy fuck. It's *you*."

The wet-earth scent of physical magic swirled around Jean-Paul, mixed with the rotting-apple scent of his coven's blood magic. Stella had never encountered Jean-Paul completely alone before, and this time she picked up on something else: his magic was wild and erratic. Completely undisciplined.

And he was nervous. Neither of these things were good.

"Easy now," Stella said, wary of an impulsive attack.

But Jean-Paul didn't rush forward. He took a step *backward*.

Ethan quickly rounded the end of the tattoo table and stood beside Stella. He grabbed her hand and squeezed, creating a united front.

They'd planned a daytime invasion because they thought the Boston witches were more likely to congregate at night. Jean-Paul's arrival put all their assumptions in doubt. This could get ugly fast if more witches were on their way.

Stella scrambled to think of a way to use Jean-Paul's nerves to their advantage. *Now*, before any one else showed up. She glanced toward the windows, hoping not to see any other familiar faces.

"How long have these two been here?" Jean-Paul asked the female artist.

“He’s been here for over an hour,” she said, indicating Ethan. “Long enough for me to get his piece done. I never saw her come in at all, but somehow she got down into the cellar.”

Jean-Paul’s gaze slid toward the cellar door, then narrowed on Stella’s satchel. A vein popped up in the middle of his forehead.

“Do you have it?” he asked, meeting Stella’s eyes.

Ethan squeezed her hand a little tighter.

“Have what?” Stella asked, playing dumb and frantically searching for a plausible explanation for them being there—preferably something that didn’t involve stealing a grimoire.

Unfortunately her imagination was slogging through quicksand.

“I’m not an idiot, Stella. You didn’t come here to return our…” He gave the tattoo artists a quick glance, then lowered his voice. “Our you-know-what. So, I have to assume you came to take something *else*.”

Stella’s mouth went dry. “Like I’ve told you before, we don’t have anything to return, and if you’re accusing me of stealing something, I wouldn’t even know how to do that.”

This last part was kind of true. She’d certainly had no idea what she was doing when she first arrived.

“I doubt that,” he said. “You’re more clever than you look.”

“Ouch,” she said with a forced smile, trying to keep things light because her anxiety was rising into her chest.

She and Ethan needed to get out of there. Like, pronto. The most obvious escape would be to run out the back door, and while she was sure Ethan could outrun Jean-Paul, she didn’t put the same odds on herself. Jean-Paul was lanky. Like a cheetah.

Jean-Paul held himself in a loose posture—as if he had everything under control—but he licked his lips in a way that betrayed his nerves.

Ethan must have noticed too because his voice went ultra calm, like a cop talking a jumper off a roof. He held up his hands and pressed down on the air in a pacifying gesture.

“We don’t want any trouble,” he said. “And neither do you.”

Jean-Paul’s eyes sliced to Ethan. While he had been stalking Ethan for months, if not years, the two had yet to officially meet.

“None of us has much choice in that anymore,” Jean-Paul said. “There’s too much trouble to go around.”

Ethan took a step forward, and Jean-Paul reached toward the old

refrigerator in the corner beyond the counter.

It was too far away for Jean-Paul to actually touch it, but when he twisted his body, making a dragging motion with his arms, it created enough magical strength to throw the refrigerator onto its side and shoot it across the floor, blocking their escape through the front door.

The female tattoo artist screamed and took cover behind the counter.

The man put his arm around her and yelled, “What the hell is going on?”

A trickle of water seeped from beneath the busted refrigerator while Stella and Ethan inched toward the rear exit.

Ethan whispered close to her ear, “Did you get what we came for?”

“Got it,” she said.

Jean-Paul’s gaze darted wildly around the room before rising to the ceiling, which was striped in dark wooden beams.

“No!” Stella cried, realizing what he intended to do.

Jean-Paul flung his arms up in the air.

“Shit!” Ethan muttered, catching on a second too late. He shielded Stella with his large body as one of the beams crashed to the floor, missing them by inches and shooting splinters of wood across the room.

“He’s trying to kill us!” Ethan seethed.

“We should have killed you both when we had the chance!” Jean-Paul yelled.

By then, the trickle of water coming from the toppled refrigerator had turned into a giant puddle that crept across the floor.

“You got this?” Stella asked as she and Ethan rose from their crouches.

“Oh, I’ve got this,” Ethan said, and his voice was edged in fury.

He pointed at the expanding puddle and—with a mere flick of his finger because her man was a freakin’ *natural*—the puddle pulled vertically off the floor into its own rogue wave.

It was small at first, so the two people behind the counter watched with fascination.

Jean-Paul, however, knew better. He backed up quickly, smacking the backs of his legs against the edge of the refrigerator. He fell backward onto the appliance, then rolled onto the floor before getting to his hands and knees.

By that time, the single wave had grown to over six feet tall, and the spray hit Stella’s face when she peered around Ethan’s body.

She squeezed the bottom of her satchel to make sure the athame and grimoire were both safely inside, then pushed the bag around her body to

keep everything dry.

“What are you doing?” Jean-Paul shouted over the sound of rushing water. He stumbled to his feet.

“You ever think of hurting Stella again,” Ethan said. “Think again.”

The wave crept closer to Jean-Paul, leaving a wet trail on the floor while the rest of the room remained dry.

Jean-Paul held up his hands and continued to back up, moving toward the wall. Just as the wave reached him, he winced and turned his head, closing his eyes.

Ethan held both of his arms in the air as if conducting an orchestra.

The wave consumed Jean-Paul, shrouding him in a turbulent pillar of water.

The woman behind the counter screamed, and the bearded man cursed into the phone, “Shit! 911? Send someone quick.”

Jean-Paul struggled, clawing at the devouring wave, trying to find some way to reach the air.

“Ethan.” Stella dug her fingers into his unbandaged arm and squeezed his rock-hard bicep. “He’s going to drown.”

“What are you doing?” the woman behind the counter cried. “Stop it! Stop it!”

“Ethan, that’s enough.” Stella tugged at his arm. “That’s enough. He’s plenty distracted. We can escape out the back.”

“He could’ve killed you with that beam,” Ethan said. “Killed both of us.”

“And he failed. Let’s go!”

Stella did more than tug at Ethan’s arm this time. She yanked, and it came down, though his other arm remained raised in the air.

“Ethan, let’s go!”

There was no way she’d be able to move him if he were unwilling to leave, but he heaved a heavy sigh and let his other arm fall to his side.

With that, the wave came crashing down, splashing against the floor.

Jean-Paul fell onto all fours, gasping noisily for air.

The front door to the tattoo parlor pushed open, but only by a few inches before it was blocked by the fallen refrigerator. While Jean-Paul had toppled it in order to block Stella and Ethan’s exit, now, it prevented someone else from getting inside.

Stella got the barest glimpse of a tall woman’s Afro, and a reflection of aviator sunglasses. Antoinette.

The stylish witch looked up from the fallen refrigerator, and her eyes met Stella's, her expression turning from confused surprise to grim comprehension.

"Run," Stella whispered to Ethan, and as she turned to go, her feet slipped on the wet floor. She went down on both knees, and another burst of pain shot through her.

Ethan scooped her up into a bridal carry and rushed out the back door with Stella's satchel dangling from her body.

"Hey!" Antoinette called after them. Then, presumably to the two people behind the counter, "Stop them!"

The back door shut behind Ethan, and they were outside.

"Put me down," Stella said, pushing at his chest. "You can't run with me in your arms."

"I could try," he said.

Stella kicked her legs free, and her feet landed on the ground.

They took off at a run, but with no planned destination.

"Any ideas?" Stella panted.

"Pasquale's," he said.

He meant the Italian restaurant where they'd shared their first meal—back when it had been Stella who was trying to kill him.

"That's six blocks from here," Stella said, breathing hard.

Ethan grabbed her arm and forced her to go faster. "We wore running shoes for a reason."



"*BUON APPETITO.*" Pasquale Russo, a rotund, older man with a thick black mustache set a heaping bowl of spaghetti at the center of the table. The savory scent of garlic and rich tomato sauce perfumed the air.

Stella took one look at all that food, and her stomach roiled.

Ten minutes earlier, she and Ethan had busted in through the Russos' back door, straight into the restaurant kitchen where they kept a small booth where family could eat. The Russos considered Ethan family.

"Pasta will settle your nerves," Mr. Russo said. "Then you tell me what's troubling my favorite love birds, eh?" He addressed one of the young men in

the kitchen. “Tony! A bottle of chianti! Two glasses!”

Mr. Russo set two forks and two giant spoons on the table, suggesting she and Ethan were to eat from the same bowl.

“Thank you,” Ethan said, though it didn’t look like he had much of an appetite either.

Barely eluding capture could do that to a person.

Stella’s satchel, now with the athame *and* the grimoire inside, sat on the seat beside her. The rotting scent of the grimoire’s magic rivaled the smells of the Italian kitchen. So much so, it gave her stomach another turn.

“Yeah,” she said weakly. “Thank you, Mr. Russo.”

“Call me *Pasquale*,” Mr. Russo reminded her with a warm but worried smile. “Were you going to do something about your arm?”

“My arm?” Stella glanced down and was surprised to see a thick, four-inch-long splinter lodged under her skin. Holy shit. How had she not noticed that before?

Ethan frowned. “What’s wrong with—? *Christ*.”

He slid out of his side of the booth and stood beside her seat. He pushed her short sleeve up even higher over her shoulder.

“Do you have any antiseptic?” Ethan asked. “Tweezers?”

“I was just about to get some,” Pasquale said. “*Un momento*.”

As soon as he left, Ethan asked, “Were you going to mention this?”

“I didn’t realize.”

“You didn’t realize you’d been impaled?”

Stella clicked her tongue. “*Impaled* sounds a little dramatic.”

Ethan’s frustration was palpable. “It’s from the beam that asshole tried to bring down on top of us.”

“Probably.”

“It had to hurt.”

“I thought I might’ve felt something, but honestly, the adrenaline was running pretty high at the time.”

Pasquale returned with a first-aid kit, and Ethan made quick work out of pulling the splinter from her arm. She had to look away. It was pretty nasty.

He squirted something that stung like a mother, then blew cool air over it.

When Stella looked back, he was already bandaging her arm and looking quite pleased with his work.

“We’re twins,” she said.

“What?” He closed the first-aid kit and set it on a shelf just outside the

alcove where their booth was situated.

“We’ve both got a bandaged arm,” she explained, remembering how she found him in a tattoo chair when she came up from the cellar.

“Oh.” He returned to his seat facing her. “I almost forgot.”

“What the hell were you doing?” she asked. Getting a tattoo had never been part of their brilliant plan for distraction.

Ethan rolled his eyes in a self-deprecating way. “You’d only been down in the cellar for ten minutes—maybe less—when the invisibility spell wore off. I didn’t know what to do. It was the first thing that came to me.”

Stella’s shoulders sagged. She’d forgotten about her spell fading prematurely. “That was my fault. I was so busy in the cellar, I didn’t even notice.”

“Why?” he asked. “Why did it fizzle like that? I thought your spells were lasting longer now that we were... Since we’ve been together.”

“My spells *have* been lasting a lot longer,” she said. “It must have disintegrated because of the distance between us. I put the spell over both of us at the same time. I guess...once I went downstairs and the separation was too great...the spell stretched until it ripped.”

“Makes sense,” Ethan said, twirling his fork through the spaghetti but not eating.

“So...your arm?” she pressed.

Ethan tipped the handle of his fork onto the table while the prongs remained stuck through the pasta.

“I didn’t know how long it was going to take you to get the book. When the spell disintegrated and they saw me, I couldn’t exactly say I was window shopping.”

“Actually,” she said, “you *could* have. You could have just looked at their samples.”

“But I was inside the store, and they never saw me come in. They were startled, and I needed to distract them from that. I said I was interested in a tattoo. The lady said she’d had a cancelation. Next thing I knew, I was in the chair.”

Stella let out a breath. “What did you get?”

He grimaced.

“Ethan...” Stella felt a bubble of laughter rising to the surface. In his hurry, he might have gotten something truly terrible. “What did you get?”

Ethan rolled up his sleeve and peeled back the bandage. The image was

shiny with all the goop they'd put on it, but Stella could still see it clear enough: a simple black-line tattoo of the alchemical symbols for the sun rising from the ashes—a circle with a center dot sitting atop a capital letter E with an elongated crossbar.

She stared at the image for several seconds before blinking rapidly and looking up at him. "You've got to be kidding me."

He shrugged. "It seemed appropriate."

"It seems *nuts*," she said. "You got the symbols from the grimoire tattooed on your arm, and we still haven't uncovered all that it could mean."

"It's the symbol of the countercurse," he said confidently. "*I'm* the curse breaker."

"You are *something*," she deadpanned. "That's for sure."

"Are you going to eat any spaghetti?" he asked.

"You go ahead and carbo-load. I think this book is souring my stomach." She laid her hands across her belly.

"Want to put your bag next to me?" he asked. "Create some distance?"

"No, it's okay."

Pasquale came back with their wine and two glasses. "All better?"

"All better," Stella lied, giving him a wide but phony smile.

"Good," he said. "I let you eat. Then we talk."

Stella poured herself a half glass of chianti and took it down in one gulp.

"What about your stomach?" Ethan asked, eyebrows raised.

"I know. But I needed something to take the edge off my nerves before I opened the book."

"We're doing it here?" Ethan glanced over his shoulder toward the line cooks who were yelling at each other and making a clatter of pots and pans.

From Stella's side of the booth, she had a clear shot of everyone. No one was paying them any attention at the moment.

"It's private enough," she said. "And I've got to know what this curse breaker is all about."

Ethan faced her and let out a deep breath. "All right. If you say so. Let's do it."

Stella removed the book from her satchel and laid it on the table. Next, she took out the athame, and Ethan sucked in a breath.

"Shit," he said. "I forgot about this part."

"The book needs blood," she said, "or the pages stay blank."

"I know. You explained it. Doesn't mean I have to like it. In fact, does it

have to be you?”

“No. I guess not. Any magical blood should work. And frankly, the book could respond better to you than it does to me, you being descended from the Boston coven.”

Ethan pressed his lips together, clearly unsure what to think of that relationship, then exited his side of the booth and quickly entered hers.

Stella scooted closer to the wall to give him more room and opened the book to the last page that had anything written on it. All it contained was the symbol now tattooed on Ethan’s arm. Beneath it were the brown stains left by bloody fingertips of the past, then at least a hundred blank pages.

She handed Ethan the athame, and he pricked one of his fingertips with the magical blade. A single drop of blood welled to the surface. Before it could run, he flipped his fingertip over and pressed it to the page, close to the other bloody stains.

Just like before, ghostlike words appeared on the page—transparent and illegible.

This time, Stella didn’t slam the book shut. She held her breath and waited as the pen strokes thickened and darkened. With any luck, they’d soon be able to read it.

“That’s incredible,” Ethan said, leaning in. “Can you read it? Is it better than the other one?”

By *the other one*, he meant the same spell that they’d found in Goodwife Joan Wright’s spell book, but which had been too faint for them to read, prompting their recent stint as daytime burglars.

“Wait,” Ethan said. “Isn’t that...? It’s written in French.”

“I thought it might be,” Stella said as she pored over the words. The syntax was archaic, but the nouns were still recognizable—most importantly, words like *un os*, *premier père*, and *la pleine lune*.

“Do you know French?” Ethan asked.

“Just high school level.” A cold sweat broke out over Stella’s forehead as she worked out the meaning. It looked like things were going from bad to worse.

“Is that enough for you to read it?” Ethan asked.

She swallowed hard. “Unfortunately, yes.”

Ethan turned sideways in his seat to look at her, clearly surprised by her answer.

The truth was, she didn’t want to tell him what the recipe for the

countercurse required. She didn't want him to think they'd hit a wall too high for them to climb.

"What does it say?" he asked.

Stella shook her head and closed the book.

Ethan grabbed her shoulders, avoiding her newly bandaged arm, and gently turned her toward him. "Stella. *Babe*. What does it say?"

Slowly, she looked up at him, her throat dry. "We need to dig up a corpse."

"What?" He leaned back, and his hands dropped from her arms.

"We need to dig up your first father."

Ethan's forehead furrowed. "I don't even know if my father is dead."

"Not your biological father. Your *first* father. In magic."

Comprehension dawned on his face. "You mean..."

"John Silence Mather," she said. "The recipe calls for one of his bones, and we need it before the next full moon."

CHAPTER
FOUR

Forty-eight hours later, Stella and Ethan stood at the top of Hull Street, right at the end of the Freedom Trail, staring into Copp’s Hill Burying Ground. They dressed in black to blend with the night, shovels in hand.

Beside them, three wolf shifters, Hawk, Dylan, and Max, were also dressed like ninjas. Dylan was only in his early twenties, but tall, broad, and burly. He wore his blond hair pulled back in a stubby ponytail at his nape.

Max was older—early thirties—with brown skin, sparkling eyes, and long sinewy limbs.

Hawk was in his late twenties with dark, loose curls, pale gray eyes, an olive complexion, and full lips.

All of their muscular bodies were alert, tense, and ready for action.

“Right when I think we’re at the height of madness,” Ethan murmured, “there’s another rung to climb.”

The five of them had spent the day before, scoping out the cemetery. Stella’s earlier genealogical research on Ethan told her that this was where John Silence Mather was buried. Not being a so-called legitimate heir of Cotton Mather, John wasn’t buried in the family tomb, but rather in a back corner that was full of small, blackened tombstones, all standing askew with their names beaten into oblivion by time and weather.

“It’s now or never,” Stella murmured.

The waxing moon made some of the newer tombstones glow silver in its light. Tomorrow night, the moon would be completely full. If they didn’t do this now, they’d have to wait until after the summer solstice to try again, and Ethan didn’t have that kind of time. Not with Stella’s coven constantly tightening their noose.

Hawk shook his curls out of his eyes and pursed his lips. He dragged his hand over his stubbly jaw. “Stella’s right. Better get going.”

“Never pictured myself as a grave robber,” Ethan said as the tip of his shovel clanked against the cemetery’s stone steps.

“*Shhh*,” Stella said. “And you’re not really robbing it. I doubt he was buried with all his gold. I doubt he even had any gold.”

Stella’s impression of John Silence Mather was that he’d barely scraped by. Seventeenth-century children who were born out of wedlock didn’t start out with the strongest foothold in life. Judging by the size of the desk Ethan had inherited from the man, her best guess was that he was a poorly paid clerk, like Bob Cratchit from Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*.

“A body is about as precious an asset as any other,” Ethan said. “It doesn’t matter we’re not here for his gold.”

He’d been making similar comments all day. The nerves were really getting to him. Stella could see it in the tightness around his eyes.

She was only doing marginally better. It wasn’t like she’d ever had reason to dig up a corpse before, but at least this one was too old to have any flesh on it. It could be worse.

Hawk pushed past her and ran up into the cemetery, quickly disappearing in the dark, save for the white soles of his bare feet. Hawk was the pack’s beta. Without their alpha there, he was taking the lead.

If there was anyone else in the cemetery this late at night, Hawk would know in seconds. Even in human form, the wolves’ sense of smell was fiercely acute.

Dylan and Max flanked Stella and Ethan as they headed up the steps that led from the sidewalk to the grass, then toward the unassuming grave tucked into the back corner of the burial grounds. The shifters’ heads swiveled as they surveyed the graveyard for danger.

Stella turned on her flashlight, keeping the small narrow beam aimed low. It struck on an unusually pale tombstone she’d noticed the day before. The epitaph read:

*Virtue & youth in the height of bloom
With our fair Lizzie find their tomb.*

Beyond that verse, she knew to count seven more headstones before they reached the final resting place of Ethan’s *premier père*—his first father in

magic, John Silence Mather—presumed son of a teenaged Cotton Mather and the Scottish witch, Isobel Duncan.

When they arrived at the grave, Hawk was already there, waiting for them.

“Give me your shovel,” he said, extending his arm.

Stella held her shovel against her chest, keeping it out of Hawk’s reach. “I can dig.”

“I know you can,” he said. “But we can dig faster. Ethan, give yours to Dylan.”

“This grave belongs to *my* ancestor,” Ethan said.

“And it’s *all* of our necks if we get caught,” Hawk said. “Give Max the shovel.”

Ethan looked at Stella. Even in the dark, she could see he didn’t want to abdicate his role in this family exhumation. But the wolves did have a point. The quicker the five of them got out of there, the better.

Stella handed her shovel to Hawk and told Ethan to do the same. “If we find any of your ancestor’s bones—”

“*When* we find his bones,” Ethan said, correcting her.

“When we find his bones,” Stella said, because Ethan was right; they hadn’t come this far to fail. “You can be the one to recover them.”

Ethan sighed and handed his shovel to Max.

“But to confirm...” Dylan said, tightening his stubby ponytail. “You only need one bone for your spell?”

“Just one,” Stella said. “Ideally a leg bone, though a rib would do nicely. Even an arm in a pinch.”

“Let’s hope for the best,” Hawk said, and he drove the tip of Stella’s shovel into the hard-packed dirt near the head of the grave.

Max got to work at the approximate foot of the grave—overestimating, Stella thought, given that seventeenth-century people were quite a bit shorter than today’s average.

Dylan stripped out of his black clothes and rolled them into a ball, which he shoved under the bushes.

When it came to shifters, Ethan always hated the nudity part, so he looked away and muttered a few choice words.

Dylan barked out a laugh, gave Stella a wink, then shifted into wolf form. Once done, he lent his own assist to the grave digging effort, tearing at the ground in the usual canine way.

Dirt flew. Sand. Pebbles. Thick clods of turf.

Stella and Ethan took several steps backward before having to turn away completely, just to keep the grit out of their eyes.

“He’s making a mess,” Ethan said. “It’s going to be a bitch getting the hole filled in again.”

“We’ll cross that bridge later,” Stella said, and she shivered, wishing she’d thought to bring a jacket.

“How long do you think this will take?” Ethan asked, putting his arm around her.

“Well, the last time I dug up a grave with a trio of wolves...” A trickle of dread ran down her arms.

“Smartass.”

“No idea,” she said, letting out a breath. “Hopefully not long.”

“Do you want my sweatshirt? You’ll drown in it, but—”

“I’m fine.” She took a chance and peeked over her shoulder, but quickly turned away again when a spray of dirt flew in her direction.

“I was expecting to shovel,” she said, explaining her T-shirt. “I thought I’d work up plenty of body heat that way, but you’re a nice alternative.” She snuggled closer.

“Mission accomplished,” Ethan said on a sigh. “I’ve always wanted to be someone’s ‘nice alternative’.”

“Now, who’s being the smartass?” She nudged him with her elbow.

Ethan moved behind her so his body blocked the breeze coming up over the hill from the Charles River. He wrapped her in his arms and held her tight.

Stella closed her eyes and leaned back into his warmth, always so steady and reassuring, especially in times like this, which were becoming more and more frequent.

“Have you given any thought to a Plan B?” he asked, head bowed and his lips close to her ear.

“Now, *you’re* having doubts about finding anything?” This was an about-face from a few minutes ago.

“I mean, if we get the bone, but the spell doesn’t work and we can’t break Bridget Bishop’s curse,” he explained.

“It’ll work.” Stella focused on Hull Street on the far side of the cemetery from where they stood. One of the houses on that street was super skinny, barely wider than a door, and wedged between two larger buildings. It looked

like it was being pressed to death.

“You’ve never done this countercurse before,” Ethan said.

That didn’t require a response. If she’d done the spell before, she would have known what to do, and they wouldn’t have had to steal the grimoire.

“So, for all you know,” Ethan said, “it might not work. We should have a Plan B.”

Stella huffed out a laugh. “Now that you’ve dropped out of the election, Plan B is to run far, far away from here to some treehouse nestled deep in the woods. I’m thinking Finland.”

“Finland’s winters are pretty cold.”

“Norway?” she asked.

“Still cold.”

“Then a treehouse in the jungles of St. Tropez.” Stella’s pulse raced. Her attempt at casual conversation wasn’t having the calming effect she’d hoped.

“St. Tropez I could do,” Ethan said, “but I don’t think there are any jungles there.”

Stella turned her head so she could look up at him. “Isn’t St. Tropez in the Caribbean?”

“No, it’s in the south of France.”

“Really?” That didn’t sound right.

“Yeah, really. You’re thinking of St. Croix.”

“Oh...yeah. That’s what I meant, and that’s where we should go.”

“You got it,” Ethan said. “It’s as solid a Plan B as I’ve been able to come up with.”

“And what are we going to do in this jungle treehouse?” she asked playfully, wiggling her ass against the front of his pants.

Ethan kissed the side of her neck. “Have lots of sex, I hope.”

That seemed likely. She glanced behind her. The wolves were only a couple of yards away, and they had excellent hearing. Fortunately, they appeared too engrossed in their work to be paying them any attention.

“What else?” she asked.

“Become paired witches. Make a bunch of babies. Raise a magical baseball team.”

Ethan was trying to be funny, but everything he said made Stella’s heart flutter like a butterfly caught in a jar. Becoming paired witches still terrified her, though she knew that’s where they were headed.

But babies... She never saw herself as having children. What if

something happened to the two of them, and they weren't around to raise those babies? There'd be no one in the jungle to teach them how to play baseball. Or how to use their magic. Or how to simply...be.

"Hey," he said, giving her a squeeze. "I was joking."

"I know." She tried to relax against him again, but it wasn't as easy as before.

"We can keep it to five," he said, "and raise a basketball team instead."

Stella bucked her body against him, willing him to shut up before he totally sent her into full-blown panic mode.

Ethan laughed softly, and they both fell silent for several seconds.

A crow cawed overhead.

"Have I told you that I love you?" Ethan asked.

"Yes." Tingles spread down her arms. "Once."

"Did you believe me?" He leaned his cheek against the top of her head while his thumb stroked up and down her rib cage.

"Yes."

"Good. I'll have to rectify that 'once' business, though. That's pathetic given how often I think it."

"I love you too, Ethan. And that makes once for me. When you told me before, I never said it back."

"No?" he asked, sounding surprised.

"No." In fact, she'd never said *I love you* to anyone before—at least no one who wasn't family. Or coven.

The thing was...lately...Ethan had become more like her family than her real one. She trusted him with her life. He could trust her with his.

"Huh," he said as if mulling that over. "I *feel* like you've said it before. I've definitely felt it."

"That's good," she said. "Because I meant it."

A car sped by on Hull Street, and a dog barked from blocks away.

"How long have the wolves been at it now?" she asked, changing the subject completely.

"I don't know," Ethan said. "Ten minutes? Fifteen?"

Stella peeked over her shoulder, surprised to discover how much progress they'd made. Hawk and Max were already standing shoulder deep in the hole. Dylan sat at the edge of the grave, panting. His fur stood out from his body, keeping him warm. Lucky shifter.

"Anything yet?" Stella asked.

Ethan glanced over his shoulder too and jerked—clearly as startled as she'd been by how fast they'd worked.

“How deep are you?” His arms dropped away from her body, and he approached the grave.

“Five feet or so.” Hawk rested one hand on the end of the shovel. With his other hand, he brushed his curls off his sweaty forehead.

“Uh-huh,” Ethan said, agreeing with the approximation. He went down on one knee at the edge of the hole. “Any sign of him? Bits of fabric? Chunks of wood?”

“If this dude was buried in a pine box,” Max said, gently tapping at the dirt with the tip of his shovel, “it’s likely rotted away. I doubt we’ll hit anything solid. We’re going delicate from here on out. Don’t want to bust anything.”

“Thanks,” Ethan said.

From the far side of the graveyard came laughter and the sound of running feet against one of the brick paths.

“Shit,” Ethan murmured. “Someone’s coming.”

Dylan took off like a shot—still in wolf form—and headed for the bushes behind the headstone.

Stella immediately switched off her flashlight, which, fortunately, had been pointed toward the ground and not bouncing around the cemetery.

“Quick,” Hawk whispered. “Down here.”

Hawk and Max moved apart, giving Ethan room to ease himself into the hole. He reached up for Stella, and she jumped down into his arms.

“*Ooff*,” he said when their bodies collided. “Easy there, Red.”

“*Shhh*,” Max whispered.

Stella shivered. Though she was now out of the wind, it felt oddly colder down in the grave.

They waited in silence. For a moment the running feet had quieted, then came the sound of more running—this time *many* feet and all headed in different directions but definitely in the cemetery.

“Fuckin’ A,” Hawk murmured. “There’s six of them.”

Stella was impressed that his hearing was so good he could get an actual count.

“At least this grave’s in a corner,” Max whispered. “They might not have reason to come this far.”

They all hunkered low and, despite Max’s wishful thinking, tipped their

heads back in anticipation of a stranger's face suddenly appearing over the edge of the grave, or maybe a whole body falling in.

At that exact moment, there was a loud flapping sound.

Stella sucked in a breath, thinking they'd been discovered, but it was only the crow. It landed on the headstone and peered down at them, its beady eyes reflecting the waxing moonlight.

From somewhere on the far side of the cemetery, a young male voice yelled, "Ghost in the graveyard!"

"*Fuck*," Ethan said, letting out a breath. "It's just kids. They're playing a game."

"They need to find a new playground," Hawk muttered. He whispered a little louder to Dylan, "Get rid of 'em."

Hawk's order was answered by Dylan's low rumbling growl.

Stella heard the leafy branches snap back into place after Dylan emerged from the bushes, but she couldn't hear the pads of his feet as he stalked into the cemetery.

A few seconds later, he growled again, this time farther away from where they hid.

Stella curled her fingertips into the grave's dirt walls, adrenaline pumping.

"What's that?" a young girl asked.

"What's wh—?" a boy asked. "Shit! Run!"

Another girl screamed—the piercing sound dangerously close—and Stella crouched even lower in the hole.

Ethan dropped into a squat with his hands on the grave's dirt floor.

"*Help!*" the girl yelled. "*Oh my god!*"

The sound of more pounding feet. Panicked shouts. A heavy thud as someone apparently tripped and fell. Another menacing growl. More shrieks, fading away.

A full minute later, Dylan appeared at the edge of the grave with his tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth.

Hawk rose out of his crouch. "Everyone gone?"

Dylan bobbed his head and made a *keh- keh- keh* panting sort of sound that apparently communicated something to the other two shifters.

"You can get out of the grave now," Max said, meaning Stella and Ethan.

"Same goes for the two of you," Ethan said.

"What are you talking about?" Stella asked. "Ethan, we just had a scare."

We can't quit now. They're not done digging."

"Yes, they are," he said.

"But we're so close to getting what we came for," she argued.

"Very close," Ethan said, and he raised his arm. Dirt sifted out the bottom of his closed fist like sand running through an hourglass.

"Ethan," she said, her voice little more than breath.

His smile dazzled in the moonlight. Clenched in his fingers was a long curved bone. "I think I found a rib."

CHAPTER
FIVE

“I wonder if *Silence* was as apt a middle name for him in the seventeenth century as it is for him now,” Ethan mused, his voice still rough from sleep.

Stella had her arm draped across her eyes to block out what little late-afternoon sun was making it past the thick canopy of trees and through the window in the loft area of the Mosebys’ hunting cabin.

Hearing Ethan’s voice, she pulled her arm back to find him sitting on the edge of the bed with his eight times great-grandfather’s rib in his hands.

“What do you mean?” she asked on a yawn.

After their midnight grave digging, they’d spent the morning gathering the rest of the ingredients for the countercurse—three adder’s tongue leaves, two agrimony flowers, two dried allspice berries, and a thick stick from a hawthorn tree for stirring.

The agrimony flowers grew naturally around the Moseby cabin, as did a single hawthorn tree near where the driveway met the dirt road.

The wolves had acquired the adder’s tongue and allspice for them. Stella assumed they got the ingredients from Goodwife Joan Wright, though she didn’t want to ask. It was going to take her a while to forgive the old witch for alerting the Salem coven to their location, even if Joan did her best to give her and Ethan a fighting chance.

With the ingredient collection complete and Roman, the alpha shifter, purchasing the distilled water they’d need—plus wrestling up an iron cauldron to boil it in; he had a friend in the scrap iron business—Stella and Ethan had slept the rest of the day away.

This wasn’t a bad thing; they would need their strength for later that night

when the moon was full and she finally cast the spell from the grimoire and broke Bishop's curse on Ethan.

Stella's stomach growled. She kicked her legs to free them from the twisted sheet and straightened the oversized T-shirt she was wearing.

"What I mean," Ethan said, "is that Silence is a great name for someone with nothing to say. I really wish this bone could talk."

"Well, I'm glad it doesn't." Stella got her legs free and scooted to the edge of the bed to sit beside him. She wrapped her hair into a thick auburn knot at the nape of her neck. "Because a talking bone would be pretty damn freaky."

Ethan gave her a weird look, and she had to laugh. Maybe he was right. When it came to everything they'd been through—kidnapping, torture, magical attacks, wolf dens, breaking and entering, and now grave robbing—a talking bone might not rank very high on the freak-o-meter.

"This might be a pathetic thing to say," Ethan said, "but holding this bone is the closest I've been to my blood family since I was seven years old."

The heavy tone of his voice made Stella's heart squeeze.

"That's not pathetic, Ethan."

She wrapped her arm around his bare shoulders. His skin felt warm and smooth.

"It shouldn't mean so much to me." Ethan rolled the dry, brittle bone between his fingers, and little bits of dust fluttered onto his lap, clinging to the fabric of his black, cotton sweatpants.

"Of course it should." She laid her cheek against his shoulder. "Family is important."

His eyes met hers, and she saw regret.

"Ethan." She braced for whatever was the cause of his emotion. "What is it?"

"All I ever wanted was a family. I'd hoped my foster parents would adopt me, but that didn't happen."

"I know. You told me. You hoped to make the people of this state your family."

He huffed out a self-deprecating laugh. "Deep down, I knew not even that would be enough. If I had a brother, or a sister like you do... Or a found family like a coven... I'm sorry to be the reason you lost all of that."

"You're not the reason," she assured him. "My so-called *family* is the reason. They've pulled away from me and—more importantly—from the

truth. Ethan... You haven't chased them away."

Stella had given her family plenty of opportunities to come around, and even though her sister, Jade, had seemed more conflicted as of late, it wasn't like she'd convinced any of the others to give Ethan a chance. They were still committed to fulfilling Bishop's curse and killing Ethan, which was why tonight had to go perfectly.

"I really hope this works," he said, setting the bone on the nightstand. He leaned back on his hands, and his abs tightened.

"The countercurse? It will." Stella had been poring over the Boston coven's grimoire since she and Ethan had stolen it two days ago, and while the countercurse had the most unusual ingredients—an ancestor's bone trumped eye of newt any day—it wasn't the most complicated. Not by a long shot.

"How are you so sure?" he asked. "You've never done it before."

"Because the book is ancient."

He frowned. "And that's enough proof?"

"Not necessarily." She kissed his bare shoulder and touched her tongue to his skin to get just a taste. "But after all these years, if it didn't work as written, there'd be tweaks scribbled in the margin. Instructions would be crossed out and modified. If older generations determined that a particular type of bone got the best results, they'd have specified."

"You're sure," he said, which didn't sound like a confirmation as much as it did like a persistent question.

"Yep. That's how it is with witches. We work as a community."

She left out the operative word *usually*. The last couple weeks had been her first experience as a solo act.

"Even past generations help the future ones," she explained.

"And that's what Bridget Bishop is doing for us now?" he asked.

Stella gave Ethan a reassuring smile as the word *hopefully* flitted through her thoughts. *Hopefully*, when Bridget Bishop sent them after the countercurse, her intent had been to help them.

Stella couldn't afford to lose that hope. She'd bet everything on Bridget regretting her curse and needing their help to reverse its effect or—at the very least—that when it came to Ethan, his magical ancestry made him the exception to Bridget's curse against the Mathers.

Tonight, Stella would lay all her cards on the table and know if her gamble had paid off.

“You know...” Ethan said. “I was thinking. Why the full moon?”

“What do you mean?” She trailed her fingers lightly up and down his arm.

“You said the symbol in the book, the one that marks the countercurse, is the sun.”

“Yes, the sun rising from the ashes. Two alchemical symbols stuck together and now tattooed on your arm.”

“And the words of the spell are *about* the sun,” he said.

“True.” The first line of the incantation was “*Le soleil à l’est*”—the sun in the east—but Stella wasn’t following where he was going with this line of questioning. “What of it?”

“It’s just...” He pressed his lips together. “Why isn’t the spell supposed to be performed at dawn?”

“Becau—” Stella’s fingers stilled against his back. Actually, that was an excellent question. And she didn’t know the answer. Why *wasn’t* the spell done at dawn when the sun was in the east?

Stella grabbed the grimoire off the nightstand and read the spell again, translating from the French. The first time she read it, she’d only been able to pick out several words from the list of ingredients— *full* and *moon* being two of them.

Since then, she’d consulted several online sources to come up with a full translation of the spell—both the ingredients and the final incantation. She’d been right about the moon. Despite the glaring incongruity, it was correct.

“No, it clearly says to do the spell at the full moon.”

Ethan shrugged. “I believe you. I was just noting a peculiarity. And I’ve been thinking about something else too.”

“Of course you have.” She laughed, but his previous question still weighed on her, and her laugh sounded nervous.

“Joan Wright locked my magic, so I assumed she was also the one who delivered John Silence Mather’s desk to me.”

“She was,” Stella said. “You asked her about it.”

“I asked if she sent the desk, but she didn’t actually admit to it. She didn’t say yes. Not out loud.”

“Didn’t she?” Stella could have sworn she did.

“No, I asked her if she sent me the desk, and she just smiled and raised her eyebrows. I took that as a ‘yes’ at the time. Now I’m not so sure.”

“She was awfully involved with your childhood,” Stella reminded him.

“I know. More than my own father was, but I still have this gut feeling that it was blood family who delivered the desk.”

Stella had always put a lot of faith in gut feelings.

“If only the note that came with the desk hadn’t been anonymous,” Ethan murmured, more to himself than to her.

“If only Joan Wright was more direct in her communication style,” Stella added. Then she shook her head as a funny image came to mind.

“What?” he asked.

“I’m just picturing four-hundred-year-old Joan Wright walking down the sidewalk with that huge desk strapped to her back. ‘Special delivery. One oak behemoth for Ethan Mather.’”

Ethan chuckled. “What would be the name of her moving company? Divination and Deliveries R Us?”

He laughed out loud, making his abs tighten in a delicious kind of way. Equally delectable was the sound of Ethan’s laugh—so warm and rich and utterly relaxed.

It made Stella laugh too.

They flopped onto their backs, perpendicular across the mattress, laughing until Stella felt moisture trickle from the corners of her eyes.

She wiped it away, and they simultaneously turned their heads to look at each other, stupid grins plastered across their faces.

Ethan’s smile faded first, and his navy-blue eyes roamed her face.

His expression of love spread tingles down Stella’s arms as the blue and red ribbons of their magic unfurled from their chests and wrapped around each other.

The ribbons had been appearing every so often—usually when their emotions were heightened—telling Stella and Ethan how badly they wanted to weave together, to be fused, to forever bind them together as paired witches.

But the colorful ribbons couldn’t do it on their own. They needed help to finish the job.

Becoming paired witches would require another big spell—maybe even bigger than the one they’d planned for tonight. For now, their pairing would have to wait, but that didn’t mean their magic wasn’t going to come out to play.

It tickled and teased. The red ribbons of Ethan’s magic lassoed around Stella, pulling her closer. The blue ribbons of her magic encircled his

shoulders.

“Do you see it, Ethan? Can you feel it?”

He cupped her cheek, whispered her name, and kissed her. “I see it.”



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, Stella arched back so far into her pillow that it folded around her head. “Oh, my god. Oh, my *god*.”

Her orgasm hit her like a wrecking ball. Hard. Devastating. It tore her down to her very foundation.

Ethan’s mouth disappeared, and he got off his knees, rising over her body, planting his hands on the mattress on either side of her waist. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, which broke into a grin.

Then he grabbed her hip, flipped her onto her stomach, and—still standing on the floor—yanked her hips up high.

A second later, he slammed into her from behind.

Perfect.

Stella lowered her shoulders to the mattress and pushed back against him, tipping her hips while she kept on coming. Harder than before. Her body throbbing and squeezing around his hard shaft.

“*Fuck, Red,*” Ethan muttered as he bent over her and put one hand to the mattress. “You’ve got one fuckin’ magic pussy.”

“Not me, Casanova. That’s your *wand* making all the magic.”

And there was no doubt about that because she was still coming, and this went on for another minute.

Even when she finally came down, Ethan continued to pound deep inside her, sliding his hard length along that sensitive bundle of nerves, making her feel like she could fly.

Another orgasm began to build.

Stella rocked forward, losing him for a second, and rolled to her back.

Ethan didn’t waste any time crawling onto the mattress and getting back inside her. He let out a long slow groan as if those two seconds of separation had been an eternity and too much to bear.

Stella wrapped her legs around his waist, raising her hips off the mattress to take him deeper than before.

He slid his hands underneath her ass and held her to him, digging his fingers into her flesh.

Stella combed her fingers into his thick, jet-black hair and stroked her thumbs over his cheekbones.

“Are you gonna come anytime soon?” she panted. Or more like, *begged*. Her whole body had gone liquid. She didn’t know how much more she could stand.

“Want me to?” he asked on a grunt.

“You’re going to have to, or I’m going to come again.”

“Not gonna get any complaints from me,” he said, angling up and doing that thing where he hit all the right points in one smooth slide.

Stella closed her eyes as she heard colors and tasted sound. All of her nerve endings migrated to the outside of her skin—sizzling and flashing.

Her core muscles coiled tighter and tighter as she felt herself leaving her body, hovering on the edge of bliss.

“Open your eyes,” he said, his voice even deeper than usual.

She did, and the sight of him, weight in his hands, shoulder muscles rounded, skin covered in a sheen of sweat, navy-blue eyes burning hungrily...

The coiled spring released, and it sent her over the edge as yet another orgasm blasted through her body.

This time, she arched her neck *and* her back, practically levitating off the mattress.

The sound of Ethan growling out his own orgasm echoed in her ears, intensifying the sensations roaring through her, until they were both cursing and convulsing in ecstasy.

About thirty seconds after that, they collapsed, panting in each other’s ears.

Ethan rolled slightly to his left so as not to crush her, but his leg remained between hers, his muscular thigh keeping a firm pressure on her throbbing core.

His hand cupped her breast in a comforting kind of way, and his lips tickled her neck when he whispered, “I wouldn’t change a thing.”

Stella turned her head to look at him, her questioning expression reflected in his dark eyes. She didn’t understand the sentiment because she couldn’t imagine what they could have done to make that any better.

And...if he was talking about something else—like the entirety of their

current situation—then she would have changed just about *everything*.

“No matter what happens,” he said. “I’m glad I found you. I’m glad I’m with you. I’m glad I trusted you.”

Stella liked that. A lot. It erased the guilt she’d felt since she’d first arrived in Boston and plotted his murder.

“I trust you too,” she whispered. “I’d burn the world down for you.”

“You kind of already have,” he said.

“Because you had to pull out of your campaign?”

He rolled onto his back and looked up at the ceiling as if lost in thought.

“I was being more literal. I seem to remember a barn on fire.”

“Oh, that.”

In their first escape from the Jacobs barn—where Jade and Izzy had pinned Ethan to the wall like an insect and tortured him within an inch of his life—Stella’s invisibility spell may have started some straw on fire.

“I’m sure they put it out in time,” she said.

“Still,” Ethan said, his lips twitching. “I appreciated the effort.”

Stella noted the fading light and checked her phone. “It’s seven o’clock.”

“Is that right?” He coiled a lock of her hair around his finger.

“It’ll be dark in three hours.”

“Should we get up and get ready?” He let the curl spring free.

“Not much to do to get ready. Just pace nervously and bite my fingernails down to nubs.”

“How long will that take you?” he asked in all seriousness.

Stella shoved his shoulder.

He smiled, but only for a second before his expression flattened.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Ethan’s body was suddenly as tight as a violin string. “Did you hear something?”

“No.” She strained to listen for whatever had alarmed him but didn’t hear anything.

“I thought I heard a car door slam.” He sat up.

Stella pushed up on her elbows. “If any of the Boston witches came here again—or any other witch for that matter—they wouldn’t drive up in a car. And even if they did, the wolves would intercept them.”

Ethan’s phone pinged, and he grabbed it off his nightstand.

“Visitors,” he said. “Dylan just texted me the word ‘visitors’.”

Stella grabbed her phone. She had a notification of her own, but it wasn’t

from Dylan. It was from Magnus Moseby.

“Magnus texted an hour ago,” she said.

“An hour ago?” Ethan asked. Apparently they’d both been too busy to notice the ping.

“His text says, ‘Incoming. Get out.’”

Another car door slammed, and this time Stella heard it.

She jumped out of bed. “Let’s go!”

“So much for the wolves intercepting,” Ethan grouched. He too was out of bed and pulling on his sweats. “What the hell am I paying those shifters for?”

Muffled voices were talking outside the cabin. *Several* voices, if Stella wasn’t mistaken.

“Hurry. Get dressed,” Ethan said, as if she wasn’t already doing just that.

Stella put on her panties and pulled her bra, still clasped, over her head. Ethan tossed her the black linen sundress she’d been wearing earlier, and she stuck her arms through the tied shoulder loops. The dress slid down her body, falling into place.

Ethan shoved the rest of their clothes into their bags, along with their toothbrushes, phones, the grimoire, and John Silence Mather’s rib. The athame was already buried somewhere at the bottom of Stella’s satchel.

Ethan was still pulling his Boys & Girls Clubs of America T-shirt over his head as they ran downstairs barefoot. They’d have to escape out the back door, but they’d left their shoes by the front.

They’d barely reached the bottom step when the doorknob turned.

Stella and Ethan froze, positioned behind the couch. They faced the front door with their hands up—not in surrender, but ready to defend.

The door opened slowly and Magnus poked his head in. His thick forelock of brown hair hung over his green eyes, nearly hiding his mixed expression of hope and trepidation.

As soon as he saw them, he closed his eyes and mouthed the word, “Shit.”

“Get inside, Magnus,” said a deep male voice from behind him. “What’s the hold up?”

The angle of the door blocked Stella’s view, but whoever stood behind Magnus wrapped his fingers around the edge of the door and pushed it all the way open.

Magnus’s lanky frame bowed, and he entered the cabin, stepping to the side and allowing three other people to enter behind him.

Stella had never met Magnus's father before, but she recognized him from around town—a tall, thin man with graying hair and a matching goatee. The other two people appeared to be another father-son duo.

The moment Mr. Moseby laid eyes on Stella and Ethan, his expression turned from annoyance with his son, to surprise, to fury.

He held a hunting rifle in his hand, and he tucked it against his hip, pointing the barrel directly at them.

Ethan stepped in front of Stella and held his arms out as if to create a human shield.

“Who the hell are you?” Mr. Moseby bellowed. “And what the hell are you doing in my cabin?”

CHAPTER

SIX

“Whoa!” Magnus backed into the wood-burning stove. “Dad! *Jesus!* Don’t shoot them!”

“Looks like you’ve got yourself some squatters, Dan,” the other man said. His own teenaged son looked on with wide eyes and a slack jaw.

“No,” Magnus said. “Dad, they’re not squatters. That’s Stella Aldren. My boss. And that guy’s Ethan Mather.”

“Mather?” Mr. Moseby asked. Name recognition flickered on his face.

“He’s running for governor,” Magnus said with exaggerated emphasis.

“*Was* running for governor,” Ethan said, correcting Magnus. “Now, could you please lower your weapon, sir?”

“What the hell?” Mr. Moseby said, but he *did* aim the barrel at the floor, so that was a marked improvement. “What are you doing here? And with her?”

Stella didn’t take any offense. From his perspective, a politician and the owner of a magic store were probably an odd pair.

She adjusted the strap of her satchel across her chest, and the grimoire pulsed menacingly from deep within the bag.

“It’s my fault,” Magnus said. “I told them they could stay here for a little while. I would have said something on the drive up, but I thought they’d be gone by now.”

Magnus gave Stella a wide-eyed look that clearly said, “*Why didn’t you leave when you saw my text?*”

“I heard you pulled out of the race,” Mr. Moseby said, addressing Ethan.

“And I get you wanting to lie low. But surely there’s a five-star hotel that would be more your style.”

“Ethan’s been having trouble with the paparazzi,” Stella explained, which seemed like a reasonable explanation. There was at least a kernel of truth there. “Reporters have been hounding him.”

Ethan picked up the baton and ran with it. “I needed a place they wouldn’t know to look while my campaign manager dealt with the fallout. Stella mentioned my difficulties to your son, and he was gracious enough to offer your cabin, but we were just leaving. Some friends of ours are picking us up. We’re sorry for the trouble.”

“No trouble,” Mr. Moseby said. “And *I’m* sorry too. For what it’s worth, the gun isn’t loaded.”

This news actually didn’t make Stella feel any better. She glanced out the front door, which still hung open.

Not far from the cabin, three wolf shifters stood in the forest, nearly obscured by the trees. Hawk scowled and folded his muscular arms. Max had his hands shoved deep in his pockets. Dylan caught her eyes and shrugged.

Apparently, Ethan’s contract with the wolves didn’t include protecting them from *human* visitors—only magical attacks. Still, would it have been so hard to send up a howl of warning?

“How long did you say you’ve been here?” Mr. Moseby asked.

“Since Monday,” Stella said, which was when the news had come out about Ethan’s withdrawal.

“Four days, huh?” He shot Magnus an annoyed look.

“I know, I know,” Magnus said. “I should have told you. But Stella said it had to be a secret. You know...because of the media.”

Mr. Moseby still didn’t look mollified, but apparently he wasn’t going to get into it with his son in front of an audience. Stella was glad her lie provided Magnus with a buffer—at least for now.

“How did you even get here?” Mr. Moseby asked. “I didn’t see a car.”

“I brought them on Monday,” Magnus said quickly, which was a helpful explanation. In actuality, the wolves had dropped them off. They’d left Ethan’s BMW at their den.

“Mom let me borrow the van,” Magnus chewed on the skin around his thumbnail.

“So, your mother knows about this?” Mr. Moseby asked, eyebrows raised.

Magnus tucked his thumb inside his fist. “Not exactly.”

“Hmmm,” Mr. Moseby said, obviously still processing.

“I’m Gary,” said Mr. Moseby’s friend. “And this is my son, Jake. Magnus and Jake go to school together. We’re taking the boys on a turkey hunt first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Who needs a beer?” Mr. Moseby asked. “I think we could all use one.”

“Us too?” Jake asked.

“There’s soda in the cooler,” his father said with a smirk.

Magnus flashed Stella a pained expression. For the last four years, ever since turning twelve, the poor kid had worked every angle to avoid these father-son hunting trips. Apparently his excuses had finally run out.

Stella was also pretty sure that while Magnus and Jake might be classmates, they weren’t friends. Magnus could be an acquired taste. Lovable, charming, and generous to a fault, but not many teenagers spent all their pennies on magic tricks. There was a reason Magnus occupied so much of his free time hanging out at her store in Salem.

“No beer for me,” Ethan said. “It’s getting late, and Stella and I should be going. Like I said, some friends of ours are—”

“Nonsense,” Mr. Moseby said, walking to the refrigerator. “You’re here for a reason, right? Call them and tell them you’re sticking around a while longer. I make some wicked burgers, and as you’ve probably discovered, I keep the cabin well stocked. If you’re not a beer man—”

He opened the refrigerator and frowned. Stella and Ethan had put a serious dent in his alcohol stock—more than might have been consumed in just four days.

Ethan put his arm around Stella’s shoulders and whispered in her ear. “What are your thoughts about doing one of your freezing spells so we can make a graceful exit from this uncomfortable situation?”

“Seems like overkill,” she said.

“Yeah?” Ethan’s lips brushed her ear, sending a shiver down her spine. “Well, Magnus’s dad thinks his *refrigerator* has been devastated. Wait until he takes a black light to his sheets upstairs.”

Oh, my *god*. Stella elbowed him. Hard.

A soft click came from the direction of the other teenaged boy.

When Stella looked over, Jake was pocketing his phone and pretending to study a chip in the kitchen counter.

“Gary. Head’s up.” Mr. Moseby reached into his pants pocket. “I guess

we're gonna need to make that liquor store run after all. There's one this side of Ipswich about a mile before you hit town."

He tossed his car keys across the kitchen, and Gary snagged them out of the air.

"On it," Gary said, and he headed out the door.

"Wait," Ethan said. He reached into his back pocket and retrieved his wallet. He pulled out two hundred-dollar bills. "Let me pay for that."

Gary took the cash and before the door closed behind him, Stella got one last glimpse of the wolves slinking deeper into the trees.

"Boys..." Mr. Moseby pulled three of the remaining beers from the fridge. "Drop your bags in the corner. We'll get the sofa bed set up later, after our company leaves."

"We won't keep you," Ethan said. "Like I said, Stella and I really should be going."

He was right about that. The light was fading fast. They only had a couple of hours before the prime curse-breaking hour, and now that the cabin was occupied, they'd have to find somewhere else to make the brew and cast the spell.

Magnus and Jake tossed their bags in the corner by the wood burning stove, then leaned against the wall, both of them looking awkward as hell, their gazes aimed in opposite directions.

"Have a seat," Mr. Moseby insisted when Stella and Ethan still hadn't moved from their original positions behind the couch. "I don't usually get to share a drink with a celebrity."

He tossed two beers across the room, one after the other. Ethan caught them both, but he didn't hand one to Stella. They wouldn't be staying.

"I'd hardly call myself a celebrity," Ethan said in that self-deprecating way he had about him. He rounded the couch and set the cans on the coffee table. "Just a townie really."

Mr. Moseby cracked his beer open, but he stayed in the kitchen, leaning forward over the counter.

"So, tell me," he said. "Why'd you drop out of the race?"

Ethan bowed his head and smiled, clearly preparing to charm his way out of a difficult conversation. "Well, Dan, I guess the most diplomatic explanation would be *personal reasons*."

"That's what they said on the news. Is *she* the personal reason?" Mr. Moseby lifted his chin in Stella's direction.

“Dad,” Magnus said, his cheeks going a little pink. “Whatever his reasons, they aren’t any of our business.”

Mr. Moseby flicked his finger at his son. “You made them my business.”

“And I said I was sorry,” Magnus whined.

“Magnus,” Stella said. “Do you want to get some air? We should talk about how things are going at the store.”

“That’s another thing,” Mr. Moseby said. “How is it that a grown woman is having my kid run her entire store? He’s had zero time off since school got out. Do you know how hard it was to get him to go on this trip? He insists on being back tomorrow afternoon so he can open *your* shop for the weekend’s tourist traffic.”

“It’s a short-term arrangement,” Magnus said, which was true, though the short term was already longer than expected. Stella had never intended his temporary employment to go into a second week, let alone a third.

She slid her phone out of her bag’s side pocket and checked the time. They were running out of daylight.

“This whole thing is a little crazy, don’t you think?” Mr. Moseby asked, and though his question may have been rhetorical, there was an edge to his voice that made Stella shift her weight uncomfortably.

Ethan joined Mr. Moseby in the kitchen. “So…” Ethan said. “You buying the predictions about where the Sox will finish this season?”

“I don’t know what they were expecting,” Mr. Moseby grumbled, “dropping fifty mil from the payroll like that.”

Seizing upon the distraction Ethan was so artfully creating, Stella whispered to Magnus, “Follow me.”

She needed to talk to him in private, as well as to update the wolves.

Magnus did as instructed and as soon as the door closed behind them, he grabbed her arm. “I tried to warn you we were coming!”

“This isn’t your fault, Magnus. It’s my fault you’re in trouble with your dad.”

“I couldn’t call,” he said. “There were always too many people around me.”

“It’s okay.”

Magnus chewed on the corner of his lip and glanced at the worn spot beside the cabin that they used for a parking space. “I can’t give you a ride out of here. Not until Jake’s dad gets back with the car, and even then it could be tough to—”

“You don’t have to. We’ve got something figured out.” Stella extended her arm in the general direction of where she last saw the wolves and beckoned with her fingers. She hoped they were still there.

“What are you doing?” Magnus asked.

“Signaling some friends.”

“The friends who are picking you up?”

Hawk emerged from behind a tree some fifty feet away, still mostly obscured by the shadows.

“Who’s that?” Magnus asked, taking a step back.

“His name’s Hawk. He’s our ride out of here. *I hope.*”

“Where are you and Ethan gonna go?” Magnus asked.

Hawk walked toward them with a shifter’s confident swagger. His plain white T-shirt stretched over his broad shoulders, lean muscles, and flat stomach. His jeans were faded and full of holes; his feet were bare.

Hawk’s eyes remained locked on Magnus for the entirety of his approach, and they flashed with a predator’s wariness.

Magnus and Hawk had never met before, and Stella’s agitation probably set the wolves on edge. They didn’t miss much.

“We’re going somewhere private,” she said, finally getting around to answering Magnus’s question. “Somewhere where we won’t be disturbed.”

“To do what?” Magnus asked, his gaze snapping to the spot where Dylan and Max stepped out of the shadows, though they remained in the trees, watching from a distance.

Stella glanced up at Magnus. For a nonmagical person, he already knew more than he should. She didn’t want to burden him with anything that could cause him trouble, especially if things didn’t go right.

“To do magic.”

“I already figured that.” His tone implied an internal eye roll, though his body remained tense and his spine ramrod straight as he kept his eyes glued to Hawk’s approach.

“Magic I haven’t done before. We’ll leave it at that. But it requires some place private in sight of the full moon. We were planning on using the clearing in the woods behind your cabin. Now, I’m not—”

Mr. Moseby laughed loudly from inside the cabin, and Stella jumped. Ethan was apparently being his affable self.

“Are you going to stay for dinner?” Magnus asked.

“No.” *Hell, no.* “We have to find a new clearing and get set up before it

gets dark.”

“It’ll be dark in a couple hours,” Magnus said, sparing a glance at the sky.

“I know.” Stella’s heartbeat kicked up a notch. If they missed tonight’s full moon, they’d have to wait until after the summer solstice for it to rise again.

“Everything all right?” Hawk asked, stopping directly in front of them.

“Hawk, this is my friend, Magnus.”

Magnus’s head snapped toward Stella, making her wonder if maybe she’d never referred to him as her ‘friend’ before. She must have. She’d certainly *thought* it plenty of times, even if he was just sixteen. In many ways, she and Ethan wouldn’t have made it this far without him.

“*Magnus*, this is Hawk.”

“Cool name,” Magnus said, starting to sound a little more like himself.

“Yours too,” Hawk replied.

The corners of Magnus’s mouth twitched upward.

“Magnus’s family owns the cabin,” she explained. “His dad and some friends made an unexpected stop.”

“Anything we should be worried about?” Hawk asked.

“They’re not a danger. This is just an inconvenience. We need to find a new spot for tonight.”

Hawk glanced at Magnus, probably wondering how much he knew or how much he could say in front of him.

“Magnus works for me at my store,” Stella explained. “He knows I’m a witch.”

“Does he know about me?” Hawk asked.

“Are you a witch too?” Magnus asked.

“Fuck, no,” Hawk said. “I’m just transportation.”

Magnus pinched his lips together, probably recognizing a lie when he heard it. Still, he didn’t push. He knew better than that.

“Our cabin’s on the edge of a wildlife area.” Magnus pointed in a northwesterly direction. “Head to Crane Pond. It’ll have the privacy you need, plus a break in the trees to see the moon.”

“Sounds perfect,” Stella said.

“Where’s your car?” Magnus asked, glancing toward the empty parking spot again. His dad’s friend would be back from the liquor store soon.

“Already on its way,” Hawk responded.

“Good,” Stella said. “Time’s a-wastin’.”

Magnus stepped forward. "Do you know the way to Crane Pond?"

"No," Hawk said. "But we'll find it."

"I'm going with you," Magnus said.

"*What?* No," Stella said. "That won't be a good place for you."

"*This* isn't a good place for me," Magnus said. "I don't want to kill a turkey. And I've helped you out before. *Plenty* of times. Every day in fact."

"This time, you could get hurt. I'm not putting a sixteen-year-old kid in mortal danger, *or* getting him in more trouble with his dad."

"Is this thing you're doing tonight really that dangerous?" he asked.

Stella glanced at Hawk, then back at Magnus. "It could be."

"But you don't know," Magnus surmised.

"Which is why you shouldn't go with us," she explained.

Magnus folded his arms and held his ground.

Just then, Ethan stepped out of the cabin with his bag slung over his shoulder.

"Oh, hey!" he said, when he saw Hawk standing in front of the cabin. "I like the look of *this* party more than the one inside."

"I'm going with you and Stella," Magnus said.

Ethan shrugged. "Sounds good to me."

"Ethan!" Stella shouted. How could he be so reckless?

"What?" he asked.

"I don't feel right about having an audience."

"Are you getting stage fright?" Ethan asked with a smile. "It's okay. Just do what I do."

She shook her head in frustration. "If you say picture everyone in their underwear, I swear..."

"No. Make them part of the act. Audience participation makes everything better."

"This isn't an act, and how is Magnus supposed to participate?"

"You need a witness," Magnus said, his chin jerking up. "If anything goes wrong, you'll need someone to get help and to let your families know what happened."

A chill ran through Stella as the memory of her mother's doomed magical experiment flashed across her mind.

"Stella?" Ethan asked, finally sounding like he was having a more appropriate level of concern. "You said the spell was easy."

"The *words* are easy. But I don't know what will happen after that."

“Well, I do know,” he said. “Bridget Bishop’s curse on me will break, and we’ll live happily ever after with one less coven trying to destroy us.”

“The wolv—” Stella stopped herself just in time, and she glanced quickly at Magnus before amending her statement. “Hawk and the boys will be there to witness.”

“No,” Hawk said. “We’ll be running the perimeter, making sure you aren’t interrupted.”

“Which is why you need *me*,” Magnus said, sounding smug.

“Fine,” Stella consented, realizing she was outnumbered and they were wasting time. “That is, if you can convince your dad to let you out of the turkey hunt.”

“I’ll tell him I left my inhaler in my room and that I’m catching a ride home with you.”

Stella leaned back and furrowed her forehead. “I didn’t know you had asthma.”

“I don’t. But I’ve been using it as an excuse for years, and my dad’s never questioned it.”

“Your mom?” she asked. Magnus was still a minor; she doubted he could hide a fake diagnosis from his mother.

“The asthma was her idea originally,” he said. “She doesn’t like hunting either. Trust me. It’s no problem.”

He dashed inside, leaving Stella outside to ponder his words.

She wished she could trust in Magnus’s optimism, but Stella’s worries grew more justified as the sun sank lower behind the trees. Their time was running out.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

“Here comes Roman.” Hawk turned to face the end of the long driveway.

“You can hear his car?” Stella asked, frowning. She didn’t hear anything but birds and the gentle wind through the branches.

Hawk smirked. “Of course. He’s only about a quarter mile away now. Let’s meet him at the end of the driveway. I don’t want to be here anymore.”

Hawk started walking, followed by Dylan, Max, Stella, and Ethan. A few moments later, the cabin door slammed behind them.

Magnus ran up to join the group, already panting, though likely more from excitement than true exertion. Or at least Stella hoped so. They wouldn’t be able to drive a vehicle all the way into the nearby wildlife preserve, which meant a hike, in the dark, with six gallons of water plus a cauldron.

“Assuming Roman found one,” Stella murmured to herself.

“Found what?” Magnus asked as he strode beside her.

“An iron cauldron.” She had the grimoire. She had the athame. She had the herbal ingredients and John Silence Mather’s rib bone. Very soon, she’d have a full moon. And she had her subject matter: Ethan.

But if Roman hadn’t brought the distilled water—and most importantly, an iron cauldron—all of their preparations for the counterspell would be in vain.

“Well, if he hasn’t found an iron one, I just bought a copper pot for making brews. I got it through an online auction.”

“Thanks, Mags. But this one has to be iron. And what the hell are you

doing, ordering things online?”

Internet shopping was going to be the death of her store.

“You didn’t have one in stock,” he said, sounding legitimately apologetic.

By that point, they’d arrived at the end of the driveway, and a set of headlights swung around a bend in the gravel road that wove through the woods.

Roman pulled over quickly, skidding on the road’s soft shoulder. He put the SUV in park and leaned out of his window. “Where do you want me to put all this stuff?”

“Were you able to find an iron cauldron?” Stella asked.

Roman grunted. “I said I would. Now where do you want it?”

“Change of plans,” Stella said as she released a sigh along with the last of her lingering doubts. “We’re not doing the spell here. We’ve got a plan B. Magnus, here, can tell you where to go.”

“All right,” Roman said, eyeing Magnus up and down. “But let’s make this quick. I’ve got to get back to the den. Pack business.”

They piled into the SUV, and Stella immediately checked the cargo area. As requested, there was all the water plus a fourteen-inch, rusty iron cauldron with a pig ear handle and three short, sturdy legs.

It only took them five minutes to reach the edge of the wildlife area. Roman hopped out and immediately opened the back of the SUV, letting light pour out onto the dark roadway.

“How far of a walk is it?” Dylan asked.

“Not far,” Magnus said. “Half mile maybe? If we enter there...” He indicated the narrow path that cut through the trees to their right. “There’ll be a clearing where Stella can set up.”

“Let’s get everything unloaded and hurry,” Ethan said. “We’re working with limited time.”

Stella adjusted her bag’s strap across her chest and grabbed one of the jugs of water. Ethan grabbed two, as did Max and Dylan.

“I’ll lead the way,” Magnus said. He fastened a velcro strap around his head, then clicked a button that illuminated a small LED lamp centered on his forehead.

“Where did you get that?” Stella asked, wondering if her nonmagical friend was now able to pull things out of thin air.

“The cabin,” Magnus said. “Thought it might be useful.”

Hawk wrapped his arms around the cauldron, lifted it easily, and headed

for the path.

“Someone will be back to pick you up in an hour,” Roman said. “Assuming that’s enough time.”

“Should be,” Stella said. “Thanks.”

Roman gave her a curt nod, then drove off.

As the dust settled, the rest of them entered the wilderness preserve in a single file line—Magnus at the lead, followed by Max, Dylan, Ethan, Stella, and Hawk carrying the iron cauldron. The trees were thick, which sent a trickle of dread sliding down Stella’s arms.

Now was not the time to dwell on childhood ghost stories. She needed to focus on Ethan, on reversing the curse, and getting Bridget Bishop’s target off his back.

Clouds drifted over the moon, making the woods darker, and even more creepy. She wished she had the wolves’ impressive night vision, but at least there was Magnus’s handy headlamp.

After fifteen minutes, they stepped through the trees into a wide open area.

“This is it,” Magnus said proudly. Apparently, he’d harbored some uncertainty about finding the place in the dark. Stella was glad he’d kept his doubts to himself. She had enough anxiety roiling her belly.

“Shine your light over there,” Ethan said, and he started raking up dried pine needles and small twigs into a pile of kindling.

The wolves helped, adding more twigs and a few larger sticks.

Stella made sure the sticks were pine as well because, even though the recipe didn’t say anything about it, every witch knew that pine created the cleanest breaks from the past. It signified cleansing, purification, and new beginnings. Whoever created the spell in the first place probably assumed anyone wanting to break a curse would know to start with a pine fire.

Then, with the flick of her wrist, she conjured four flames at the ends of her fingers and ignited the kindling. They went up like a torch, and Magnus quickly added some larger pieces off a broken pine branch before the fire snuffed out.

Hawk placed the cauldron over the crackling fire.

“Dylan, Max...” Stella said. “Can you two please fill the cauldron?”

“On it,” Dylan said.

Together, they popped the caps and emptied the jugs of distilled water into the cauldron in a loud, glugging fashion.

Stella pressed her hand firmly against her twisting stomach, trying not to think about the last person in her immediate family to use a cauldron. Her mother had one in her kitchen and one in her lab. The former had produced some questionable meals. The latter had produced a disastrous spell.

Marietta Nurse and her husband George Hawley, the couple who'd raised Stella and her sister, had done their best to shield the girls from the details that led to their mother's death. The girls, however, had figured out enough about what happened to throw their mother's cauldron away. Stella hadn't wanted to set eyes on one ever again.

Now, she had no choice.

"Dylan," Hawk said. "You stay here. Signal to us if anything goes awry. Max and I will take the perimeter."

Apparently, Hawk assumed Magnus was trustworthy because he and Max stripped down right in front of him, wasting no time to shift into their wolf forms.

Magnus watched their transformations with wide eyes and a slack jaw, then staggered backward as they bolted from the clearing, taking off at a startling pace.

The poor kid's Adam's apple bobbed so thickly, it looked a little painful. If he was regretting having begged to come along, he had no one to blame but himself.

Flipping the grimoire open, Stella pricked her finger with the athame and pressed her bloody fingertip to the page.

"Why are you doing that again?" Ethan asked.

"It's dark out, even with the fire, and the ink has faded since we first revealed them. I want the words as clear and legible as possible. I can't afford to make any mistakes."

As the words darkened against the yellowed page, Stella used a clean index finger to trace the spell as she read through it again for the umpteenth time.

The most complicated part of the countercurse was going to be in the pacing. So many clockwise stirs, so many counterclockwise...

Ethan laid out the ingredients they'd collected on a white T-shirt he'd pulled from his bag.

Flames licked up around the cauldron's iron sides, and they all stared down into the water, waiting for the first bubbles to show.

"A watched pot never boils," Magnus said after several minutes. "That's

what my mom always says when I'm making mac and cheese.”

He had a point. There was a lot of water, and this was taking a long time. Summoning her patience, Stella tried not to think about how the moon was already a large white disk against a black velvet sky. It would be at its highest point within minutes.

“Turn your backs, everyone. Magnus is right.”

“Seriously?” Dylan asked.

“Yes,” Stella said. “Seriously.”

They turned their backs on the cauldron. No one said a word for several minutes. Ethan was practically juggling his ancestor’s rib bone back-and-forth between his hands.

Only when they heard the sounds of a rolling boil did they turn back around. The time had come and not a second too soon.

“Okay,” Stella said. “Dylan, Magnus, you two back up. I want you at least twenty yards away, just in case this blows.”

“But...” Magnus said.

“No buts,” she said. “You wanted to witness. You can witness from the tree line.”

“Fine,” he grumbled.

As soon as the shifter and the sixteen-year-old were at a safe distance, Stella moved closer to Ethan so they stood shoulder to shoulder—or as close as they could get to that, given his height.

“Okay,” she said. “I suspect, once this gets started, you're going to feel some kind of physical sensations. Don't panic. Let it roll through you.”

Her words came out raspy and unusually slow as her lungs tightened and her heart raced. She really didn't want to screw this up. The point was to improve Ethan's life, not ruin it. And definitely not end it.

If he was feeling a similar kind of anxiety, he didn't show it.

“The feelings will likely increase the further I get into the spell,” she explained.

Ethan licked his lips and nodded.

“The fire might even get more intense. If it gets too hot and you have to step back, still stay as close as you can. Are you ready?”

“Ready, captain.”

She turned to him, and he turned to her. A flash of anxiety passed between them, and he leaned down to kiss her. It was just a brush of the lips at first, then the contact deepened.

Heat blazed through Stella's body. The storminess of Ethan's magic raised several leaves off the ground around them as his body pressed against hers.

"I'd say, 'Get a room,'" Dylan called, "but since we're in the middle of a wilderness preserve...."

"Focus, Red," Ethan said, chuckling. His hands slipped around her waist, down over her ass, and he squeezed.

"Not helping," she said.

"Really?" he asked. "It always makes me feel better."

"Shhh." She glanced up at the sky. "It's time."

She held the book open in her left hand and used the thick stick from the hawthorn tree to stir the boiling water in the cauldron. She'd previously stripped the stick of its bark and rubbed it smooth with a rock. The bare, pale wood glowed eerily in the moonlight.

"Three leaves adder's tongue for healing," she read from the book.

Ethan, her very eager sous chef, dropped the bright green, teardrop-shaped leaves into the cauldron and peered down into the water.

Stella stirred in a clockwise direction as magic swirled into the air with each of her rotations.

"Bubble, bubble toil and trouble," Ethan murmured.

"Yeah," she said. "Shakespeare really knew what he was talking about. Now, two agrimony flowers, crushed, for the reversal."

Ethan dropped into a squat and selected two yellow flowers from his carefully arranged ingredients.

After rubbing them into a pulp between his thumb and middle finger, he added the flowers to the boiling pot while Stella continued to stir four more times.

That done, she tucked the stick under her arm and wiped her palm against her linen dress. "Next up, two dried allspice berries for hex breaking."

Ethan plopped the hard brown pellets into the cauldron, and a hissing geyser shot up from each of their impact points.

Ethan leaned back.

Stella adjusted the book, which had started to slip in her sweaty hand. "For this next part, we need to concentrate."

"I've been concentrating," Ethan said, and he held out his hand, knowing what was coming next.

Stella nicked the end of Ethan's middle finger with the athame, then

translated from the recipe as she read, “Three drops blood of the damned, then thrice stir in the opposite direction.”

Ethan held his hand over the boiling cauldron and pressed his thumb beneath the nick. Exactly three drops of blood fell from his fingertip while Stella changed her stirring technique to a counterclockwise rotation.

“Stop,” she said. “That’s three on both counts.”

Ethan jerked his hand back, and she removed the hawthorn stick from the cauldron.

They watched the swirling water until it stilled, then Stella said, “Now, for the bone.”

Ethan reverently slid his ancestor’s rib into the water until it disappeared beneath the surface.

“Is that it?” he asked.

“Just the words are left,” Stella whispered. “Maybe take my hand for this part?”

The spell didn’t prescribe physical contact, but she needed Ethan’s strength to get her through the rest of the magic. There’d be no more translations. This one had to be read in French exactly as written. She hoped she didn’t lose style points for her accent.

She cleared her throat. “*Le soleil à l’est, oublie le passé.*”

Ethan whispered the words to himself in English, almost like a prayer. “Sun in the east, forget the past.”

Stella glanced over at him, surprised by his recitation. They hadn’t discussed doing that ahead of time.

“*Le sang des damnés, comme un oiseau qui renaît de ses cendres, il n’est plus damné.*”

Before Ethan could repeat in English the bit about the blood of the damned and the bird rising from the ashes, the blazing fire under the cauldron went out, as if turned off by a switch.

They would have been thrown into pitch blackness if not for the moonlight, which made the rising smoke gleam like ribbons of silver.

Ethan’s hand tightened around hers.

Stella held her breath as she waited. And then...

Nothing.

Was that it? Was the curse broken?

“Now is that it?” Ethan asked again.

A part of Stella wondered if she’d done something wrong. Had Ethan

been right, and the spell made more sense at dawn?

Before she could answer Ethan's question, or ponder any of her own questions out loud, Ethan's body bucked. Violently.

His eyes bulged, and his hand wrapped around his throat.

"Ethan!" she shouted. Her blood ran cold, and her legs locked.

"What's happening?" Magnus cried from his position at the edge of the clearing.

"I don't know!" Stella yelled. "I don't know what's happening."

Ethan's knees buckled then hit the ground while his torso remained ramrod straight.

Stella also dropped to her knees, her breath coming in pants.

"It's okay. It's okay," she repeated, wanting so desperately to believe it. "It's just the curse leaving your body. Don't panic. Ride it out."

Dylan, who was still in human form, let out a long and haunted sounding howl that bounced off the trees, and echoed through the woods.

He was immediately answered by the howls of two other wolves, checking in with each other. Hawk and Max sounded very far away. If Stella thought there was anything they could do to help, she might have worried they wouldn't be able to get there in time.

Ethan keeled over to his side. Spittle foamed at the corners of his mouth. Stella was only able to see it because Magnus had abandoned his position and approached. He angled his LED headlamp directly at Ethan's face.

Ethan's whole body stiffened then spasmed as if he were having a seizure, twitching on the ground like the indecisive needle on a compass.

"Come on, Ethan," she begged, squeezing his hip and shoulder. "Try to breathe."

A hissing sound slipped past his lips. He grimaced, pulling his mouth into a grotesque, distorted shape of agony.

"Is he dying?" Magnus cried.

"No!" she cried. Ethan couldn't die. Not after all of this. It was impossible. She'd gone over the spell a hundred times. She'd done everything right—just like it was written—though Ethan's question about the dawn slid through her mind unbidden.

If only they weren't so deep in the woods. If only she had her coven to help her. Then she'd know what to do.

The tension around Ethan's mouth softened. But the tremors continued to torment. His left leg spasmed, then stilled. Stella thought she saw his chest

rise, but she wasn't one hundred-percent sure.

"Ethan, breathe."

She leaned over him, wishing she had a mirror to hold to his mouth. Maybe he was breathing, and it was just too shallow for her to know. Especially in the dark. Would this have been better at dawn?

Ethan's body went slack as the twitching stopped.

"Ethan?"

"Oh, god," Magnus moaned. "He's dead. He's dead, isn't he?"

"Ethan!" Stella shook his body. She shook him harder. "Ethan!"

His eyes fluttered, then opened.

"Ethan." She bowed her head forward as blue ribbons of magic unfurled from her chest to embrace him.

"Something's...leaving...my body." Ethan's voice crackled, dry and raspy.

"It's the curse," she said, so grateful she could have collapsed on the ground next to him. "It's Bridget Bishop's curse on you. Let it go."

"It feels...weird."

This wasn't terribly surprising. Stella's heart was still racing, pounding in her ears. She raised her head, then frowned in confusion when a small puff of smoke burst out of the center of Ethan's chest.

"Stella..." Dylan said, apprehension rising in his voice as he drew closer. "What the fuck is that?"

Two wolves raced into the clearing and skidded to a stop.

The puff of smoke turned into a silver stream, still rising from the center of Ethan's chest. And the smoke was taking on a peculiarly human shape.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Stella fell into a crab-walk position and scuttled backward, her palms scraping against the rough ground. She cast her gaze upward, toward the unexpected scene, but her long auburn hair blew across her face, making it hard to see. That had to be it, because she couldn't *really* be seeing what she thought she saw, right?

Ethan groaned and slowly rolled onto his hands and knees, moving stiffly.

While he seemed oblivious to the smoky figure rising above him, the wolves certainly weren't. They all growled, even Dylan, who was still in human form and furiously ripping off his clothes.

Magnus remained several yards away—to Stella's right and behind—but he must have had a clear view of what was taking shape in the air above them. He nervously called out her name, as if expecting her to have all the answers.

The only answer Stella had was that the curse had definitely left Ethan's body. That part of the plan had worked perfectly. What she hadn't expected, or even imagined, was that once expelled, Bridget Bishop's curse would anthropomorphize.

A seven-foot demonic composite of silvery smoke wavered in the air above Ethan's body. The demon's shape fluctuated slightly with the breeze, but it had a distinctive head, shoulders, and arms. Its torso stretched toward the ground like taffy, ending in a wispy snaillike tail.

Two dark and empty circles in its head suggested the presence of sentient eyes, and when Stella flinched, it turned those eyes on her, tipping its head to the side like a bird contemplating a juicy worm.

Stella's heart raced and her hands itched with magic, but she had no idea

what kind of response was needed. There was nothing in the book that mentioned any fallout from the countercurse.

Dylan's clothes now lay in a pile at his feet, and he shifted into his wolf, probably as much for self-defense as for any other reason. When a situation became uncertain, shifters were always most comfortable in their animal form.

Hawk stalked forward, taking the lead. Max and Dylan fell into a triangular formation behind him. The trio held their heads low to the ground with their ears back and their lips pulled up to reveal razor sharp teeth.

Stella wasn't sure what good teeth were going to do when the demon had no physical mass. The wolves couldn't sink their teeth into smoke.

Ethan staggered to his feet, swayed unsteadily, then jolted when he saw the figure floating above him.

"Shit!" He retreated a few steps and nearly lost his balance—still not completely recovered from the countercurse, which, for all practical purposes, had been the equivalent of an exorcism. The poor guy had the right to be unsteady.

Fortunately, Stella was on her feet by then and caught him before he fell.

"What is it?" he asked. Ethan's voice was scratchy and hushed. He positioned himself in front of Stella and held out his arms to create a human barricade. It wasn't going to be enough to stop the demon, but still, Stella's heart warmed at Ethan's need to protect her.

"A demon," she said. "The embodiment of Bishop's curse."

She had no other explanation, and the timing was too coincidental for it to be anything else.

"What's it doing?" he asked.

Stella curled her fingers into the back of Ethan's T-shirt and held on tight. "Deciding, I think."

His body tensed. "Deciding on what?"

"On what to do next." Stella released Ethan's T-shirt and moved beside him so she could take his hand. She sincerely hoped the demon would decide to simply evaporate on the night air. But she had her doubts.

"That thing...that's the curse that was on me?" Ethan asked.

The demon grew in height, towering over them by at least six feet. It writhed and twisted, stretching its mouth into grotesque shapes.

"Actually," she said, tugging on Ethan's arm and forcing him to take a few steps backward. "It was *inside* you, but now it's out."

“Thank God for that,” Ethan said on an exhale, his face contorted with disgust.

Stella wanted to agree, but she didn’t like the way the demon kept studying them.

She really hoped Bridget Bishop hadn’t pulled a double cross. She’d had enough with ancient witches and their questionable motives. Actually, she’d about had it with magic altogether.

“Is it like a T-Rex?” Magnus asked from right beside them.

“*Shit!*” Stella jumped at the unexpected sound of his voice. “Magnus! Don’t sneak up on me.”

“I don’t think it can see us if we don’t move,” Magnus explained.

“Even if it can’t see us,” Ethan whispered. “I suspect it can hear us. Maybe we should shut up.”

“Right,” Magnus said. “I see that now.”

The demon bent down to get a better look at them.

An owl abandoned its tree and soared through the clearing, flying low as if on a mouse hunt.

However, the bird of prey turned *into* prey when the demon suddenly stretched out its arm and snatched the owl out of the air. An explosion of snowy white feathers burst from the demon’s smoky fist, then it shoved the flapping owl into its gaping maw.

“Christ!” Ethan cried out. “How did it do that? It’s made of smoke.”

“Uh...this is bad, Stella,” Magnus murmured.

He was right about that. She didn’t know where the bird went. After being swallowed into smoke, logically, it should have dropped straight to the ground. And yet...it had disappeared as if the demon’s body had become temporarily solid.

The demon wasn’t sated by the owl. It turned its hungry, haunted eyes back on them.

“It’s angry,” Magnus whispered. “It’s mad about being evicted from Ethan’s body.”

“I won’t let it hurt either of you,” Stella promised. One way or another, she’d figure out how to snuff this thing out.

“Stella,” Ethan said. “*We’re* not the one who evicted it. I think it’s looking at you.”

Stella met the demon’s eyes—or at least, she thought she did. It was hard to tell, staring into two black holes. But those eyes told her that Ethan was

right.

The demon's intense focus *was* definitely on her, and its stare sent a cold shiver of fear from the back of her neck straight down her legs. Terror rooted her to the spot. She couldn't have run even if she tried.

All she could do was take a step forward and swing at the demon with the Hawthorn stick, but the branch sailed right through the demon's smoky form.

The demon reached out with its long arm, grabbed Ethan by the shoulder, and tossed him twenty feet to the right. He bounced once on the ground, grunted, and grabbed his shoulder, but otherwise looked unharmed.

Magnus, however, yelped and—judging by the sound of running feet—disappeared into the trees behind her.

Good. Stella wanted them both as far away from this thing as possible. But how in the hell had it thrown Ethan? It was made of smoke one moment, and in the next second was solid enough to grab onto a full-grown man?

The wolves growled and stalked closer.

“Stay back,” she said. “You can't hurt it. It can only hurt you.”

“Stella!” Ethan yelled as he got back on his feet. “Do something. Get away from it at least.”

He was right. She needed to do something. There were too many potential meals in this clearing, and she wasn't about to let a demon—a demon that *she'd* unleashed—snack on her, Ethan, Magnus, or any of the wolves.

The problem was, while she'd been a newbie in the art of reversing curses, she was even less practiced in the magic required to banish a demon.

As far as she was aware, no one in her coven had ever needed to do it. Anything she'd heard about the art was purely anecdotal. All she knew was that it required blood and fire.

And that gave her an idea.

Ethan had once created blood *rain* with the touch of her bloody hand. Maybe she could create blood fire.

It would have to be big. She'd need a lot of fuel for that kind of bonfire. Fortunately, they were surrounded by trees.

She backed up slowly, heading toward the opposite side of the clearing, far away from where everyone was gathered near the cauldron. Hopefully the demon was still focused enough on her to follow.

“Where are you going?” Ethan asked.

“*Shhh.*” She flicked her hands out, signifying they should all be silent. “Quit calling attention to yourselves.”

To the demon, she said, “*Here, boy.* Here, angry little demon. Follow me.”

“What’s she doing?” Magnus whispered.

“Being a martyr,” Ethan rumbled, and the wolves’ responding growls said they heartily disapproved.

Stella paid them no mind.

The demon fell into a crouch and dragged itself forward on its smoky arms—its movements odd and angular, while still being silky smooth. Like a modern dancer. Kind of cool if Stella hadn’t just seen it toss Ethan through the air or gobble down an owl. She didn’t think it even chewed.

She was still backing up and had retreated a good twenty feet. A little bit farther, and she’d be in the trees on the far side of the clearing. In the trees where this new nightmare could join with her recurring childhood nightmares and hit her on all cylinders.

Joy.

The demon swiped an arm forward and low to the ground, lashing out at her.

Stella jumped up and over its arm, as if this were a rousing game of double Dutch.

It swung its other arm, swiping at her from the opposite direction.

Stella jumped over that too.

“Is that the best you can do?” she taunted. Another fifteen feet, and she’d be in the trees.

The athame throbbed in her back pocket, as if the blade was excited about the opportunity to be useful.

Thunder rolled in the distance, and lightning sizzled across the sky, cracking the blackness like a plate.

There were no storms in the weather forecast, so Stella assumed that was Ethan, trying to be helpful with his own brand of magic. But if he called down rain now, it would only foil her plans. She needed the blood fire to destroy the demon.

“No, Ethan!” she shouted. “No rain! Trust me. I’ve got this! No rain!”

The demon used her moment of distraction to swipe at her again. This time, it pulled her feet right out from under her, and she landed on her ass.

“Ugh. How do you *do* that?” she asked, more annoyed now than afraid. “I can fucking see right through you!”

The demon screeched like the owl it had recently consumed and dove

down at her like a heatseeking missile.

“Shit.” Stella logrolled out of the way and jumped to her feet.

No more backing up for her; it was taking her too long to reach the trees.

She took off at a run. Her feet beat against the hard ground. Her arms pumped. She wasn’t sure if she was breathing, but her pulse pounded in her ears.

“STELLA!” Ethan and Magnus shouted. “Run!”

The demon pursued her. Its hot, smoky breath warmed the back of her neck and tainted the cool night air.

As she reached the trees, a loud scrambling sound rustled through the dried leaves to her right.

Stella whirled to see that the same disturbance had also caught the demon’s attention. It whipped its head toward the sound and snagged a frightened rabbit out from under its cover.

The rabbit screamed—a bile-raising sound—then disappeared into the demon’s mouth.

“Oh, gross.” Stella grimaced and raced away, using the time it took the demon to feed to put thirty more feet between them. Now, she just needed it to come a little bit deeper into the forest.

The demon wiped its arm across its mouth, then stalked forward, reducing their separation to twenty feet.

Stella spotted a fallen tree that was long dead, bleached white and bone dry. The perfect kindling.

“I know,” she said, luring the demon closer. “I get it. You’re mad. You were all fat and happy inside Ethan. But it’s not entirely my fault you’re out in the cold now. Your maker told me how to evict you. You can blame her. You remember Bridget, right? Middle-aged witch. Black bonnet. Red bodice. Smells like spilled beer?”

The demon howled and surged forward so quickly it reduced the remaining space between them by half.

Its speed nearly stopped Stella’s heart, but this was what she wanted. Three more feet, and it would reach the dead tree.

Sweat trickled down her temple as she maneuvered to the opposite side of the fallen tree, putting it between them. “Come to mama.”

The demon was now just inches away.

Stella pulled the athame from her pocket. The gemstone in the handle throbbed beneath her thumb. The silver blade gleamed in the moonlight.

The demon's vacant eyes narrowed on the razor sharp edge, and it cocked its head inquisitively.

Stella sliced the blade across her palm. It was so sharp, at first, she didn't even feel it. Blood welled up, and she conjured a fire ball in her hand.

Blood fire. Much like Ethan's Blood rain.

She convinced herself that what she and Ethan produced had nothing to do with the blood magic in the Boston coven's grimoire. She wasn't a hypocrite. What she was doing now was entirely different. This kind of blood magic was good. This was a necessity.

The fire sizzled when it mixed with her blood, and it flared in its intensity. The magic felt different than any fire spells she'd conjured before—richer somehow, and thicker too. It gave her the confidence to believe in her plan.

The demon moved another inch forward, now hovering directly above the rotting tree.

Stella flung the fireball down in front of her, the tree caught, and the flames shot up like a torch, consuming the demon in a column of blood fire.

The demon screeched in pain.

“Die, you disgusting thing! Just die already!”

The demon reached for the sky, and it shot straight up like a rocket, high above the treetops before jackknifing and diving for the ground. Straight toward Stella.

“*Shit.* Shit, shit, shit.”

She threw one arm over her eyes and turned her head.

Her other arm—the one whose hand still held the athame—swiped blindly through the air.

She didn't feel any resistance, nothing to suggest the blade made any purchase. But the demon let out a gurgling scream, making her think she may have slit its throat.

Heat from the fire scorched her skin, and she opened her eyes just in time to see the demon divert its course and fly off—deeper into the woods—away from the fire that was supposed to banish it, but fortunately, away from the clearing where Ethan, Magnus, and the wolves were waiting, probably at their wits' end.

The acrid smoke stung Stella's eyes, but she watched the demon through her streaming tears until it disappeared into the dark—into the woods where all her nightmares seemed to go.

For the short term, she was happy. Ethan and her friends were safe. *Alive*. But now, there was a hungry demon loose in the world.

And something else. Something possibly worse. She'd been the one to not only set it free, but to let it—

Sparks and bits of hot ash burned her arms. “Oh, God.”

The blood fire she'd created had ignited a carpet of dried pine needles and were now spreading, creating a circle around her. They towered over her, leaping six feet into the air.

“STELLA!”

She could hear voices—*multiple voices*—calling her name, but the sound was muffled by the roaring fire.

She was trapped at the epicenter of a blazing inferno. The heat blistered her skin and singed her hair. There was no way out. And she'd specifically ordered Ethan *not* to conjure the rain.

Why had she told him not to conjure the rain?

The heat was intense. *Too intense*. She desperately tried to think of a spell she could use to protect herself—just long enough for the fire to burn itself out. But her brain was clouded. The pain blasted every thought out of her head.

She hurt. God, she hurt.

This was the end. This was how she was going to die.

At least Ethan was free of the curse. He could go on with his life. Maybe he could even get back into the campaign.

The pain was blinding. There was too much smoke to breathe. Stella's vision blurred. She was going to pass out. Then the fire would consume her.

Instinctively, she curled into a fetal position—her last primitive line of defense—and prayed for the end to be quick.

CHAPTER
NINE

Ethan jumped back in shock as a raging pillar of flames shot into the air, burning taller than the tallest trees in the forest. The inferno illuminated the night and roared like a dragon, but at least that demon thing was no longer in sight. Then again, neither was Stella.

He'd watched her disappear into the trees on the opposite side of the clearing, but she'd never come out again.

"You have to do something," Hawk insisted. He'd already resumed human form, while the other two shifters remained as wolves. Max and Dylan growled and laid their ears back flat.

Ethan flexed his hands. His gut told him the beta wolf was right. He had the power to extinguish the flames, but he held his ground. He'd heard Stella's instructions loud and clear. No rain.

"Mather!" Hawk barked, as if Ethan hadn't heard him the first time.

"No. Stella told me not to," Ethan explained, though his gut roiled with indecision, his head in conflict with his heart, instinct warring with lessons learned the hard way.

When Stella made fire, it was always so controlled. It was even beautiful. Not like this. Something about this fire didn't feel right. It didn't look right. It didn't even sound right. Though...what did he know about banishing demons?

"If I butt in," Ethan said, "I could ruin whatever spell she's working. She's trying to get rid of that thing, and it could take time." He remembered their break-in at the tattoo parlor. "Some spells can take over an hour."

How long had this fire been raging? Thirty seconds? A minute? God, it felt like forever. A couple minutes more and she could burn down the whole

forest.

“I’m sure Stella has everything under control,” Magnus added in a trembling voice. “We shouldn’t underestimate her.”

“Does that *look* like fucking control to either of you?” Hawk asked. “She’s going to destroy everything, including herself.”

Ethan’s gut clenched. He honestly didn’t know what Stella’s spell was supposed to look like. He thought they’d amply prepared for tonight, but this was an outcome the two of them had never discussed. Every fiber of his being told him to extinguish the fire, but he had to trust she knew what she was doing. All they had was their trust in each other.

“You’re seriously going to wait this out?” Hawk asked, incredulous. “Wait until she’s nothing but ash?”

Ethan was going to be sick. “I didn’t listen to her once before, and it put us in a spot where we were fighting for our lives. She needs me to listen to her now. If I interfere and—”

“For fuck’s sake, man!” Hawk shouted. His pale gray eyes were flung open wide and incredulous. “Interfere!”

Ethan didn’t know if it was his own terror or the frantic sound of Hawk’s voice—so out of character for the normally controlled wolf—but he clipped out an angry “Fuck!” and threw his arms up toward the heavens in an act of pure instinct.

Magic surged through him like floodgates opened wide.

Immediately, the sky became an overturned bucket, and the rain came down with so much force it pushed Magnus to his knees.

Still, the fire raged on, impervious to the deluge.

“More!” Hawk ordered.

Ethan staggered. They were all soaked to the bone, and Ethan’s clothes felt like a hundred pounds of weight on his back. He didn’t know how much more he had in him.

After just a few seconds, he was already standing ankle deep in water. The ground was too dry and compacted to absorb the onslaught.

Ethan balled his hands into fists—not really knowing what he was doing other than exercising sheer will.

“It’s going out,” Magnus said, still on his hands and knees. “The fire’s going out.”

It was. At least, it was starting to. As the water magic surged through Ethan’s body, the tower of fire disappeared beneath the treetops.

“She’s still in there somewhere,” Hawk said. “You gotta put that thing all the way out.”

Ethan flexed his muscles. Then, after another few seconds of blinding exertion, the fire finally extinguished and they were thrown into pitch blackness, save for the small beam from Magnus’s headlamp.

Ethan gathered what little energy he had left and ran, his feet splashing across the sodden ground as he headed for the spot where he’d seen Stella disappear into the trees.

God, he prayed he’d done the right thing.

The wolves ran faster, even Hawk who was on two legs. Inside the tree line, water dripped off the waterlogged branches, and the ground hissed with steam. The wolves skidded to a stop and gathered around a charred circle of earth.

As soon as Ethan caught up to them, acid rose in his throat.

Stella lay on her side, soaking wet with her knees pulled up to her chest. Her arms were wrapped around her legs, her head tucked in to protect her face. She didn’t move.

Ethan dropped to his knees beside her and brushed her hair off her face. Some of her hair had burned off, and her clothes were blackened. Amazingly, the exposed skin on her arms didn’t seem to be burned. She must have used some kind of last-ditch protective spell.

“Is she okay?” Magnus yelled from several yards behind them.

Was she? Ethan had no idea. Had he done the right thing by interfering with her spell? Had *he* caused this? He stroked the side of her face. “Stella?”

Magnus skidded to a stop behind Ethan. “Oh my god.”

Max, still in wolf form, whined. His nose twitched, presumably at the acrid scent of burnt hair and wet ash, but he stretched his neck forward and touched the tip of his nose to Stella’s shoulder.

She recoiled.

“She’s alive!” Magnus cried out. The beam from his head lamp hit Stella’s face as he dropped to his knees beside Ethan. Her face was streaked in soot.

Ethan pulled Stella into his arms, and she screamed, scaring the shit out of him. He quickly loosened his grip before realizing that it wasn’t a cry of pain he’d heard, rather one of panic.

Stella fought and kicked and clawed at his eyes, as if fighting for her life, trying to get out of his grasp.

“Stella!” he said. “*Red*. Easy now. It’s me. You’re safe.”

She continued to fight him, and she was way stronger than he expected. In fact, Ethan had never fully appreciated her physical strength. Now, he had to use all of his just to keep her from hurting them both. It was like she thought he was that crazy owl-eating demon.

“Stella, it’s me,” he tried again. “Settle down. It’s okay.”

She swiped at his face, scraping her nails across his cheek and screaming like a banshee.

Ethan leaned back and away, but he didn’t let go.

“Something’s wrong with her,” Hawk said.

“No,” Ethan said. “She’s just scared.”

“She’s having a psychotic break,” Hawk countered.

“She’ll be fine,” Ethan murmured. “Won’t you, Red? You’ll be fine. You’re fine.”

Ethan felt some of the rigidity in her muscles relax, though she continued to push against his chest, trying to get away.

“We should get her to a hospital,” Magnus said. The beam from his head lamp sliced through the trees.

Maybe, Ethan thought. But maybe not. He’d suffered from night terrors after his mother died. His foster mother would hold him and rock the fear away. Sometimes, it took a while—hours, even—but he was always able to fall asleep again.

Stella made a sound—not a scream, more like a break in her voice that ended in a gut-wrenching gasp. Her body shook and instead of scrambling away, she pulled herself closer to Ethan’s body.

“That’s it,” Ethan said. “Let it out.”

Stella sobbed in his arms, a trembling mess of hysteria. He held her closer while the four others let out collective sighs of relief. This was a definite improvement, though they still weren’t out of the woods.

“Y- you,” she said as she gripped his T-shirt.

“Yes,” Ethan said. “It’s me.”

“I th-thought...”

“Shhh,” he said. “You don’t need to talk.”

“I thought you were g-gonna let me burn.”

“*What?* No.”

“You know, it’s possible to trust a person a little too muh—” She hiccuped on a sob. “Too much.”

Slowly, Ethan understood what she was saying. Hawk had been right. He should have interfered way sooner than he did.

“What happened?” Ethan asked. “Wait. No. You don’t have to tell me now. Let’s get you somewhere safe and cleaned up. Are you hurt at all?”

“A protective charm,” she said. “Didn’t know if it would work.”

“It didn’t work on your clothes or your hair,” Ethan said, stroking his hand over the missing sections of her hair. “But your skin just looks like it needs some soap and maybe a little aloe.”

“I need to get out of here,” she whispered.

“Stella,” Hawk said, moving closer. “Where is it?”

She opened her eyes for the first time and blinked up at the beta wolf.

“Where...?” she asked.

“The demon,” Hawk clarified, lifting his eyes to survey the treetops. “Where did it go?”

An expression of terror slipped over Stella’s features, and she twisted over her shoulder to cast her gaze deeper into the forest.

“*That* way?” Hawk asked, turning in the same direction.

“I screwed up,” she said.

“No, you didn’t,” Ethan said. “You broke the curse.”

“And set it free in the world,” Dylan added.

Ethan hadn’t noticed when the younger wolf shifted back into human form, but Dylan was now standing completely naked beside him, his junk right in Ethan’s line of sight.

“*Jesus*,” Ethan muttered, looking away.

“It’s gonna come back,” Dylan said knowingly.

“Then we’ll deal with it,” Hawk said.

“So much for witches and their low profiles,” Dylan muttered, and Max growled in agreement.

Hawk scoffed.

“What are you talking about?” Ethan asked.

“Given their history,” Dylan said with a shrug, “witches try to keep a low profile. That demon thing is the opposite of low.”

He searched the sky, then added, “It’s been about an hour. We should get back to the road. Roman will be here to pick us up soon.”

Ethan got onto his knees without jostling Stella. He adjusted her weight in his arms, then rose to his feet.

“I can walk,” she murmured against his neck.

“You’re not walking,” Ethan said. “I’ve got you.”

Surprisingly, Stella didn’t argue or put up any more of a fight. She wrapped her arms around his neck and laid her head against his shoulder. She was totally wiped.

Back in the clearing, Dylan got dressed. Max shifted and got dressed too. Hawk picked up the cauldron. Magnus kicked his feet through the remains of the campfire, destroying any evidence of their activities, before leading the way back to the road where Roman was parked.

Roman looked up from his phone when he saw them all coming. “Everything go all right? The air smells like smoke.”

Clearly, he hadn’t spotted Stella in Ethan’s arms yet.

“Curse is broken,” Hawk said. “Now, we’ve got bigger fish to fry.”

“I can’t fix this on my own,” Stella whispered so only Ethan could hear.

“You won’t have to,” he assured her, and when they reached the SUV, he set her gently on her feet.

Stella’s knees buckled, and she grabbed onto Ethan to stabilize herself. “Ethan, we can’t do it on our own either.”

“What are you saying?” Ethan asked.

Stella’s phone buzzed in her pocket. She pulled it out and made a little whimper. The screen said, *Jade Calling*.

“Do you think your sister already knows?” Ethan asked.

“About the curse being broken, or about a demon being on the loose?”

“Either,” he said.

“There’s only one way to find out.” Stella drew in a shaky breath, reminding Ethan how fragile she still was. “Hel-lo?”

“Stellz?” Jade asked. The panicked sound of her voice was loud enough to make the wolves turn and look.

Stella glanced up at Ethan, and she put the call on speaker. “Hi, Jade.”

“I’m with Judith,” Jade said, and her voice sounded wary.

“Uh-huh.” Stella’s beautiful gray eyes filled with worry.

“Can you explain what she’s seeing in her crystal ball?” Jade asked.

Stella tucked herself closer to Ethan’s side, and he put his arm around her shoulders, holding her close.

“I don’t know,” Stella said. “What is she seeing?”

“Bridget Bishop,” Jade said, sounding dumbfounded.

Stella looked up at Ethan with arched brows. She held her phone between their chests. “Oh, yeah?”

“Bridget Bishop says her curse is broken. She says *you* broke it.” Jade’s voice suddenly lowered. “I always knew if anyone could do it, you could.”

Ethan gave Stella’s shoulder a light squeeze, and she looked up at him with her lips parted in surprise. Apparently she hadn’t been as confident in her abilities as he had been. Or for that matter, as confident as Jade had been.

“You always *knew* I could break the curse?” Stella asked her sister.

Ethan expected some of the tension to drain from Stella’s body. They couldn’t have hoped for better news. If Bridget Bishop was making the announcement herself, that meant he and Stella wouldn’t have to convince the Salem coven that the deed was truly done.

But Stella’s body was as tense as ever.

Before Jade could answer Stella’s question, an old woman’s scream sliced through the phone line.

Jade’s voice broke off, and she must have put her hand over the phone because her next words were muffled. “*Judith? What is it? Are you... Oh my god. Judith!*”

Stella lifted the phone higher, closer to her mouth. “Jade? What’s going on?”

“I gotta go. Judith’s seen something else. She looks like she’s going to be sick.”

“Jade?” Stella cried. “Jade, don’t hang up!”

But Jade didn’t listen, and the line went dead.

CHAPTER
TEN

Stella lowered her phone and looked at it in horror. “What do you think Judith saw?”

Ethan had no way of knowing, but Judith was a prophetic witch. It didn’t sound like their futures were about to improve.

“Your sister’s with her,” Ethan said. “She’ll let us know. For now, we need to take care of you. We need to get you checked out.”

Stella shook her head slowly, her gaze still glued to her phone. “I’m all right.”

“You’re not all right.”

“Something bad...*more bad*...is going to happen,” Stella said, her voice sounding haunted. “I need to get to Salem. I need to talk to Judith.”

Ethan would have thought that was the shock talking, if not for the determined look on Stella’s face. “Okay. But I’m going with you.”

“No,” she said. “No way. My coven is still too unpredictable.”

“You heard your sister,” Ethan argued. “They know the curse is broken. Why would they hurt me now? And don’t forget... Your sister let us escape from that alleyway. We were caught, and she let us go. She was on your side even before this.”

“Yeah? She said she always knew I could break the curse and yet she was torturing you in Jacobs’ barn less than two weeks ago. I can’t take any chances. I need to see their eyes before I trust what they’re saying.”

Ethan got in front of her, put his hands on her shoulders and bent his knees to get on eye level.

Stella looked up and met his gaze.

Ethan tightened his grip to make sure he had her full attention. “Bridget

Bishop told them the curse was broken. They might not have believed *us*, but they have no reason to doubt the source. They won't hurt me."

"And what about the demon?" Stella closed her eyes and shuddered. "Don't forget, it only exists because I got you out from under the curse."

"So, now that thing is my fault?" Ethan asked.

Her eyes snapped open. "No! Of course not. It's totally mine. But once my coven finds out about it, they might be happy to put the blame on you."

Ethan sighed. "We just keep giving your family more reasons to love me, don't we?"

He ran his fingers through Stella's hair, reaching the end on one side sooner than normal.

When his hand fell away, Stella jerked. She grabbed the lock of hair and pulled it forward so she could see it for herself.

"Shit. I was wondering what that awful smell was."

"It'll grow back," Ethan said, smiling despite it all. Stella didn't need hair to be beautiful. Not to him anyway. His feelings for her went way deeper than that.

"You're right." Stella exhaled. "Now's not the time to be vain. Maybe I should just shave it all off and start fresh."

"Your call. I bet you've got a beautiful skull."

Stella rose on her toes and kissed his lips. "Please, do this for me. Stay with the wolves while I go to Salem."

Ethan gritted his teeth. He wasn't useless, and he could defend himself and Stella for that matter. But his resistance wasn't just about pride. A part of him felt vacant whenever he and Stella separated. Having nearly lost her to the fire, he wasn't excited about feeling that emptiness again so soon.

"We haven't been apart in a long while," he said.

"It'll be all right," she assured him.

Ethan nodded, even though he didn't feel it. But after what she'd just been through, he didn't want to argue.

He'd let her have this one; they could talk about it later. Ideally when he had her in his arms with no one else around.

"Fine," he said, "but I'd feel better if you had some protection."

"I'll take Hawk with me," she said.

"What's this?" Hawk asked.

"You and me," Stella said, "we're going to Salem."

"There are a lot of witches there," Hawk said warily.

“That’s the point,” Stella said with a nod. “We need their help.”

“How are they going to react to the news you’ve got a demon running amok?” Hawk asked.

“How are *you* reacting?” Stella countered.

Hawk pressed his lips together because he must have realized Stella was right. There was too much at stake to worry about an angry coven. They needed all hands on deck.

“When do we leave?” Hawk asked.

“As soon as possible,” Stella said.

Hawk glanced at Ethan, then back to Stella. “If that’s what you want. We’ll take your friend back to his cabin, then drop Ethan at the den. I’ve got my truck parked there. I can have you in Salem before dawn.”

“Perfect,” she said.

It wasn’t perfect. Ethan couldn’t find *anything* perfect about this situation. He knew, if they’d gone through with the pairing ritual when he’d wanted them to, they wouldn’t be separating now.

He couldn’t understand Stella’s resistance. The way she described the power boost that would come from it, pairing their magic sounded like the solution to so many of their problems.

They all piled into the SUV and, after dropping a visibly shaken Magnus off at the cabin, returned to the wolves’ den for the rest of them to clean up and say their goodbyes.

“Let’s go,” Hawk said, leaning across his truck’s bench seat.

Stella and Ethan stood outside the open passenger-side window.

“You’ll take good care of her,” Ethan said, as much a question as a direct order.

“I won’t let her out of my sight,” Hawk said.

Stella kissed Ethan once more. Hard on the lips. Her fingers curled into the front of his buttoned shirt as she held him to her.

When she released him, he opened the truck door for her, and she hopped in.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can,” she said. “As soon as I know that they’re confident the curse is broken and I have a better idea of what’s coming next.”

“And when you get back,” Ethan said, “we need to talk.”

“We’ve already talked,” she said, apparently knowing what he wanted to say. “And I agree. As soon as I get back, we’ll set up for the pairing ritual.”

“Really?” He hadn’t expected it to be so easy.

“Really. Now, more than ever, we need all the power we can get.”

“And because you love me.”

A small smile spread across her lips. “Witches can be paired without love, Ethan, but you’re right. For us, it’s going to matter. I can feel it. It’s going to make a difference.” She leaned out of the window and kissed him again.

Her kiss fanned the flame in his chest that always burned the brightest whenever she was near. “Hurry back.”

“We could be on our way if you two kept your hands off each other for five seconds,” Hawk grumbled.

Ethan laughed, leaned in to kiss her one more time, then stepped away from the truck.

“About time,” Hawk muttered. He started the engine, backed up, then shifted the truck into drive.

Ethan watched as the red taillights disappeared into the night, taking his heart with them.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Stella had never traveled alone with a shifter. She bet Hawk had never traveled alone with a witch. The foreignness of the situation was intensified by Hawk not being much of a talker.

He'd been a good ally, but she couldn't help wondering, if Ethan hadn't paid the pack a significant sum of money for their involvement, would Hawk have anything to do with her?

Of course, he wouldn't *now* when there was a demon in her life. If she had a choice, she wouldn't be anywhere near herself either.

But like...on a normal day, if she and Hawk passed each other in the grocery store, would he even say hi?

Hawk drove with his window down, reminding her that the wolves weren't too keen on a witch's scent. Stewed leaves and candle wax, they'd said.

Stella leaned her head against the passenger-side window. There wasn't even anything to look at really, given it was three A.M. and still hours before dawn.

The only thing keeping the silence from being unbearably uncomfortable was the adrenaline coursing through her veins and the guilty thoughts about demon attacks occupying her mind.

Hawk drove south down I-93 with his left hand on the steering wheel and his right hand gripping the gear shift. The tension practically dripped off of him, and Stella didn't have to guess why.

That demon could have targeted any one of them. She was glad she'd been able to lure it away from her friends and allies. She wondered how much worse the night could have gone if not for the help of the pack. Hawk.

Dylan. Max. Roman...

She was glad Chelsea hadn't come along.

"So," she said, scrambling for something to say that would break the silence. "I noticed there aren't a lot of females in your pack."

Hawk's eyes slid to her, then back to the road. "No."

Stella groaned internally, wondering why in the world she'd asked him that. If there was a reason for the pack's unbalanced numbers, it was likely a private one, and shifters weren't known for opening their books to public scrutiny.

Still, in her discomfort, she pushed the conversation for no other reason than she had too much adrenaline to burn.

"I would've thought Roman would have a mate," she said, "him being alpha and all."

There was another beat of silence, then Hawk responded, "He does."

"He does?" Stella's voice went up, and she turned toward him. She hadn't expected an actual answer. "Who?"

Hawk's eyebrows lowered, and he frowned at the road. "Bonnie."

Stella faced forward happy to have him talking. It would make the rest of the drive go faster. "I don't remember meeting her."

"Because you didn't."

"Okay. So, just her and Chelsea then?" She wondered why they kept Bonnie hidden and Chelsea so forward-facing. Maybe Bonnie was more domestic while Chelsea was a soldier? Or was it because Bonnie was mated to the alpha?

"There are a couple of juvenile females," Hawk said. "They don't hang out at the den."

"Why's that?" Stella asked.

Hawk gritted his teeth so hard a muscle jumped in his jaw. "I heard you have some kind of store in Salem, under your apartment."

The change of subject took Stella by surprise. "Uh...yeah. But that's not where we're going."

"But I thought you said—"

"We're going to Salem, but to my high priestess's house. That's where she and my sister are."

"How do you know that?"

"Because Jade called saying that Judith saw Bridget Bishop in her crystal balls, and Judith keeps all her crystal at home. She rarely takes them out."

“What do we do when we get there?”

Stella’s stomach twisted with unease. “Tell them the truth about what happened in the woods tonight, then find out what Judith saw in her crystals and go from there.”

“Is there anything you need me to do?” Hawk asked.

“Let Ethan know what happened to me if things go south.”

Hawk gave her a quick glance, then drove on in morbid silence.

After another forty minutes, they reached the northern edge of Salem. Hawk shifted into a lower gear and crossed the canal on North Street.

“Bang your first left onto Bridge Street,” Stella instructed.

Hawk put on his signal and slowed to make the turn. There wasn’t any other traffic this time of night.

“It’s about another mile,” Stella said, “then go left on Rice. Judith’s house is at the dead end.”

Hawk grimaced. “I hope that’s not symbolic.”

Stella clenched her hands in her lap. “Me too.”

Judith’s house was an early nineteenth-century, two-story farmhouse that had been only slightly updated as the rest of the neighborhood grew around it. A tidy picket fence bordered the property.

The white clapboard house had a peaked roof with two dormers. Red shutters flanked all the windows, and the front door was painted to match. To the side, there was a small addition with a porch and a door that led straight into the kitchen.

Judith’s porch light was on, and the downstairs windows were all illuminated—like beacons of happy memories. Judith and her non-magical wife had been the primary babysitters for Stella and Jade whenever Marietta and George wanted a night to themselves.

Hawk parked on the curb, and Stella immediately spotted George on Judith’s porch.

His expression looked strained. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and he leaned against the wall with his arms folded—arms that had held her when she fell and scraped her knee; arms that had swung her into the air until she’d grown too big to be his “sweet girl.”

“Who’s the black dude?” Hawk asked. “Is he part of your coven?”

“That’s George.” Homesickness squeezed Stella’s heart. “He and his wife raised me.”

“Did you expect him to be here?”

Stella didn't answer, though it was a good question. She'd only expected to see Judith and Jade. George's presence suggested that Judith was worried about the coven's safety. It was possible she'd summoned everyone to her house in the middle of the night.

Stella jumped out of the truck and slammed her door. George immediately pushed off the wall.

"Hi, George." Stella approached slowly, even though she desperately wanted to run to him.

"Hello, sweet girl." George's warm, rich voice greeted her as though they'd seen each other yesterday. "What happened to your hair?"

Stella touched the section that had burned off, but before she could answer, George's gaze rose to the truck.

Hawk was taking his time getting out, and the window tint revealed nothing more than his general shape behind the wheel.

"You didn't come alone, I see. Did you bring...?" George let his question dangle.

"Ethan's not with me."

Hawk got out of the truck and shut his door. He stepped toward the front of the truck but stopped, still on the far side, and folded his arms.

"A shifter?" George asked, the corners of his mouth rising.

"A friend," Stella responded.

By then, she'd reached the porch. George pulled her into a giant bear hug. She inhaled the familiar scents of his spicy aftershave and Marietta's homemade lavender laundry soap.

His skin looked more wrinkled than before. There was even some gray in his tight black curls. Or maybe that was just Stella's imagination?

She'd only been exiled from her coven for seventeen days. It was absurd to think George could have aged so much in such a short time.

He released her and asked, "Why not bring Ethan?"

"Probably because you all tried to kill him." Stella tried to keep the sarcasm out of her voice, but a little slipped in. There was no helping it. She was still incredibly hurt.

"So did you," George said, reminding her of something she preferred to forget. "You tried to kill him at least once, right?"

"Maybe for a second," she agreed reluctantly. "But I didn't."

"Because you were alone and still able to come to your senses."

"What do you mean?"

“Just that it’s a lot easier to be rational when you’re all by yourself. Once you’re working with a mob....” He sighed. “I’m a black man and a witch. I know what a mob is capable of. Add onto that they were all truly worried about their safety and that of their families.”

“*They?*” Stella asked. “You never joined the fight?”

“*Shit...*” He dragged the word out while chuckling to himself. “You know my party tricks were never gonna be any help to anyone. Besides, you’ve always had a good head on your shoulders. I knew you’d do the right thing.”

Stella let her gaze slide to the door into the kitchen. Her family was on the other side. The people she loved.

And...the people who’d tried to kill Ethan, and nearly her in the process. She couldn’t let that go, no matter how much she loved them.

“I wish they all could’ve trusted me,” she said.

“They’ll be eating crow for a while. Don’t you worry.” George’s gaze flitted briefly to Hawk, who still stood with his arms folded.

“Wait.” Stella suddenly remembered why she’d rushed to Judith’s house in the middle of the night. Judith had seen something. Something that had made her scream.

This could only mean that something bad was happening, or was about to happen. “Does Judith know you’re standing outside, George?”

He glanced over his shoulder toward the door. “It’s crowded in the living room, and the kitchen’s too warm.”

Stella followed his gaze. “Who’s all here?”

“The likely suspects. Everyone except the Crisps and the Blys.”

Stella recalled Jade telling her about Charlie’s car wreck. She also remembered Jade blaming the wreck—as well as George’s worsening migraines—on Stella’s failure to kill Ethan and fulfill Bishop’s curse.

“How are your headaches, George?”

“Better, sweetheart. Thank you. Did you want to go in?”

“Are they expecting me?”

“No, but I think they’ll be happy to see you, especially given recent developments.”

Recent developments. Okay. She’d been right to come.

George opened the door. Stella signaled to Hawk that he should stay by his truck.

Hawk look conflicted—torn between not wanting to be in a house full of

witches, but having promised Ethan not to let her out of his sight.

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him, then she followed George inside.

Judith’s kitchen smelled like apple cake, and the small room was bathed in an amber candlelight. A cat jumped off the counter and darted behind the broom propped up in the corner.

Several dishes were stacked in the sink. The rectangular farmhouse table was scattered with crumbs. A half empty carafe of coffee sat in the middle of the table.

Strings of garlic and bunches of dried herbs hung from the ceiling—not for Judith’s own use, but because Marietta’s kitchen was overcrowded, and she needed a place to store her surplus ingredients.

“The kitchen is the same as always,” Stella murmured, and a wave of nostalgia almost erased her anxiety.

“Of course,” George said. “But it’s about the only thing you can say that hasn’t changed.”

The muffled sound of Judith’s television filtered in from the living room.

“You never answered me about Judith,” Stella said. “Jade said Judith saw something in her crystals, something that made her scream.”

“She’s in there with the others, watching the news. Hopefully you’ll know something about it.”

A chilly wave of fear washed over Stella’s sensitive skin.

George led her out of the kitchen, ducking under the low doorway that was original to the house.

His body blocked Stella’s view of the people gathered in the living room, but when he stepped to the side, she saw Judith, Marietta, Izzy, and Jade.

Judith sat on the end of her worn, floral couch. Her gaze remained glued to the TV. The basset hound bags under her blue eyes seemed puffier than ever, but she didn’t look sick. More like shell-shocked.

A glass of whiskey and a crystal ball sat on the coffee table in front of her. She didn’t look up when Stella entered.

Jade and Izzy sat together on a second couch on the opposite side of the coffee table. They were both in their sleeping clothes—oversized T-shirts and flannel shorts—as if they’d wasted no time after being summoned to Judith’s house.

Jade jumped to her feet. Her dark ringlets bounced as she hopped over Izzy’s feet and came running over. She pulled Stella into a tight hug.

When she released her, she leaned back and narrowed her eyes. “What

happened to your hair?”

Marietta had already risen from her seat in a rocking chair and stepped forward. The corners of her Native American features—eyes, mouth, and even nose—were tight with stress, and her dark eyes blinked rapidly.

She pulled Stella into her own warm hug, causing the beaded fringe on her long, purple tunic to rustle.

She held on tight to Stella with one arm while reaching out with her other to squeeze her husband’s hand. “Thank the goddess our girl is safe. I’ve been so afraid for you.”

She’d been afraid? Stella nearly laughed. There would have to be a lot of apologies and acts of forgiveness in their futures but, for now, that would all have to wait.

Throughout these greetings, Izzy remained seated, her eyes on Stella and her expression amazed. Static electricity lifted her long, brown hair off her scalp, making it look as if her mane had doubled in volume.

Judith’s gaze remained fixated on the TV.

“Did he come with you?” Izzy asked, wringing her hands in her lap.

“No, but the curse really is broken,” Stella said, still uncertain about what they knew and what they believed.

“Yes,” Marietta said. “We know. We have you to thank for our safety.”

“And for *Ethan’s*,” Stella added, just to make sure they were all on the same page. “You can’t attack him anymore.”

“Of course not.” Marietta narrowed her eyes on the burned-off chunk of Stella’s hair.

“What did Judith see?” Stella asked, focusing on their high priestess who still hadn’t acknowledged her arrival. “I heard her scream over the phone.”

“There’s something crazy happening just north of Boston,” Jade said. “Judith’s so deep into her visions she’s been basically catatonic since I called you.”

At that opportune moment, the TV commercials ended, and Judith sucked in a breath, flattening her palm over her chest.

Stella moved farther into the room, then turned so she too could see the screen. The camera showed a dark residential street. Several emergency vehicles were parked on the curb with their lights flashing.

“What’s going on?” Stella asked.

“The news has been following someone’s live feed,” Marietta said. “It’s all from a cell phone, and the picture hasn’t been great.”

Stella knelt in front of the television. Emergency crews had blocked off most of the camera's view of the scene, but it wasn't enough to entirely obliterate the shape of a shadowy creature hunched in the night over something that was lying on the sidewalk.

The wet pavement reflected the emergency lights. It hadn't been raining. Whatever had soaked the sidewalk, it wasn't water.

Three police officers closed in on the shadow with their weapons drawn.

Her skin prickled with dread. She wished she could yell at them, tell them to run like hell, because she recognized the shadow. Their guns weren't going to do shit to save them.

"Where is this being filmed?" Stella asked.

"Medford," Judith said, speaking for the first time.

"Honey, do you know what it is?" Marietta asked.

"Bishop's curse," Stella said. Her mouth felt like wool.

"What do you mean?" Izzy asked, getting off the couch and kneeling beside her.

The demon's head jerked up, and the three police officers jumped back as one.

Whoever was filming cursed in a low whisper under their breath, and the cell phone camera dropped to the ground.

A second later, the camera was pointed back at the scene. Liquid dripped from the demon's gaping maw.

Blood, Stella guessed, because there was a fourth officer on the ground, lying flat on his back and being held down by the demon.

Someone fired a shot, and the camera jostled again before the scene came back into focus.

At that moment, the demon swooped into the air, rolling and swirling like a black tornado, before darting straight for the camera.

A male scream came over the audio, and the picture went black.

A second later, the onscreen image returned to the bright television studio where a man and a woman peered down into their own monitors in stunned silence.

Neither spoke for several seconds, and it looked as though all the blood had left their cheeks. Eventually, the man raised his head.

"Obviously..." He swallowed hard. "That was very disturbing, and we apologize to our television audience. We hope to have more answers for you soon."

The woman looked like she was going to be sick.

“Sweetheart?” Marietta said, reminding Stella that she still hadn’t answered Izzy’s question about what the demon had to do with Bishop’s curse.

“Bridget Bishop told me about the countercurse,” Stella said, keeping her eyes on the TV. “We gathered the ingredients. One of the shifters found me a cauldron, and I followed the recipe tonight in the woods outside Ipswich. It was all going well, but when the curse left Ethan’s body, it took on a human form. Or, *semi-human*? It can have arms, a head, even a kind of...face. I don’t know. It changes. Sometimes it’s little more than smoke. Other times, more solid.”

“Oh, my,” Marietta murmured. “Oh, no.”

“And now it’s loose in the world?” Jade asked.

Stella swallowed hard. “And it’s hungry. I tried to banish it by myself, but my spell got out of hand. I need your help.”

She turned away from the TV to see the faces of her coven. Her family. They all looked at one another.

“So...?” Stella asked. “Does anyone know any spells for banishing a demon?”

All eyes landed on Judith. She was the oldest. She was also their high priestess. If anyone knew what to do, it would be her.

“I’ve never had reason to banish a demon,” Judith said. “As far as I know, no one in the Salem coven has ever had anything to do with them.”

“So what do we do?” Jade asked.

“We’ll diversify our attack,” Judith said. “Hit it with every kind of magic we’ve got.”

The news replayed a still image from the prior live feed. It showed a black form only visible in the night because of the red and blue lights from the squad cars. The demon’s vacant eye spots stared into the camera, and bits of torn flesh clung to its lips.

“Summon your strength,” Judith said. “We’re going to Medford.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

“Red sky in the morning,” Jade said, tipping her head back to look up at the rosy vista.

“Sailors take warning,” Stella said, finishing the adage.

Izzy and Marietta, who were going over the battle plans beside Judith’s Vista Cruiser, both glanced up at the sky.

“Well,” Jade murmured, “then it’s a good thing we’re not sailors.”

She linked her arm through Stella’s—a gesture of camaraderie that Stella allowed, though she still felt an unfamiliar stiffness being around her coven.

They’d left Salem forty minutes ago, Stella traveling with Hawk in his truck, the other women riding with Judith. George had stayed back to let the rest of the coven know what was happening, and to act as command center if need be.

Now, the five women (plus Hawk) stood on the outskirts of Medford—the demon’s last-known whereabouts—waiting for some sign to give them further direction.

As Stella kept her gaze cast upward, a dark flash, like an inky comet, streaked across the sky.

“There!” she exclaimed, pointing at the sky.

The demon swooped through the air, darting and writhing like an eel in its own private ocean. The damn thing thought it had them beat before they’d even begun to fight.

Stella pulled free of Jade and hopped into the cab of Hawk’s truck. “Move out. It’s headed east.”

Hawk had remained behind the wheel, scrolling through texts from Roman. He tossed his phone in the cupholder and glanced in his rearview

mirror. "Are the others coming?"

"They'll follow."

Hawk shifted into drive and peeled away from the curb. Stella rolled down her window and leaned out, keeping a close watch on the sky.

"Crap."

"What?" Hawk ducked down to see more of the sky through his windshield.

"That bastard just dove down again. I'm a bad judge of distance, but it's gotta be several blocks northeast of here. I wish I knew Medford better."

Hawk cranked the wheel, taking a right.

Judith's Vista Cruiser followed closely behind, its tires squealing shrilly as it made the corner.

A few more quick turns, then Hawk slowed at a stop sign, just long enough to check for traffic. His head jerked.

"Did you hear that?" he asked.

"Hear what?" Stella pulled her head back into the cab.

"Someone screamed."

Stella's gut twisted. She had a good idea what someone would be screaming about in an otherwise sleepy residential neighborhood.

"How far away?" she asked.

Hawk stomped on the gas, and they raced down the tree-lined street. "Another block."

They were there in an instant, and Hawk slammed on the brakes. Stella caught herself against the dashboard, then they both jumped out.

"Where now?" Stella asked.

"Sounds like it's around the corner. I didn't want to park too close and scare it off."

"Man, you've got good ears."

"I'm a wolf," Hawk said flatly.

The Vista Cruiser arrived fifteen seconds later and everyone piled out.

"I got a partial sighting," Stella said, "and Hawk's ears tell him it's around the corner."

"Should we surround it?" Jade asked Judith.

"It's not going to be like herding a cat," Stella warned them. "The thing has a shape, but usually no mass. It's like smoke, right up until it goes more solid. It was able to grab onto Ethan and toss him into the air, and I saw it eat an owl. Took it down whole."

“We’ll surround it,” Judith said, “but don’t close in. Everyone, keep your distance until we’re ready to coordinate our spells.”

“I’ll position on the north side of it,” Stella said.

“I’ve got the south,” Jade said.

Stella didn’t stick around to hear the other station assignments. She left them all behind, including Hawk, and took off at a run. Judith’s final warning—“Stay vigilant!”—chased after her.

Judith didn’t need to tell her twice, but there was no way this sonovabitch was going to get the better of her twice.

Up ahead, a car backed out of its driveway. It slammed on its brakes as Stella darted behind it, right across its path.

The driver rolled down his window. “Watch out!”

Stella’s heart—which was already racing—hitched in her chest. That had been a close call. What hope would she have against a demon if she could be so easily flattened by an early-morning commuter?

She rounded the corner headed for the north side of the block. A kid was riding his bike on the sidewalk, delivering morning newspapers and heading her way.

“What’s going on?” he asked, skidding to a stop right in front of her. “Why you running?”

“Get home,” she said. “Forget about the papers. Take cover.”

The kid looked up at the sky. “It’s not gonna rain.”

Stella bolted past him while yelling over her shoulder. “Take cover!”

“You’re cray, lady!” he yelled back.

A deep, guttural growl rumbled from the opposite side of the street. Hawk in wolf form.

The kid screamed bloody murder and probably crapped his pants.

Stella felt bad for him, and she hoped that was the scariest thing he saw today.

She also hoped that Hawk knew what the hell he was doing, getting involved. If the demon could take down an owl and chomp on some downed police officer, witches and wolves were likely both on its meal plan.

Stella made it to the north side of the block just as a man darted out from between two houses, dressed in purple Crocs and a bathrobe that was gaping open more than it should.

“Run! Get outta here!” His eyes were wide with terror, and he glanced behind him toward his own backyard. “There’s a... I dunno what...in my

veggie patch.”

Stella guessed he wasn't talking about potato bugs.

“Got it.” She ignored his warning and shimmied past the Lexus that was parked at the end of his driveway.

Hawk darted in front of her and blocked her path to the garden. He had a pair of jeans tied around his neck.

“Fuck!” the man cried out when he got a look at the giant wolf in his driveway. With his bathrobe sash flying behind him, he dashed up his front steps and back into his house. He came out a half-second later with his car keys, jumped in the Lexus and tore off down the street.

“Get out of my way, Hawk,” Stella whispered. He was still blocking her path to the man's back yard.

Hawk laid his ears back and growled softly.

She knew what he was doing. He wanted her to wait for backup. But she knew how fast the demon could move. If someone didn't act right away, it would fly off to some other unsuspecting town.

Stella fainted right, but Hawk moved just as fast and blocked her.

“Let me by,” she hissed. “I've faced it before. Less than six hours ago. I can do it again.”

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, and she quickly answered it on another whisper. “Hello?”

“It's me,” Judith said. “Marietta and I are in position—to the east and west. We're still waiting for confirmation from Izzy and Jade. Can you tell if the demon's still there?”

“It settled in someone's back yard.” Stella glanced up at the front door to the two-story house. “The address is 128 Summer Street.”

Stella pressed the phone to her chest and addressed Hawk. “You can back off now. Everyone's about ready to go.”

He huffed and stepped to the side, parking his furry butt on the edge of the driveway.

“I need another minute to get in position,” she told Judith. “Then I'm ready.”

“Wait for my signal,” Judith said.

Stella pocketed her phone before easing along the side of the house toward the back yard. When she reached the end of the exterior wall, she peeked around the corner.

There, in the homeowner's garden, was a similar scene to the one she'd

watched on the morning news. The demon had gutted a man and was munching on his spleen like a HotPocket.

The tattered remains of the man's white apron suggested a local butcher. Possibly a baker who'd just opened his shop for the morning rush. Someone had to have seen something. You can't fly a man through the air and go unnoticed.

"What's the plan?" Hawk asked softly, right behind her ear.

Stella jumped out of her skin. She hadn't heard him move, and now he was standing beside her. Naked.

"This is a nice neighborhood, Hawk."

He nodded and glanced down the street. "Seems like it."

Obviously, he missed her point. "You can't be running around naked like it's the middle of the woods."

"Tell that to the guy in the bathrobe. He was flashing his junk for everyone to see."

"If you want to help me, you'll be more use if you've got your magical claws at the ready."

"That's what I thought at first." He started putting on his jeans. "Then, I figured it would be better if we could communicate, so vocal cords it is."

Stella's phone vibrated. It was Judith again.

"Everyone's all set," she said. "Next time I ping you, fire bomb it. Izzy's going to try an electrical charge. You said the thing sometimes goes more solid, so Jade's got a rope. She'll try to ensnare it."

Stella closed her eyes. What they really needed was a legit banishment spell, but for the moment, this plan was the best they had.

"What will you and Marietta be doing?" Stella asked. She'd left the planning session before hearing all the details. It wasn't clear what a prophetic witch and one who specialized in potions was going to bring to the table.

"I'll be focused on my crystals," Judith explained, "trying to keep one step ahead of it. If it takes off again, I should have a good idea where it's going. Marietta's burning sage, and she brought some dill-weed oil. It won't *stop* a demon, but it should be enough of a repellent that it will keep it localized between you, Izzy, and Jade."

"I'm closest," Stella said, peering around the corner of the house into the back yard. "I can see it right now. Why don't I try something first. If I can't *trap* it, maybe I can stun it. Then the rest of you can bat clean-up."

“How close are you?”

“Close.” Stella ducked back around the corner and stayed out of sight. “Maybe thirty feet? Judith, the thing nearly killed me last night. It turned my own magic against me. I won’t let it have the last word.”

“When did you become so reckless?”

Stella clenched her teeth. *About the time my family attacked my magical pair*, she thought, but she kept her mouth shut and hung up.

She took another peek at the demon. It seemed to be licking its smoky fingers.

She put her hand to the side of the house and realized she was touching a trellis that had been nailed in. She gave it a shake. It seemed sturdy enough.

She looked up. The demon wouldn’t be expecting an aerial attack. Maybe if she had a higher vantage point, she could wait for it to take a more solid form, then pin it to the ground with one of her freezing spells.

Hawk slid up alongside her. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking I’m going up to the roof.”

“Is that smart?” he whispered, tipping his head back to assess the possibility.

“Won’t know until I try.”

“You’re one ballsy witch. Anyone ever tell you that?”

“You’re the first.”

“Really? What does Ethan call you?”

“Red, mostly. Can you give me a leg up? The bottom of this trellis is busted.”

Hawk laced his fingers together and Stella stepped into his hands. He heaved upward, and she nearly took flight.

“Easy,” she hissed. “Check your strength, wolf man.”

Hawk scowled.

Stella scrambled up the trellis. Her foot broke through one rung, but she managed not to slip.

When she reached the gutter, she pulled herself onto the roof, keeping her body prone against the shingles. She hadn’t thought she was afraid of heights, but now she wasn’t so sure. She glanced down at the ground. Hawk was staring up at her. Her stomach went a little queasy. Now was not the time to discover she was afraid of heights.

“Oh God.”

She crawled like a sloth to the peak, then threw one leg over and

straddled the ridge line. This might have been a very bad idea. The world swayed, and she steadied herself with one hand pressed against the crumbling chimney.

She closed her eyes and breathed slowly. Then she looked down into the back yard.

The demon lounged against the garden shed. It had left quite the disgusting mess behind, and it looked positively sated. Less transparent for sure. There was blood smeared down its front. Maybe it was slipping into one of its more solid forms.

Stella inched forward, closer to the chimney, and her foot scraped against the shingles, knocking one loose. It sailed through the air like a Frisbee before landing by the demon's grisly buffet. The demon glanced up.

Shit. She ducked behind the brick column and snapped her fingers. A blue flame appeared at the end of her thumb. She rolled it, nurtured it, until it grew in size and sat like a glowing indigo egg in the palm of her hand.

With her other hand, she picked up a chunk of broken brick and whipped it as hard as she could at the shed. The rock clattered off its siding, and the demon jumped to its... Well, she really couldn't call them feet. Its body tapered off like a snail's.

Still. It got vertical, and the two dark holes it used for eyes narrowed. A bloody gurgle rumbled in its throat. Or...the general area that, for the time being, looked like its throat.

Above it, the sky darkened, and the hairs on Stella's arms rose to attention. Izzy had started to brew her electrical contribution to the attack.

Stella's fire magic was now a softball-sized, blue orb in her hand. Just a little bit more, and it would be ready. It was her aim that she worried about. If she could remain behind the chimney, she'd do okay. But if she had to fight on the run, all bets were off. As a kid, she'd been shit at dodgeball games.

Lightning crackled across the sky, and the demon glanced up.

Then it did a doubletake, clearly spotting Stella peeking around the edge of the chimney.

Fuckety-fuck. She'd been made.

She hurled her fire ball straight at the demon, and the spell sailed through its chest, leaving a twelve-inch hole. That was something, at least.

The demon wobbled forward, then soared upward, landing on top of the chimney.

"Stella!" Hawk hissed from the base of the trellis.

“Be quiet!” she whispered. Did he want to call attention to *himself* too?

She scrambled along the ridge line, pulling herself farther away from the chimney with her hands while pushing with her feet. Her shoes made scraping sounds against the shingles.

The demon’s face area stretched into a wailing expression and an unearthly sound escaped its mouth. Its body wavered atop the chimney. Apparently, Stella’s first strike had weakened it more than she thought. Either that, or its recent killing frenzy had taken a lot out of it.

“Stuffed yourself, and now you’ve got the meat sweats?” she asked, her panic coming out in quippy sarcasm.

She came to a spot on the roof where two angles met. It provided enough of a foothold that she leaped to her feet, and quickly conjured another fire ball.

She flung it forward, and though the demon lunged right, she caught it in its obliques.

So solid again, huh?

The edges of its body glistened as if it wanted to slip into its smokier form but needed to remain solid for its own attack. It reached for her, swiping its arm.

Stella leaned backward and avoided the blow.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” she said through clenched teeth. “I got rid of the curse, and that means I got rid of you.”

The demon grinned and hopped off the chimney, landing on the ridge. It made another swipe and, this time, connected with Stella’s shoulder. She slid down the roof and caught herself on the gutter.

“Shit!”

Her fingers dug in as her legs swung wildly.

She made the mistake of looking down at the ground.

Lightning sliced across the sky and hit the copper rod at the corner of the roof, right behind the demon.

The demon jumped and twisted to see what had zapped him just as a rope lasso wobbled through the sky. Jade’s physical magic was on its way.

“Get me back up there,” she demanded. “Quick! While it’s still turned the other way.”

Hawk climbed the trellis and pushed Stella back onto the roof.

She jumped to her feet while the demon was still solid, and leaped onto its back. She wrapped her left arm around its head and wrenched it off its

body.

The force of her violence had Stella falling backward. The demon's head dropped from her arm and rolled down the roof, catching in the gutter.

Stella also slid down the pitch. She tried to dig her fingernails into the shingles to slow her descent, but she found no purchase and kept on sliding.

She turned her feet outward, but she only picked up speed.

When her feet hit the gutter, there was a terrible groaning sound, then the sound of metal scraping.

The gutter pulled loose from the house. Stella screamed.

Then she was weightless.

That is, right up until she landed with a thud in a pair of strong, waiting arms.

"Jesus Christ," Hawk muttered.

Stella looked up at the headless demon while swinging her legs out of Hawk's arms.

Her feet landed on the ground, and she reached for the trellis just as the demon swooped down to the ground, picked up its head, and shot straight up into the sky.

"Damn it. It's getting away."

Stella's and Hawk's phones both vibrated in their pockets. Hawk turned away to answer his with a curt, "Yeah?"

Stella answered Judith's call with another question: "Got any visions on where it's headed?"

Judith sighed. "Somewhere with trees. Lots of them."

"Figures," Stella muttered.

"That's all I could see," Judith said. "Doesn't narrow it down much. Do you know what happened? Jade said her magic never even made it to the intended destination."

"I ripped the demon's head off."

Several beats of silence filled the phone line before Judith said, "That's something, I guess."

"It picked its head up and flew off. I think it can stick it right back on."

Stella felt a presence at her back, and she turned to see Hawk standing there with a grim expression.

She pressed her phone to her chest and asked him, "What's wrong?"

"Roman called."

Something about his tone sent Stella's heart into a nosedive.

“Stella?” Judith’s muffled voice came over the phone line. “What’s going on?”

Stella put the phone back to her ear. “I don’t know.”

“We’ve got trouble,” Hawk said.

“Ask him what kind of trouble,” Judith said, sounding frustrated by the distance between them.

“How much *more* trouble can there be?” Stella asked. A headless rogue demon had her maxed out.

“There was an attack on the den,” Hawk said through a tight jaw. “Three wolves are down.”

“Down?” Stella’s stomach clenched with dread, remembering how Roman and Dylan had both been injured in the two most recent skirmishes.

But they’d both bounced back. If three wolves were down, they’d be getting up again. Right?

“One is in critical condition,” Hawk said, his voice tight.

Stella felt all the blood drain from her head, and a dozen faces flashed before her.

“Hawk, I’m so, so sorry.” This was all her fault. She never should have brought the wolves into this.

“It’s not your fault,” he said. “You didn’t attack them.”

“Who’s hurt?” she asked, and her arm suddenly felt heavy. She could no longer hold her phone to her ear.

“Caleb and Stryker are pretty banged up. Goody Joan Wright is tending to them.”

Stella remembered Stryker. He was the shifter who’d greeted her and Ethan with a shotgun the first time they’d gone to the wolf den. Caleb she didn’t know, but that didn’t make the news any better.

“And the third wolf?” she asked.

Hawk’s throat constricted with what looked like a painful swallow. “Max is in the ICU.”

“Oh, God,” Stella whispered, then she got a flash image of Max’s mate. “What about Chelsea?”

“She’s fine. But Stella, that’s not all...”

Hawk’s hard expression softened, and the sympathy in his pale gray eyes made her take a step back.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but...”

“No,” Stella whispered. Her phone slipped from her hand and clattered

against the driveway.

She could feel Hawk's next words coming for her—like the vibration of a freight train barreling down the tracks. She was trapped in a tunnel with no means of escape.

“Please, Hawk.” Stella's knees weakened. “Please, don't say it.”

“It's Ethan,” he said. “He's been taken.”

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

Stella blinked rapidly, and her body swayed. Ethan was right. They should have never separated.

Hawk caught her before her knees gave out and she fell. She had the vague sense of him lowering her to the ground. The hard driveway was under her butt. She leaned back on her hands. Bits of gravel dug into her palms.

This wouldn't have happened if she and Ethan had stuck together. Or if they'd gone through the pairing ritual like he'd asked her to. *Begged* her to. If anything bad happened to him, she'd never forgive herself.

"Oh, my god." What was she thinking? Something bad had already happened. "It was the Boston coven, wasn't it? They finally got their hands on him."

Hawk nodded even though it had been a rhetorical question. The Boston coven knew she and Ethan had stolen their grimoire, and they'd always suspected Ethan of having the athame.

She could only hope he was still alive. So long as they believed he had the information they wanted, they had to keep him alive. Right?

But if they weakened Ethan to the point he told them where to find the book and the blade, they wouldn't have any use for him anymore. They'd already put Max in the hospital. Who knew what else they were capable of?

Hawk bent to retrieve Stella's phone from the ground and asked Judith, "You still there?"

Judith's muffled but agitated voice came over the phone line. "Who took Ethan Mather?"

"You heard all that?" Hawk pushed his loose, dark curls out of his eyes. Stella put her head between her knees.

“Get everyone together,” Hawk told Judith. “Meet us at my truck. I parked on the east side of the block. We’ll be there in a second. Stella’s still catching her breath. We’ll make a plan from there.”

Stella opened her eyes. She’d forgotten she had the support of her coven. They’d help her get Ethan back.

Assuming he was still alive, so were her hopes.

Hawk pocketed Stella’s phone, and his pale gray eyes—always so keen and assessing—focused on her.

He seemed to look straight into her soul, and she knew it for sure when he said, “Don’t worry. Ethan’s gonna be okay.”

“You promise?” she asked, and it came out as a scratchy whisper.

“If they wanted to kill him, they would have tried right then and there.”

“Is Max going to be okay?” she asked, closing her eyes again.

“Don’t know. But shifters know the score. No one signed up to be part of Roman’s pack thinking it was gonna be risk free.”

“Still...”

Stella couldn’t believe Hawk didn’t harbor at least a *little* resentment. Ethan may have paid for the wolves’ protection, but there was no putting a price on a friend’s life. And Chelsea... Poor Chelsea. She had to be worried sick.

Hawk helped Stella to her feet and, together, they walked swiftly back to the truck. They arrived just as Judith’s Vista Cruiser barreled around the corner and came to a screeching stop on the opposite side of the residential street.

Judith, Marietta, Izzy, and Jade all piled out and ran over. They threw their arms around Stella and hugged her tight.

The bags under Judith’s eyes looked like they’d been packed for a long trip. Marietta smelled strongly of dill. Izzy’s staticky hair stood off her head, and Jade looked grumpy as hell. Her magical lasso hadn’t gotten to the demon in time to have played any part.

“Divide and conquer?” Hawk asked Judith. “We’ve got two problems to solve now.”

“I hate to leave that thing loose in the world,” Judith said. “But our arsenal obviously isn’t cutting it. We need an actual banishment spell.”

“Where do you get one of those?” he asked.

“We’ll have to reach out to a wider network,” Judith said, then she turned her gaze from Hawk to Stella. “Have you got an idea who took Ethan? He’s

your pair after all.”

“Ethan’s not my pair,” Stella said. “We haven’t—”

“He is,” Judith said. “It may not be official yet, but he is. Do you know who took him?”

“The Boston coven,” Stella said with a sigh. “Ethan had their athame and now... They think he has their grimoire too.”

Judith raised her eyebrows. “He has their *grimoire*?” Her tone said, *no wonder there’s a price on his head.*

“No,” Stella said. “I have it.”

“You have it?” Marietta asked, her voice rising an octave.

“It’s in my satchel with the athame,” Stella said. “In Hawk’s truck.”

Marietta tugged at a lock of her long, salt-and-pepper hair and whispered a disappointed, “Oh, honey.”

Judith asked. “Why didn’t you say so before?”

Stella glanced back and forth between Judith and Marietta. “Why didn’t I say *what* exactly?”

“You said the Boston coven had blood magic in their grimoire,” Marietta said, drawing closer.

“Yes,” Stella said, still confused. “That’s what I used to counter Bridget Bishop’s curse.”

“Then they probably have spells for banishing demons,” Judith said.

The two older witches had probably meant to deliver their explanation as gently as possible, but it still left Stella feeling like a colossal idiot. Why hadn’t she thought of that?

Hawk beeped open the locks on his truck, wrenched the driver’s side door open, and snagged Stella’s satchel off the seat.

He shoved it into her hands, apparently uneasy with touching the magic directly. She didn’t blame him. Both the athame and the grimoire pulsed with blood magic, and the rotting apple scent could be overwhelming, probably even more so for a shifter with a sensitive nose.

She took the book from the bag and started thumbing through the pages toward the back. The pages that held the darkest magic had gone blank again.

“It looks really old,” Jade said.

“Even older than ours,” Stella said. “Hold it for me. I need to prick my finger. It needs blood before you can read the last half of it.”

Stella handed the book to Jade, who acted as the podium and held it open at the first blank page with the alchemical symbols.

Stella took the athame from the bag and nicked the tip of her middle finger. She pressed her fingertip against all the other brown blood stains. Just like before, the pages began to fill with old, quill-scratched handwriting.

Judith moved to stand beside Stella, and she flipped through the first few pages. "It's all in French."

"Most of it, yes," Stella said.

"Can you read it?" Judith asked. Her graying blond hair hung like curtains on either side of her face.

Stella tipped her hand back and forth in a so-so gesture. "It took me a while, but I worked out the countercurse. I didn't have reason to read anything beyond that."

"I can't read any of this," Judith said. She flipped further into the book. "I can't even tell which spell might be the right one."

"You know," Izzy said, smoothing her hands over her staticky hair. "This might not be a bad thing."

"How can this not be a bad thing?" Jade asked.

"The Boston coven has something we want," Izzy explained.

"Two somethings," Stella corrected. It wasn't just the spell she wanted. She wanted Ethan back too.

"Two somethings," Izzy agreed. "And we have two somethings *they* want."

"You're suggesting we trade their grimoire and the athame for Ethan and a banishing spell?" Marietta asked.

"Do you have a better idea?" Izzy asked.

"We stole that book, and I hid the athame for a reason," Stella said. "Who knows what kind of evil they could unleash if that book was back in their hands *and* they had the way to open it. It was a member of their own coven who hid the athame from them. Ethan's mother didn't want them to be able to open it."

"It's your choice," Judith said.

"There is no choice," Stella said. Goody Joan had said that Ethan's mother was a prophetic witch, but it was doubtful Catherine Renaudin foresaw this moment when she decided to steal the athame.

Stella had to believe that, if faced with this choice, Ethan's mother would do everything in her power to save her son.

And that's what Stella would do too.

It was her fault that demon was loose in the world, feasting on innocent

people, and she couldn't leave Ethan alone with the Boston coven. Lovey DuPre was likely torturing him at this very moment. Stella's only question was whether she might already be too late.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

“**T**rankil,” murmured a heavily accented female voice. “He’s coming to.”

Ethan’s head felt heavy and not completely centered on his shoulders. He seemed to be sitting on a chair. Distorted jazz music played from what must have been a slightly warped record. He slowly blinked his eyes open, then waited for them to focus.

Lovey DuPre, the elderly witch who’d devastated his campaign headquarters, sat across from him on the edge of a pink wingback chair. Immediately, his memory of the assault on the wolves’ den came back to him, and his spine went rigid. Other than that, though, he couldn’t move his extremities. He had no way to defend himself.

And this was the coven that Goody Joan said had hunted and killed his father!

The elderly witch lifted a china coffee pot from the low table in front of her. A lace doily covered the table. Ethan’s eyes darted around the space, and he noted there were more doilies on every other flat surface.

The wall behind Lovey was covered in old portraits—most of them black and white, some of them even tintypes, and all of them mounted in ornate, gilded frames.

“Where am I?” Ethan asked. His voice sounded scratchy.

“My apartment in Charlestown.” Lovey carefully poured coffee into each of three matching cups on the table.

Movement to Ethan’s right made him jump, and Jean-Paul, the witch Ethan had battled at the North End tattoo parlor four days prior, reached forward to plop three sugar cubes into one of the coffee cups. He gave it a

stir, then picked it up, sat back in his chair, and took a sip.

Ethan struggled against whatever invisible—and obviously magical—restraints kept his arms, torso, and legs bound to his chair. When that got him nowhere, he searched the room for some other means of escape.

Instead of finding one, he spotted a female witch with a sparkly rhinestone clip in her impressive Afro. She wore a tight, black crop top and purple corduroy pants and smiled at him over the rim of her coffee cup.

Antoinette, he thought, if he was remembering it right. She'd been with Lovey at his campaign headquarters.

The tall, stylish witch reclined against the rolled arm of a settee with her legs pulled up onto the sagging chintz cushion. There was room for two, but the settee's delicate, curved legs didn't invite additional weight.

In fact, the entirety of Lovey DuPre's apartment appeared to be decorated in antiques that reminded him of a trip he took years ago to New Orleans's French Quarter.

A petite witch with a blond pixie haircut stood behind the settee and leaned on the windowsill. She also had a coffee cup in hand. The whole scene appeared completely civil.

"How do you take your coffee, Ethan?" Lovey asked.

As groggy as he was, the coffee was tempting, but Ethan wasn't about to let his guard down too soon.

These witches had drugged, hooded, and kidnapped him from the wolves' den. He had the strong impression that some of the wolves had been blasted with a pretty nasty spell.

On top of that, Stella was out there somewhere—with witches he hoped were on her side—fighting a demon that was out of control. He blamed that debacle on this Boston coven's grimoire.

There must have been something janky with that countercurse because it couldn't just break Bridget Bishop's curse, could it? Oh, *nooo*. It had to unleash something equally nasty in its place. As if removing one curse left a vacuum of evil in the world that had to be filled.

"Ethan?" Lovey asked again. "Your coffee?"

For all he knew, the coffee was poisoned. Except...the old witch had poured from a single pot, and Jean-Paul had eagerly taken his cup.

"Hard to drink coffee when I can't move my arms," he said.

"Oh!" Lovey exclaimed. "My apologies. I forgot."

Ethan's right arm loosened by his side, then his left.

“We didn’t want you to fall out of your seat, you see?” Lovey explained. “In fact, you won’t be steady on your feet for a while, so we’ll keep you safe, *non?*”

Ethan rubbed the tension out of his arms, but he could still feel himself glued to his seat. Given that his head was still a little woozy, he wondered if Lovey might actually have his best interests in mind.

She set the coffee cup in his hand.

After sniffing it to make sure it smelled normal, Ethan took a tentative sip. It was rich, black, *very strong*, and he felt every inch of the hot liquid’s journey down his throat and into his stomach. He couldn’t remember the last time he ate.

“Maddy, *mezanmi*, would you get the beignets from the kitchen?” Lovey asked.

The petite blond—*Maddy*—left her spot by the window and headed out of the room.

Ethan watched her go, his brain scrambling to figure out what was going on. The niceties had to have some nefarious motivation. This had to be a trap.

“You made beignets?” Jean-Paul’s voice rose with excitement.

“For our guest,” Lovey said. “My mother’s recipe.”

Ethan’s gaze slid from Maddy’s retreat to the black and white photograph that Lovey was gesturing to above her head. The portrait featured a beautiful, dark-skinned woman wearing a tailored 1940s skirt and blouse and a smoothly coiffed hairstyle. The photographer’s backdrop bore a fleur-de-lis pattern.

“Was her picture taken in New Orleans?” Ethan asked, recalling what Goody Joan Wright had told him about the roots of this coven.

“Yes,” Lovey said. “Before the hurricane.”

“The storm that caused your coven to move north,” Ethan said.

Lovey gave him a satisfied smile.

“Do you know much about the family,” Antoinette asked, “either before or after the hurricane?”

Ethan blinked, startled by her question. The way she said “the family” suggested she viewed his family and her family as one and the same. And, of course, if coven equaled family, that’s exactly what they were. The Boston coven had been his mother’s coven; therefore, it was, technically, his coven too. Under any other circumstances, these people would have been his friends. And *family*.

“I know a little bit about my mother.” Ethan took another sip of the strong coffee, not wanting any emotion to show on his face. “But I doubt you brought me here to reminisce.”

The four witches glanced at each other, and Antoinette chuckled softly. “We got off on the wrong foot before. We thought it best to start fresh. You *are* family, after all.”

Ethan balanced his cup on his knee. The remaining magical restraints kept him from reaching the table.

“You’ve stalked me,” he said, reminding them of their history. “Attacked me, hurt my friends, kidnapped me, and bound me to a chair.”

Despite their new attempt at civility, Ethan wasn’t ready to make peace quite yet. Maybe they weren’t going to kill him, but they *did* want something from him. That much hadn’t changed.

“Exactly,” Antoinette said. “The wrong foot. We got frustrated and forgot you’re kin. And it’s like Gran said. We only bound you to that chair because you were unconscious. We didn’t want you to slip off the seat and hurt yourself.”

“Of course,” he said. “How kind.”

“What Nettie’s trying to say,” Maddy said, returning from the kitchen with a tray of confections covered in powdered sugar. “Is that it’s all been a misunderstanding. Not just a one-sided mistake, though. You got the wrong idea about us too.”

“We should’ve brought you back into the fold a long time ago,” Antoinette added.

“So, that’s it?” Ethan asked, smiling at how ridiculous this whole thing sounded. “We’re all friends now?”

“Of course,” Antoinette said with a smile.

“So...like...I’m free to leave whenever I choose?”

Antoinette’s smile faded.

“You’re tall,” Lovey said.

Ethan’s gaze sliced from Antoinette to her grandmother.

“Like your father,” Lovey added. “Did you know that?”

“You hunted and killed my father,” Ethan said.

Lovey’s eyebrows arched toward her hairline. “Who told you that?”

Ethan wasn’t ready to give up names, but Goody Joan Wright had told him as much, about the same time she told him that his mother had stolen Lovey’s athame, put his own magic under lock and key, then hid him away to

save him from his father's fate.

Lovey's tired expression did nothing to hide her frustration. "I didn't kill your father."

"But someone in your coven did."

"No," she said. "Though he was certainly murdered. Your father liked to stir up trouble. Catherine could have done so much better. You look like her, you know?"

Ethan didn't know what or who to believe anymore. He would have pressed for more information in that moment, but at the mention of his mother's name, his stomach muscles tensed.

"I look like her?" he asked, his voice cracking like he was a child again. Goody Joan Wright said she saw Catherine in his eyes, but that hadn't told him much.

"Same dark blue eyes," Lovey said. "So peculiar."

"I don't even have a picture of her," Ethan said. "She died when I was seven, and after I went into foster care, her things got lost."

Or maybe they hadn't been lost, he thought as this puzzle piece slid into place after all these years. Maybe the lack of information he had about his mother had been part of her attempt to obscure his identity.

Lovey *tsked* her tongue, then reached toward the bookcase in the corner. She snapped her fingers, and a thick book with a crushed velvet cover lifted off the shelf and floated through the air, landing gently in her lap.

With her other hand, she reached toward Ethan and, without touching him, dragged his chair around the end of the coffee table, scraping noisily against the floor, until he was resettled right alongside her.

She put the book in his lap. "Open it."

When Ethan flipped open the cover, he discovered it was an album that—judging from the fashions—started with photos from the nineteenth century. Some were posed professional portraits like the ones on the wall. Others, especially those taken in more recent decades, were candid of people laughing, blowing out birthday candles, or leaning proudly against new cars of varying vintages.

On one page, Lovey pointed out a tiny blond-haired girl balancing on an old man's knee. "Your mother."

Ethan leaned in closer. She couldn't have been more than three years old in the picture. He couldn't get a clear enough look at her eyes, but he had no reason to doubt it was her. She'd grown up in the Boston coven. It made

sense to see her in the old witch's family album.

Lovey turned a couple more pages, then tapped a photo of a teenaged girl in a flouncy prom dress. "This is her at seventeen."

Ethan was now able to see that he'd gotten more than just his eyes from his mother. He had her straight nose and the shape of her mouth. But her hair had remained blond. His dark hair must have come from his father.

"Is that my dad?" he asked about the young man in the tuxedo beside her.

"No," Lovey said, and the corners of her mouth tightened infinitesimally. "She hadn't met him yet."

"She was so beautiful" Ethan said, enraptured by the photo. His mother was so young in the image. So healthy. Tears pressed against the backs of his eyes.

"Do you want to know more about her?" Lovey asked.

"Do you know more?" he asked, a bubble of excitement rising in his chest.

"Plenty," she said. "And good thing, too. Everyone else in our coven is too young to have known her."

She raised the platter of beignets from the table. "But first. Try one."

Ethan glanced around. "Is everyone eating them?"

"Count me in," Jean-Paul said, and he snagged one off the tray.

Ethan watched him stuff it in his mouth, then reached forward. His hand paused, hovering over his first-choice selection.

Lovey smiled, seemingly pleased, so he quickly changed his mind and took a different one instead. Lovey may have known his mother, but she'd also kidnapped him an hour ago.

"They are all quite safe to eat," Lovey said. "I promise."

She took one off the platter herself and ate it quickly, leaving a layer of powdered sugar on her dry, thin lips.

Ethan tried a small bite of his. It tasted like pure, sweet heaven. Sugar sprinkled onto his lap, and he licked his fingers.

"It must be hard not to know where you come from," Antoinette said.

Ethan took another sip of coffee, playing it nonchalant, or as best he could.

"My own mother died last year," Antoinette said. "All I've got left as far as blood goes is Gran, one cousin, and her new baby."

"Mine and Maddy's parents are all still in the coven," Jean-Paul offered. "At least, *technically*, they are. They don't practice much magic anymore."

“Why not?” Ethan asked.

“Married to their work,” Maddy said. “My mother travels a lot.”

“But we are still *yon fanmi*,” Lovey said, turning toward Ethan.

Ethan’s heart surged at what was obviously the Creole word for family. He’d wanted one for so long, and it was being offered to him from the most unexpected witch.

“Family is what’s most important, *non*?” Lovey pressed.

Ethan assumed it was a rhetorical question, but the look she gave him demanded an answer.

“Uh...yes,” he said. “Family is important.”

“We agree then,” Lovey said, curling her gnarled hand around his. “I will tell you more. Did you know your mother played piano?”

“No,” he said, surprised by this news. “I don’t remember us owning a piano.”

“And she had a beautiful singing voice,” Lovey added. “So clear. Like crystal. Her own father, your grandfather, even nicknamed her that. When she was a child, she went by her nickname far more often than Catherine.”

Ethan smiled. He had a ghostlike memory of his mother singing while she made dinner, and he was relieved that at least some of his memories of her remained.

“Was she really a water witch?” Ethan asked. That’s what Joan Wright had called his mother, and he hoped that was really the source of his most powerful magic.

“She specialized in prophetic magic, but yes...” Lovey nodded. “She was good with water. As are you, I understand.”

Jean-Paul made a *harumph* sound and turned sideways in his chair, twisting away from Ethan. Apparently, there were still hard feelings there.

“I wish I’d known more about her before she died,” Ethan said. “I wish she could’ve taught me more about myself.”

“It’s hard when you’re stripped of your identity,” Antoinette said.

Ethan nodded. There was no arguing with that.

“When we lost our athame,” Antoinette said, “we lost our ability to claim our identity.”

Ethan closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. Here it was. The reason why he was here. He knew they’d be getting around to this conversation sooner or later. Fortunately, the athame wasn’t on him. It was still with Stella.

The thought that she was out there right now, fighting a demon, made his

stomach turn and his heart clench with worry. It had been stupid to separate, and that vacant spot in his chest—that spot that could only be filled by her—yawned open.

“Listen,” he said, making eye contact with each of the four witches in the room. “I didn’t take your athame. I’d never even heard of it until recently.”

“We know *you* didn’t take it.” Antoinette slipped her feet off the settee and leaned forward. “It’s been missing for longer than you’ve been alive. But you *have* it, don’t you?”

Ethan shook his head. “I don’t. You can search me if you want.”

“Is it in your apartment?” Maddy asked. “You keep a ward on your front door.”

More like, he’d *had* a ward on his front door. Unbeknownst to him, it had been put there by a witch he’d unwittingly hired to provide entertainment for a company retreat. The witches in Stella’s coven, however, had dismantled the ward nearly two weeks ago.

“Your athame isn’t in my apartment,” Ethan said.

“If you know where it’s *not*,” Jean-Paul said, “then you must have some idea where it is.”

“Is it hidden in the same place as the grimoire you stole?” Maddy asked.

Ethan shifted uncomfortably. Throughout this whole exchange, Lovey had remained silent, but her keen, assessing gaze felt weightier than the interrogation itself.

“There was a curse on me,” he explained. “Your grimoire had the spell that would break it. That’s why we borrowed it.”

“Borrowed it.” Antoinette rolled her eyes. “You couldn’t have just asked us for the countercurse?”

“We weren’t exactly getting along,” Ethan reminded them.

“More to the point,” Maddy said, “Now, that you’ve used the spell, are you going to return the book?”

“*And* the athame?” Jean-Paul added.

Ethan leaned back against his chair and brushed the powdered sugar off his lap. Pretending to be nonplussed was half the battle.

“Stella says there’s something called blood magic in your grimoire. She says if you had both the book *and* the athame, you’d unlock spells that could do some pretty nasty things.”

“Like what?” Antoinette asked, but it sounded more like she was testing his knowledge than being merely confused or curious.

“She called you resurrectionists. She said you planned to raise the dead.”

“It’s easy to pass judgment on things you do not understand,” Lovey said, finally rejoining the conversation. “As you have now discovered for yourself, there is *anpil* magic in our grimoire that is both good and helpful, for I understand you’re no longer under this curse. A good thing, *non?*”

Ethan couldn’t argue with that and, despite his overall faith in Stella, it did make him wonder if perhaps she’d over exaggerated the danger.

But then...he recalled what Goody Joan Wright had told him. There had to be a reason his mother had stolen the athame in the first place.

“Goody Joan Wright told me some members of your own coven weren’t so sure about the magic in that book. It was one of the things that fractured your coven.”

“Joan is a busybody,” Lovey said. “She does and says what serves her interests.”

Ethan couldn’t argue with that either. As helpful as Goody Joan had been, she’d caused even more chaos in order to protect herself. She was—as she’d told him more than once—a *survivor*.

“The athame and the grimoire belong with us,” Lovey said. “Do you know what it means to belong?”

“Not really,” he admitted. It was something he’d striven for his whole life. It was what had fueled his campaign. But until he’d met Stella, he hadn’t felt like he’d truly belonged to anything beyond himself.

“Ah, *mezanmi*.” Lovey murmured the endearment with utmost sympathy, and her hard expression softened into the deep ravines of her wrinkled face. “It doesn’t have to be like this. You are among family now. That pretty redheaded witch—”

“Stella,” he said. “She and I...are meant to be paired.”

Ethan immediately regretted sharing that information, and he expected Lovey to pounce.

Instead, she arched a quizzical eyebrow. “Meant to be? After all the troubles you’ve faced, and she has not yet paired her magic with yours?”

“She says we will.”

Lovey *tsked* her tongue. “If she has not done it by now, what makes you think she ever intends to? Perhaps she is holding back for a reason?”

Ethan’s chest felt uncomfortably tight. Stella had definitely been holding back. She said it was to protect him—to protect them both—but maybe she hadn’t been telling him the whole truth. Much like she’d misinterpreted the

alchemical symbols in the spell book.

Much like, maybe, she'd misunderstood his ancestor's grimoire?

Maddy leaned forward in her chair, addressing Ethan directly across the coffee table. "Have you ever stopped to think what's so terrible about raising the dead?"

"What?" he asked. "Of course not. It would seem pretty obvious."

"Really?" she asked. "Isn't there someone you've lost whom you'd like to have back?"

Ethan's heart swelled with emotion. The question wasn't a fair one, especially for someone who'd been young when he lost both parents. He would have given anything to have his family back.

"We're kin," Antoinette said. "We want you to come back home. We want you to make our coven whole again, in all the ways we've talked about."

Home, Ethan thought. For a man who'd never had any place to belong, now, it seemed, he needed to make a choice. Dozens of ancestral portraits stared down at him from the wall behind his chair. Was his home in the future with Stella? He'd felt quite certain of it before. Or did his home really lie in his past?

Lovey's expression tightened, and she narrowed her eyes on Maddy. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Ethan looked up from the table. The blond witch's eyes had gone glassy and seemed unfocused, her thoughts far away.

"Someone's coming," Maddy said in a thin, wispy voice. "And they're close."

Antoinette jumped off the settee, quickly rounded its end, and pressed her forehead against the window.

"It's the witches from Salem," Antoinette said, looking down at the street. "Stella, and four others."

Lovey flourished her arm, and a very concentrated, pin-pointed wind struck the center of Ethan's chest without ruffling anything else in the room.

The wind plastered his torso to the back of his chair and pushed him across the room into the corner to the left of the door.

Damn it, Stella, Ethan thought. He knew why she'd come, of course. But he had things under control. She shouldn't worry about him, not when there was a demon on the loose.

"How did they find us so fast?" Antoinette asked.

Jean-Paul joined Antoinette at the window. “Maddy doesn’t have a monopoly on prophetic magic.”

“Or the wolves alerted them,” Maddy said.

“Does it look like Stella’s got anything on her?” Lovey asked from her wingback chair.

“No,” Antoinette said. “Nothing.”

Ethan pressed his lips together. Stella rarely let the book *or* the athame out of her sight, but there was no way she’d risk bringing them here.

Which meant, things were about to hit the fan because, one, the Boston coven desperately wanted to make their coven whole.

Two, he’d never known Stella to back down from a fight.

And, three, Lovey’s parlor was too small for the brewing pandemonium.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

“You’re sure this is the right place?” Stella asked. The building wasn’t secure, so they’d walked right in and climbed four flights of stairs to apartment 4B.

“So say my crystals,” Judith said. “And there’s a definite ward on this door. Can’t you feel it?”

“I can take it down,” Izzy offered.

“No,” Judith said. “We do this civil like. We’re not going to get any help if we break in.”

“Do you think he’s really in there?” Stella asked. She thought she’d be able to sense it by the way her magic reacted. Whenever Ethan was near, her magic reached out for him, but right now, she felt nothing but blind panic.

“Only one way to find out,” Jade said. She raised a fist and pounded against the door.

“Easy,” Marietta said. “Don’t be so aggressive.”

“She’s old, right?” Jade asked. “I have to knock hard or she might not hear it.”

For several seconds, there was nothing but silence on the other side of what they assumed to be Lovey DuPre’s apartment door.

Jade raised her fist again, but Judith grabbed her wrist when the sound of footsteps drew closer.

A dead bolt clicked open. Then another. Followed by another. And finally another. The door opened only four inches, stopped by a security chain. Lovey DuPre’s wizened face appeared in the gap.

Marietta grabbed Stella by the shoulders and pushed her to the front of their group so Lovey could see her.

“*Bonjou*, Miss Aldren,” Lovey said. “I’d ask if you’ve come to steal something else, but you already have everything that is precious to me, *non?*”

“Is Ethan here?” Stella noted the scent of physical, personal, *and* prophetic magic behind the door—which meant that Maddy and Antoinette were likely both there. Possibly even Jean-Paul, though the scent of his physical magic would have mixed with Lovey’s so Stella couldn’t be sure about him.

“Do you have my book?” Lovey asked.

“Do you have Ethan?” Stella pressed.

Lovey stepped to the side, but she didn’t unlock the door. She had to know that at least one witch from Salem—given enough time— could dismantle her ward, and that the chain was no match for even a little bit of magic. In other words, the security chain was symbolic, and Stella knew if she wanted their negotiations to be fruitful, she’d need to respect it.

There was a rush of air behind Lovey, then a scraping sound as a dining chair flew across the wood floor and stopped precisely on the spot that Stella could see through the gap in the door.

She sucked in a breath when she saw who was sitting in that chair with his arms tight against his body, and his fingers wrapped around the edge of the seat.

Red ribbons curled out from the center of Ethan’s chest, more vibrant in color than the pale rose they’d been before.

“Stella,” he said, low and warningly. “Don’t overreact.”

She’d react however the hell she wanted, starting with relief that he was both conscious and unbruised, along with pissed off that he was obviously restrained. Her gaze descended the length of his body. He didn’t *look* hurt, though he did have a strange white powder on the front of his pants.

“Are you all right?” she whispered as blue ribbons of magic unfurled from her heart, desperately reaching for him.

His navy-blue eyes softened. “I’m fine.”

“I thought they might have...” She swallowed hard and refrained from telling him that Max was in critical condition. By now, he might even be dead.

Stella surveyed Ethan’s body for injuries one more time. It didn’t seem possible that he should be so unscathed. The Boston witches knew she and Ethan had stolen their grimoire. They suspected Ethan had the athame. They should have gone to any length to get them back.

“What about the—?” Ethan left his question unfinished, though his meaning was clear enough to Stella. It was one of the reasons why they’d come. It also suggested he hadn’t mentioned the demon to the Boston coven.

“We need help,” she said. “Can we come in?”

Ethan’s lips quirked, and he glanced at his hands, pinned to his sides. “I’m not really in a position to undo the chain.”

Lovey appeared behind him, and with a wave of her hand, Ethan’s chair slid out of view.

Lovey stepped up to the door, her face framed by the four-inch gap.

“Please,” Stella said, gripping the edge of the door. “We need to focus on what’s affecting us all.”

“What do you mean?” Lovey asked, tipping her head to the side.

“Haven’t you seen the news?” Judith chimed in from behind Stella’s shoulder.

Lovey’s gaze slid to Judith, and the corner of her eye twitched. “We haven’t been watching the television. We have been enjoying a *reyinyon fanmi*.”

Stella’s heart lurched. She could guess what those words meant in Creole, and she knew what a family reunion would mean to Ethan, especially under better circumstances.

“Turn on the news,” Judith said.

Irritation flashed in Lovey’s dark eyes—likely not used to taking orders in her own home. Stella noted movement from at least one other witch in the apartment before Lovey shut the door.

“He wasn’t hurt,” Marietta said, cupping Stella’s shoulder.

The warmth of her hand was somewhat reassuring, though Stella would have felt a lot better if Lovey had let them inside.

“Now what?” Jade asked as the muffled sound of Lovey’s television found its way out into the stairwell.

“Let the demon do the talking,” Judith said. “They’ll understand why we’re here soon enough.”

Izzy sat on the top step of the flight of stairs that led down to the lower floors. She put her head in her hands.

Jade leaned back, pulled up one knee, and pressed the sole of her Doc Marten against the wall behind her. She folded her arms.

Judith and Marietta stood patiently—Judith with her fists planted on her ample hips; Marietta with her hands folded in front of her and her thumbs

stroking against one another. The beaded fringe on her long purple tunic rustled.

Stella paced the hallway for what seemed like hours. She'd just made it back to Lovey's apartment door when the chain unlatched, making a light *shwipp* sound, then swinging free.

The door opened fully and Lovey filled the space, her swelling magic making her seem double her usual size.

"Whose mess is this?" Lovey asked, meaning the demon. The horrified but determined look on her face said she'd seen enough.

"Mine," Stella admitted.

"Figured as much," Jean-Paul muttered from somewhere deeper inside the room.

"Does this explain your terrible haircut?" Lovey asked.

"Forget her hair," Judith said. "Can we come in now?"

Lovey stepped aside, and Stella, Judith, Marietta, Jade, and Izzy all entered the cozy, doily-covered apartment.

Stella and her coven all stuck close to the door.

Similarly, Lovey, Antoinette, Jean-Paul, and Maddy took positions behind Ethan's chair in a show of unified strength. Fortunately, no one struck out at anyone else, with words or with magic.

Ethan stayed seated and restrained, not that he had much choice. His eyes remained locked on Stella, watching her carefully.

As soon as Izzy closed the door behind them, Stella's eyes began to water from the soupy mix of so much magic trapped inside the small apartment. Usually her ability to sense the presence of magic was a gift. At the moment, not so much.

Add in the rotting stench of blood magic, and her head felt fuzzy and detached—like a beach ball stuck in a swirling eddy.

She couldn't breathe. The air was too still. Too tense. She swayed, and her eyes rolled back.

"Stella!" Ethan threw himself forward in an effort to catch her before she hit the ground. Instead, all he managed to do was pitch himself onto the floor. They both hit the floorboards at the same time, Ethan still stuck to his chair.

"Christ!" Jade said.

"That's gotta hurt," Jean-Paul murmured.

Several hands pulled Stella back onto her feet. Maddy and Antoinette righted Ethan's chair. He had a huge red mark on his forehead now.

“Could someone, please, open the window?” Ethan asked through gritted teeth. “Stella can’t breathe.”

“It *is* unpleasant,” Lovey agreed. She shared Stella’s ability to sense the presence of magic, but wasn’t faring as poorly. She was probably used to having several witches in such a tiny space.

Maddy opened the window, and a cool, fishy breeze rushed in from the Mystic River, ruffling the light-weight curtains.

Stella took a deep breath of clean air.

“Tell us what happened,” Lovey said, and though her voice was calm and measured, her physical magic continued to swirl around her—controlled but palpable. A few paper napkins on a tray of pastries fluttered in the wind she created.

“Bridget Bishop placed a curse on any descendant of Cotton Mather who had ambitions of political power,” Judith said because Stella was still trying to catch her breath.

Lovey gave a single nod, which didn’t surprise Stella. Bishop’s curse was well known to witches beyond the Salem city limit.

“Ethan Mather was campaigning for governor,” Judith continued.

“Yes,” Lovey said, as if urging Judith to get to the parts she didn’t already know.

“I... We...” Stella took another deep breath as the last of the thick stew of magical scents finally dissipated, finding their way out the open window.

“Ethan and I wanted to lift the curse so he wouldn’t be under a death sentence. The countercurse we had was too faded to read, but I knew the same spell would be in your spell book because I recognized the symbol—two alchemical symbols. The sun rising from the ashes.”

“And?” Lovey pressed.

“And the spell worked,” Judith said. “Bridget Bishop appeared to me herself and told me the curse was broken.”

“But?” Lovey asked, her dark eyes slicing from Stella to Judith, then back again.

“But as soon as the curse lifted,” Stella said, “it took the shape of that thing on the news.”

“And you let it loose in the world,” Antoinette said. She was still standing behind Ethan, now with one slim hip jutted out. Her black crop top revealed flat abs, and a silver belly button ring.

“Stella didn’t *let* it escape,” Ethan said. “It attacked her. There was too

much power for any of us to contain.”

Antoinette scoffed. “You were so concerned that the magic in our grimoire would bring evil into the world and call unwanted attention to witches. Now, you’re the one causing way more chaos than our coven could have ever imagined.”

“The irony is delicious,” Maddy agreed smugly. She hoisted herself onto the windowsill, and a pulse of her prophetic magic swirled into the air, escaping out the open window.

“Obviously it wasn’t my intent,” Stella said, finally steady on her feet.

“You’re dangerous,” Antoinette snapped, pointing at the television set. Normies are dying out there, but that doesn’t explain why you’re here.”

“The five of us tried to trap it earlier today,” Judith said. “We found it—”

Lovey chuckled, and Judith clamped her lips shut.

“What’s so funny?” Jade asked.

Lovey waved her hand around as if shooing a fly. “You’re high priestess. She is funny. You didn’t *find* the demon. It found you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jade asked, tossing her loose brown curls.

“The demon is attracted to magic. The five of you casting spells... It knew you were there. It could have taken off...gone anywhere it liked...but it bided until you drew closer. You’re lucky to be alive. Or were there originally six of you?”

Stella looked at Judith, then at Marietta. Before, in Medford, she’d felt like she was chasing the demon down. It never occurred to her she might be getting sucked into a trap.

And yet, she’d noted the demon seemed lazy right up until it spotted her on the roof. Was Lovey right? Was the demon attracted to magic? Had it been enjoying a meal in that man’s veggie patch, just biding its time until she was there?

Stella glanced at the open window and bit down on the corner of her lip.

“We think you might have a banishment spell in your spell book,” Izzy said.

“Doesn’t matter if we do,” Jean-Paul quipped. “It seems to have gone missing.”

His physical magic snapped in the air, the scent filling the room with another burst of springtime mud.

Izzy responded with an electric spark that zapped Jean-Paul enough to

make him yelp. His dark hair stood up on his head, and one of his knees buckled.

Maddy hopped off the windowsill and rushed forward, as did Jade, both of them meeting on either side of a pink, wingback chair.

Ethan yelled, "Stop!"

"We came here to negotiate a truce," Judith said quickly before things went south.

"A truce?" Lovey's eyes brightened.

"Yes," Judith said.

"Terms?" Antoinette asked, stepping forward and putting her hand on the back of Ethan's chair.

"Do you, in fact, have a spell that can trap and banish a demon?" Marietta asked Lovey.

"No," Lovey said. "*You* have the spell that can trap and banish a demon."

Stella let out a breath. It was as direct an answer as she could have hoped for. Their assumption had been correct. Somewhere in all that French scribbling was the answer to their prayer.

"We can't read the spell book," Stella said. "It's in French. Some of it Old French. Some of it Creole."

"You read it well enough to break Bishop's curse," Lovey reminded her.

"I only knew what spell to use because of the alchemical symbols and a little help from a couple of other witches. But I can't read it well enough to find a banishment spell out of all those pages. Even if I could find it, I'm not confident I'd get the spell's details right."

"What are you saying?" Lovey asked.

"I'll return your grimoire," Stella said, "if you'll teach us the spell."

"We can't unlock the pages without the athame," Jean-Paul said.

"And I'll give you the athame in exchange for Ethan," Stella added. "Let him go free. He doesn't have what you want."

"He's part of our family," Lovey said.

"And this is the way you treat family?" Stella asked, and she sensed a guilty shifting of weight from her own coven members behind her.

"Red," Ethan said, his tone suggesting she was giving up too much control and not getting enough in return.

But Stella didn't see it that way, especially when she saw the magic unfurling from his chest, reaching for her. It was amazing that no one else could see it.

She wondered if Lovey could feel it, because it was so damn strong. Stronger than any of the other magic swirling in the room and sailing out the window into the world.

“Where is it?” Jean-Paul asked. “Where’s the athame?”

Stella drew in a deep breath, and she placed her palm against her hip. Slowly, her satchel began to materialize and expand as she withdrew her invisibility and flattening spells.

Ethan let out a low groan of defeat.

“An invisibility spell?” Antoinette asked. “You’re a talented witch.”

Stella tightened her fist around the strap of her bag. “Do I have your word?”

“That’s it?” Lovey asked. “No other promises? You will return our grimoire and athame if we give you the banishment spell and release our kin?”

“That’s it,” Stella said.

“What if Ethan doesn’t want to leave with you?” Maddy asked. “We still have a lot of history to teach him. We have more photos of his mother.”

“That would be his choice,” Stella said, though the possibility of Ethan choosing to stay with these witches made her throat tighten. She’d been practically ravenous for new stories about her own mother—both when intimidated by the wolves and by Joan Wright. That same kind of allure could hold true for Ethan.

“But if he stayed,” she said. “You have to promise not to harm him or restrain him or do anything against his will ever again.”

Ethan bowed his head and shook it slowly.

Stella didn’t know how to interpret that. Was he telling her not to trust them? Was he simply in a state of disbelief that she was handing over the grimoire and athame—especially after they’d worked so hard to keep them away from the Boston witches?

“It’s a promise,” Antoinette said.

Lovey glanced over her shoulder at her granddaughter, then back to Stella. She stuck out her hand. “*Pwomès.*”

Stella reached out and closed her fingers around Lovey’s bony, leathery hand. When they stepped apart, Stella pulled out the athame first. The blade glinted, and the ruby at the base of the hilt pulsed beneath her thumb. The rotten-apple scent of blood magic rose thick and sticky into the air.

“For Ethan,” she said.

“And the book,” Lovey said.

“I’ll hold onto the book until you teach me the spell,” Stella said.

“You can’t read the book’s blank pages without the athame,” Jean-Paul said.

“And the athame means nothing to you without the book,” Stella snapped back. “We’ll be on equal footing if we do one thing at a time.”

“We could take them both from you by force,” he said.

Jade and Izzy moved to stand directly behind Stella, and Stella narrowed her eyes on Jean-Paul. “You could try.”

“Enough,” Lovey barked. She waved her hand toward Ethan, making a small flick of her fingers.

Ethan’s posture sagged, and his arms swung forward. He massaged his wrists while giving Stella a tight-lipped grimace.

Stella ignored his disapproval and tossed the athame to Jean-Paul. It cartwheeled through the air, and he caught it by the hilt.

Stella rushed forward, kneeling in front of Ethan. “Are you okay?”

“Perfect.” Ethan rose to his feet, pulling her up with him.

The magic in the room intensified—some of it fueled by excitement, other strains boosted by trepidation—but the strongest waves were those that unfurled between Stella and Ethan. Red and blue ribbons of magic—luxurious and soft, like satin and velvet—thickened and lengthened until they wrapped around the both of them, binding them tightly.

Ethan dipped his head. His lips touched hers, and Stella felt her magic swell inside her chest until it had nowhere to go but out, exploding into the room, blue sparks snapping and ricocheting off the walls.

And then came the roar of a freight train. Stella and Ethan pulled apart, their eyes wide. They were familiar with many of the magical reactions their magic had to its partner, but it had never created a deafening sound like that.

Everyone turned toward the open window, just as the demon sailed into the room.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

“**R**un!” Stella didn’t know who yelled it. She also didn’t know where in the hell they were supposed to run. Lovey’s apartment was small. For the demon, it would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

Ethan’s hand closed tight around hers, and he yanked so hard she had to curl her toes to keep from leaving a shoe behind.

“Where are we going?” she cried as they ran out of the room and down a hallway.

“I’m following Jean-Paul,” Ethan said.

Jean-Paul had reached the end of the hallway and was now reaching up for a thick cord. He pulled on it, and a wooden ladder unfolded noisily from a trap door in the ceiling.

“Everyone up!” Jean-Paul called.

“Quickly!” Antoinette said. “Before that thing solidifies and gets its bearings.”

Stella glanced behind her and saw what Antoinette was talking about. Apparently, after soaring around Boston and the surrounding cities for the last twenty-four hours, the demon was discombobulated by the enclosed space. It twisted like a tornado of smoke, pausing occasionally to open its ghoulish mouth and lick at the air—or more likely, at the magical residue left in the room.

But Stella had enough experience to know that Antoinette was right; very soon the demon would get itself sorted, solidify, and come after them.

Antoinette dragged her grandmother to the front of the group and forcefully pushed her up the ladder. Antoinette scampered up after her.

Jean-Paul and Ethan stood on either side of their escape route, urging Judith, Marietta, Jade, Izzy, and Maddy to follow and to do it quickly.

Stella kept an eye on the tornado of energy tearing up Lovey's living room. "We'll never make it."

"We won't if you don't get your ass up the ladder," Jean-Paul said.

Ethan grabbed her shoulder and spun her around, setting her hand on one of the rungs.

Stella looked up and found that Maddy was already at the top and nearly through the trap door.

"Go!" Ethan ordered.

Stella gave him a worried glance, then gripped the strap of her satchel and hustled up the ladder. Once there, she crouched at the opening in the attic floor and reached down for him.

"You next," Ethan said to Jean-Paul.

"No man, you go. I don't got the potential to pair with anyone," Jean-Paul said. "We might need that kind of power."

Ethan glanced up at Stella, and she flexed her hand toward him, silently pleading with him to hurry. He pressed his lips together and dashed up the ladder with Jean-Paul following closely behind.

Ethan was through the hatch. Stella grabbed his arm and pulled him out of the way to give Jean-Paul more room.

Jean-Paul's head had just emerged through the hole in the attic floor when the demon howled. It was no longer in the living room. It had made its way to the hallway, and though Stella couldn't see it, she sensed it was no longer confused by the enclosed environment.

Stella grabbed one of Jean-Paul's arms. Ethan grabbed the other.

They were pulling him through the trap door when Jean-Paul made a strangled scream. "It's got my ankle!"

"Kick it loose!" Ethan shouted.

Stella inched closer to the hole. She rolled a fire ball into her hand and threw it into the demon's open mouth. She knew it wouldn't be enough to kill, but all she needed was enough to stun it.

But the fire had zero impact. The demon wrapped its arm around Jean-Paul's middle and yanked him off the ladder.

"JP!" Maddy yelled. "No!"

Jean-Paul screamed. Terror etched across his face as he flailed his arms and legs in mid-air, trying to break free. He reached behind him and pulled

the athame from the back of his pants.

Stella thought he meant to use it against the demon, but instead, Jean-Paul yelled, "Catch!"

He flipped the athame into the air, aimed directly for her. The blade flew tip over hilt, sailing through the hole in the attic floor and landing beside Stella with a heavy clatter.

"Jean-Paul!" Stella cried, reaching for him. This couldn't be happening. There had to be something she could do.

"Goddess save him," Marietta murmured, barely detectable over the panicked cries of Antoinette and Maddy.

Jean-Paul's mouth opened wide in an expression of disbelief. Then he disappeared down the demon's throat.

"Oh my god!" Stella cried, falling backward onto her hands and scuttling backward, away from the hole. "Oh my god, oh my god."

Ethan pulled up the extendable ladder and locked the trap door, casting the nine survivors into pitch blackness.

There was a scuffling sound as everyone crawled or scooted closer together on the attic floor.

"Holy shit," Ethan murmured.

Stella reached for him in the dark and found him sitting with his knees to his chest and his hands clutching his hair. Thank God he was safe. But oh my God... *Jean-Paul*. A bitter taste flooded Stella's mouth, and she thought she was going to be sick.

"Would someone give us a light?" Marietta asked.

"But not by magic," Lovey said. "Magic will attract a demon even more. We want it to leave."

Antoinette pulled out her phone and opened the flashlight. Her shaking hand made the beam dance across the attic eaves.

"What happened?" Antoinette asked.

"What do you mean what happened?" Maddy cried. "JP's not down there having a fucking tea party!"

"He made me climb up first," Ethan murmured like he couldn't believe what he was saying. "When I turned around, he was almost up."

Stella's skin felt cold and prickly. She waited for the stinging accusations because, even though Ethan wanted to blame himself, everyone knew she was the one who'd allowed the demon into the world when she broke Bishop's curse.

She was to blame for all of this. She should have been the one to come up the ladder last.

Something crashed down below in Lovey's apartment. Something large and heavy scraped across the floor.

"It's tearing your place apart, Gran," Antoinette said.

"What do we do now?" Maddy sniffled. "We're trapped!"

"*Trankil*," Lovey whispered.

"Can it get up here?" Izzy asked. "It knows where we are."

"Demon's have the memory of a goldfish," Judith said. "As long as it can't feel our magic, it'll forget we're here. Keep your voices low, and it'll leave on its own. Eventually."

"We shouldn't be hiding up here," Antoinette said as Maddy wept beside her. "We should be fighting it."

"We will," Lovey said. "In time."

Maddy stabbed her finger in Stella and Ethan's direction and hissed, "Maybe if the two of them hadn't fucked around and had gotten their magic paired, we would've had enough power to stop it from getting Jean-Paul."

"Back off," Jade snapped on an angry whisper. "Stella didn't plan for any of this to happen."

"*Shhhh*," Marietta chastised.

Maddy seethed through her tears.

"Should they pair their magic right now?" Izzy whispered. "That thing is still downstairs. Maybe we could take it if we had enough fire power."

Stella held her breath. She may have made peace with a future pairing, but she thought she'd have more time to prepare mentally. And she definitely would have preferred not to do it with an audience.

"Could they do that?" Jade asked. "Could they pair their magic up here?"

The three oldest witches scoffed, and Antoinette's flashlight beam bounced across their faces.

"If the two of them tried to pair their magic in this attic," Judith whispered, "they'd blow us all sky high. We'd need at least one window to release the pressure."

"*Pasyans*," Lovey said, entreating patience. Everyone stopped talking as the terrifying sounds of Lovey's apartment being destroyed filtered up through the attic floor.

The tension in Ethan's body was palpable, and though he wasn't speaking, Stella was quite sure she felt the turmoil in his head. She didn't

think it had anything to do with the talk about their pairing.

“Ethan?” she whispered, turning her back on the others to give her and Ethan some privacy. “Are you going to be okay?”

He pressed his forehead to hers. “I should have done something more to save him.”

“No, Ethan.” She cupped his face in her hand. “There was nothing you could’ve done except take his place.”

Stella felt like shit for thinking it, but she was glad that if the demon had to take one of them, Ethan had been spared.

“That’s what I should’ve done,” Ethan said. His breath was warm against her ear. “I should have forced him up the ladder ahead of me.”

Growling and scratching sounds slid around Lovey’s apartment below. Stella’s pulse kicked up a notch, and she wished the thing would just leave already. As much as she hated the idea of it hurting someone else, she couldn’t do anything to stop it while she was stuck in this attic.

Ethan shook his head slowly, then asked with an acid tone, “Where’s Hawk?”

“Hawk?” She stroked Ethan’s hair, not understanding why he was bringing up the beta wolf.

“When we said goodbye at the wolf den, you left with Hawk. He promised he’d take good care of you. He said he wouldn’t let you out of his sight.”

“He *did* take care of me.” Stella dropped her hands and wove her fingers through Ethan’s, trying to make sense of what he was saying while feeling the pressure of several witches’ eyes on her back.

“But he left you,” Ethan bit out. “He left you when that thing was out there. You could have— Fuck!”

Glass shattered in Lovey’s apartment, cutting off Ethan’s words. That was probably for the best because Stella finally understood his train of thought.

Ethan’s imagination was getting the better of him, and now the stupid man was punishing himself for things that *could* have possibly happened. As if reality wasn’t bad enough, he had to mope around in Hypothetical Land. The stupid, masochistic, martyr of a man.

“*Shhh*. No,” she said, trying to soothe him.

“No? Hawk’s not here, is he?” Ethan asked accusingly.

Stella bit her bottom lip. This probably wasn’t the best time to tell Ethan

why she and Hawk had parted, namely Hawk's need to get to a pack mate who'd been admitted to the ICU.

"Hawk had some personal business to attend to."

Ethan growled, "What kind of personal business is more important than keeping you safe? I paid them a fucking mint."

Stella didn't answer. She'd never heard Ethan so angry, and she realized she was holding her breath when her lungs began to burn.

"Answer me," Ethan commanded, though his hard voice barely rose above a whisper.

"Max is in the hospital," Stella said. "Hawk needed to go see him."

"What?" Ethan's head jerked up, and his energy softened. "Fuck, no. Are you saying that demon got to the wolves too?"

"Uh... It was..." Stella looked over her shoulder at the Boston witches. She didn't know why she bothered. All she could see was the bright pinpoint of Antoinette's flashlight.

Ethan drew in a breath as he apparently realized the truth. "When they grabbed me, that's when Max got hurt."

"Yeah." Stella turned back toward Ethan and nervously adjusted the strap of her satchel across her chest. "Max is in critical condition, but he's tough. He'll make it."

Ethan sat with that for several seconds, then said softly, "I'm sure they only meant to stun him."

Stella blinked. "I'm sorry, *what?*"

"I doubt Lovey and the others expected him to get hurt."

"You're making excuses for them?" Stella struggled to keep her voice low. Of all the things she'd heard that day, Ethan's defense of the Boston witches was one of the most surprising.

Seriously. He had to be shitting her. She realized they were his coven—*technically*—but that didn't mean he should give them a pass on hurting a friend.

"Not excuses," Ethan whispered, leaning closer. "Of course not. I just don't think they're as sadistic as you imagine. We're a unified team now. We've got to be."

"You're right about that last part," Stella said resignedly. "At least for now, solidarity is our only way out."

Izzy whispered to the others. "Does it seem more quiet to you? You know...down below?"

Stella glanced behind her. They'd activated a few more flashlights and huddled closer around the trap door. The additional light reflected off the rhinestone clip in Antoinette's hair and cast the circle of worried faces in deep shadows.

Antoinette looked shellshocked. Maddy was still softly crying. Izzy and Jade had their arms wrapped around Antoinette and Maddy, offering comfort.

"Do you think it's finally gone?" Antoinette asked.

"Hold tight a little longer," Marietta advised.

When Stella turned around to rejoin the circle, Jade grabbed hold of her hand.

Another few minutes passed before Stella felt fairly certain that Izzy was right and the demon had left. She didn't want to think about *where* it had gone, or what poor unsuspecting person would encounter it next.

"It's still quiet," Maddy whispered. "Do you think it exited out the window?"

"Should someone go down and make sure?" Jade asked.

"If it's all the same to you," Izzy said, "I'd rather stay up here."

"We'll wait a while longer," Lovey said, then held out her hand. "But let's take a look at the book."

Stella balked, and Ethan and Jade drew in closer around her.

"We had a deal," Judith reminded Lovey.

Lovey glowered. "You don't think I'll deliver on a spell that will banish that beast? I'm the one who has lost a coven member."

Maddy choked on another sob.

Judith looked appropriately chagrined. "Of course not. Stella, show her the book."

Stella reached into her satchel and pulled it out. At her touch, the book pulsed with magic, and the rotting scent of apples wafted through the attic. She really hoped that demon was gone.

"And closer with the light," Lovey said.

Jade held her phone over the book, illuminating the blank pages, and Antoinette passed the athame to Lovey.

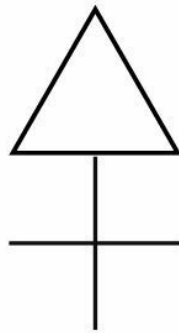
Lovey stared at the grimoire and the athame for a second, and her eyes glistened. Stella had a good guess where the emotion was coming from. According to Goody Joan Wright, it had been decades since Lovey had seen both the grimoire and the athame together.

Then the elderly witch took a deep breath, opened the book to the first

blank page, and pressed the edge of the athame against the calloused tips of her index and middle fingers.

It took a few seconds longer than Stella expected for the blood to well up, but when it did, Lovey quickly pressed her fingers to the page. Everyone leaned in as the looping ancient writing styles slowly appeared. Those who hadn't seen it happen before sucked in a breath.

Lovey quickly began to turn the once-blank pages, scanning each one for the banishment spell. Eventually, she got to a page that bore a symbol much like the page with the countercurse, though this symbol was an acute triangle on top of a plus sign.



“That’s an evil symbol,” Izzy said, leaning backward, away from the book.

“No, it’s not,” Judith assured her.

“But you’re not *entirely* off base.” Marietta said. “Some people do associate that symbol with hell, but that’s only because it’s the alchemical symbol for sulfur. Something isn’t evil just because it smells.”

“And that’s the trouble with jumping to conclusions,” Lovey said, and though she didn’t look at Stella, Stella knew the comment was directed at her. “Not everything that looks evil is evil incarnate.”

“Is that the spell you were looking for?” Antoinette asked when Lovey didn’t keep turning the pages.

Maddy clung to Antoinette’s arm. The tough exterior Stella had come to expect from the petite blond witch had shattered with Jean-Paul’s grisly demise.

“This is the one.” Lovey dragged her finger down the margin as she read the details.

Izzy looked over Lovey’s arm. “The ingredients are listed in French, but at least someone translated the spell part into English. It’s written in the margin. *‘She who calls a demon hence, deserves to pay her recompense.’*”

Maddy looked up at Stella with wet, narrowed eyes.

Izzy finished, “*But to send the demon back to hell, heed the dictates of this spell.’*”

“So, what are the ingredients?” Marietta asked Lovey.

“*Pour bannir un démon,*” Lovey read. “To banish a demon...”

“Yes?” Judith asked.

“*Treize plumes de poulet,*” Lovey said, and Stella understood that much. Thirteen chicken feathers.

“*Une peau de serpent,*” Lovey continued.

“A little bit of snake?” Stella asked, immediately thinking of Darren, who was probably sleeping in his terrarium back at her store. Could she really sacrifice him for the sake of the spell? There was a lot at stake, but—

“A snake’s *skin,*” Lovey corrected, and Stella let out a breath.

“*Trempées dans la crème,* which means we must stew the feathers and the snakeskin in cream,” Lovey explained.

“Sounds appetizing,” Izzy groaned.

“Easy enough,” Antoinette said as Lovey continued to read silently through the spell’s final steps. “I’ll find a chicken. Who’s got dibs on catching the snake?”

“There’s no need,” Stella said. “I know where to find them both.”

“You’re thinking Alice and Darren?” Jade asked her.

“Easy Peasy,” Izzy said with a snap of her fingers.

Stella expected her little red chicken and indigo snake would be happy to lend an assist, but she couldn’t help thinking about the makeshift spell she’d used earlier in her pathetic attempt to banish the demon all on her own. Would any of this even work?

“I’d always heard a banishing spell required blood and fire,” she said. She

hadn't set the freakin' woods ablaze for nothing.

"It requires blood *magic*," Lovey said, correcting her in a pointed manner. "You must first trap a demon in a circle with the first part of this spell. The second part of the spell will cast the demon back *into* the fire."

Lovey bent lower over the book while drumming the fingers of one hand against the attic's plywood floor.

"Is anyone going to tell us about this Alice and Darren?" Antoinette asked.

"Feather and skin donors," Jade explained. "Stella's friends."

"Oh," Lovey said as she read through the spell again. "And it all must be done in *une marmite en cuivre*, a copper cooking pot."

"I'm afraid all my pots are made of iron, not copper," Marietta said.

Stella swallowed hard and looked up at Ethan. "I know someone with a copper pot."

Ethan nodded, and Stella could tell from his somber expression that he was remembering the exact same thing.

"I hate to involve Magnus," she said.

"If you didn't freak him too much last night," Ethan said, "I bet he'd be thrilled to help."

Stella bit down on her lip and hoped Ethan was right. Magnus's internet shopping might have irritated her in the past. Now, it might provide the last thing they needed to save all their lives.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

“After that towering inferno you put Magnus through last night,” Ethan said. “He might not be ready to take your call.”

“There’s only one way to know for sure.” Stella pulled out her phone.

“No,” Lovey said, holding up her hand. “We don’t worry about the banishing spell quite yet.”

Antoinette shook her head. “I don’t think the world has time to wait, Gran.”

“First, you two,” Lovey said, addressing Stella and Ethan. “Down to my kitchen.”

“What are we doing in your kitchen?” Stella asked. Was the old witch suggesting she and Ethan exit the attic first to see if the coast was clear?

“She’s right, honey,” Judith said. “Before we bother with a banishment spell, you two have to be paired to maximize your power. We’ll need your boost if this turns into a fight.”

“If?” Maddy scoffed bitterly, and a flashlight beam bounded beneath her face.

Judith ignored the other prophetic witch and added, “So, you need to do it now.”

“I know the pairing recipe,” Marietta said.

“Any concerns about the pairing spell luring the demon back?” Izzy asked. “That’s gotta be some heavy magic.”

“If we mean to banish it,” Judith said, “we’ll have to lure it back to us sooner or later. Hopefully, we can get them paired before it comes back.”

“Let’s get going then,” Antoinette urged. “Get them paired.”

Stella's adrenaline spiked, and her stomach pitched. Her gaze swept across everyone's shadowed face before stopping on Ethan. This was too abrupt. A step this significant should be cause for more planning. More ceremony. More...

Stella didn't know exactly what she expected. A magical pairing wasn't like a wedding. She knew there wouldn't be music and flowers or anything sweet about it. Some paired witches were nothing more than business partners who lived apart and came together when power boosts were necessary.

Still... Despite the urgent circumstances, shouldn't it be a *little* more special than sitting with seven other witches in a busted-up Charlestown apartment?

"Yes," Lovey said. "But not up here. In my kitchen where there's a window. My husband worked in potions. His cabinet is still stocked with every ingredient you might need."

"Ethan, can I talk to you?" Stella asked. If they were doing this, she wanted to be somewhere where she could relax, at least little bit more than here. She wanted familiarity. She wanted connection.

"You're still not sure about being paired to me," he whispered so only she could hear.

"No," she whispered in his ear. "If ever there was a right time, this is it. But, Ethan...is this really how you pictured it?"

"Honestly," he said, and his mouth was so close to her ear that it caused a shiver to run down her arms. "I've never had a clear enough understanding to picture it at all."

"Well, neither have I," she said. "I mean, I assumed there'd be a complicated spell. Maybe something like what we did last night."

"Hopefully without the fallout," Ethan added with a hint of dark humor.

"Yeah." She peeked over at Antoinette and Maddy as guilt spiked through her again. Jean-Paul was some significant fallout. "It's just... Didn't you want this to be *different* somehow?"

"Less people around, for sure," he said. "Fewer demons too."

Ethan leaned forward, and cupped her cheek. The warmth of his hand was calming. She closed her eyes and pressed into it.

His breath fanned her face as he leaned closer. Still, it took her by surprise when his lips touched hers.

They both inhaled loudly at the contact, their bodies tensing as their usual

connection—always intense—exploded with a new anticipation for what was to come.

Stella's insides coiled and tied themselves into complicated knots—and this just from a kiss!

Her magic was clearly excited, like it was its own separate being with unique desires. And that's exactly what it was. She'd been fighting it for too long to think it was her imagination.

"Again," she whispered, and he obliged.

Ethan exhaled against her face, and sucked gently on her bottom lip.

Heat bloomed in her belly, and he made a guttural sound that was somewhere between pain and pleasure.

Swirling pheromones made her rabid for more. Everyone else in the attic disappeared. There were no sights, no sounds, no scents or physical sensations except for those he was eliciting in her.

Someone cleared their throat, the sound sharp and grating against her ears.

Ethan's lips curled up against hers, and he pulled back, but only by a fraction of an inch.

It was only then that Stella came back to reality. They both had their hands covering each other's ears, their foreheads pressed together, heads bowed. Ethan's chest heaved as heavily as hers.

"Got everything settled?" Judith asked them.

"Yes," Stella said. "We're ready. But we're not doing it here. We're doing this at Broomstix."

"Broomstix?" Antoinette asked.

"My store," Stella explained. "It's in Salem. We're going to have to go there anyway for the feathers and snakeskin."

"That's smart," Marietta said. "If the pairing magic *does* attract the demon, we don't want to waste time with travel between here and Salem. I can work on the pairing potion with the two of them while the rest of you can prepare the banishing spell."

"That does seem wise," Lovey agreed.

Stella pressed her lips together, glad everyone had readily agreed, because her plan wasn't just about efficiency. When she went through the pairing ritual with Ethan, she wanted to be some place she loved, somewhere she found comfort, and in a place she deeply missed. She wanted to go *home*.



STELLA HELD her breath as Ethan released the latch on the trap door. The ladder's hinges squealed as they unfolded, and Ethan descended into Lovey's hallway.

When he reached the bottom, he stopped, looked around, then disappeared from view. His footsteps fell across the floor, broken items crunching under his feet. Something rolled across the floor.

A minute later, Ethan returned to the bottom of the ladder and looked up at them all. "Coast's clear."

Stella exhaled and hustled down the ladder to join him. Everyone else followed closely behind.

"Oh, no..." Stella murmured as she reached the parlor.

The chintz sofa cushions were shredded. The TV was turned over, its screen shattered. Most of the framed portraits had fallen off the wall. The china coffee service was smashed to bits, including the table it had been sitting on.

Lovey whimpered as she crossed her living room to pick up a splintered picture frame. That heartbreaking sound was the first sign of weakness Stella had ever seen from the old witch.

Antoinette and Maddy picked their way over the debris field to comfort Lovey.

"Ingredients?" Marietta asked quietly, gently reminding Lovey of their plan. Outside the windows, the slant of light suggested the sun was already setting. They needed to move along.

Lovey sniffed, then dabbed at her nose with a tissue she pulled from under her sleeve. "Down the hall to the left."

Marietta and Judith headed for Lovey's kitchen, then returned less than a minute later with a bulging plastic bag from a 7-Eleven. Presumably, it was filled with everything Marietta would need for the pairing spell.

After one last glance at the destruction, they all left the apartment, headed downstairs, and exited out onto the street where Judith had parked her Vista Cruiser. The brown sedan that had chased Stella, Ethan, and Magnus out of Boston eleven days earlier was parked behind it.

Lovey, Antoinette, and Maddy stared at the sedan.

“I don’t suppose either of you have Jean-Paul’s car keys, do you?” Antoinette asked.

Lovey grimaced.

Maddy shook her head.

“I’ll call you a car,” Ethan said. He pulled out his phone and just shy of an hour later, they were all in Salem and ducking into Broomstix.

The place was empty and as silent as a tomb.

“I don’t like this,” Jade said. “The lights are all on, and the door was unlocked, but...”

“Is anyone here?” Antoinette called out loudly.

Stella had tried Magnus’s phone during the drive to Salem, but he hadn’t answered. In a last ditch effort to reach him, she called his house. His mother answered, but said that while Magnus had come back from the cabin, she hadn’t seen him all day.

Stella shivered as fear trickled through her veins. She could think of only one other place Magnus could have gone, and she searched her store for signs of a bloody struggle. “Magnus! Are you here?”

“Stella?” The storage cupboard behind the cash register slowly opened, and Magnus peeked out.

“Magnus?” Stella exhaled so much air her shoulders sagged.

Alice came tottering out from behind him, then flapped her wings and squawked loudly, practically tripping over herself to get out from behind the counter.

Stella went down on one knee, scooped the little red chicken into her arms, and headed straight for Magnus.

“What were you doing in the cupboard?” Ethan asked.

“Hiding from disaster,” Magnus said. “That thing is all over the news.”

“You left the door unlocked,” Jade said in admonishment.

“I didn’t know what to do,” Magnus admitted. “I didn’t think Stella would want me to close the store entirely.”

“Oh, Magnus.” Stella appreciated his concern, but his life was far more important than keeping the store open.

She set Alice on the ground and gave Magnus a big hug. “I hate the idea of you being so scared and alone.”

“You didn’t think disaster could find you in a cupboard?” Izzy asked.

Magnus pushed out of Stella’s hug, probably not wanting anyone to think he’d been *that* scared.

Yeah, Stella knew him that well.

“Alice squawks at everything that comes in here,” Magnus said. “Ever since you left, she’s been in defense mode. Like some kind of avian Rottweiler. I hoped she’d give me enough of a head’s up that I could get away.”

“Did you sleep here last night?” Ethan asked.

“I figured that thing had my scent. I didn’t want it to follow me home. My mom’s there.”

Magnus’s eyes slid to the other witches behind Ethan. He already knew Judith, Marietta, Jade, and Izzy—if not personally, at least their faces and names. The others were strangers.

“Magnus,” Ethan said, “let me introduce you to my coven.”

Stella’s gaze sliced to Ethan. What he said was true—the Boston coven was his coven by birthright—but she’d never heard him describe them that way.

Ethan pointed to each witch saying, “This is Lovey DuPre, her granddaughter Antoinette, and Maddy...”

“Pierce,” Maddy said.

“Nice to officially meet you?” Magnus said, though his voice went up at the end like a question. There was good reason for that. He’d been at Ethan’s campaign headquarters when Lovey and Antoinette launched a magical attack. In fact, Magnus—with his brand new license—had been the driver during their tire-squealing escape from the city.

“Back at you,” Antoinette said, then glanced at Stella. “He’s a normie, right?”

“Not exactly,” Stella said. Magnus might not have been truly magical, but there wasn’t much normal about him.

“So, what are you all doing here?” Magnus asked.

“Putting together our offense,” Stella said. “Like you said, that thing’s still out there.”

“Can I help?” Magnus asked.

“You can search Darren’s terrarium,” Stella said. “Hopefully, he’s shed his skin recently because we need it.”

“And thirteen feathers if you can convince Alice to give any up,” Jade added. “If not, take them by force.”

“I can do that,” Magnus said.

“And we need your new copper pot,” Ethan said.

“It’s here!” Magnus said, sounding triumphant. “I used the store as the delivery address.”

“Perfect,” Stella said. “You work things out with Lovey. Ethan and I need to do something first.”

“Don’t worry.” Magnus lifted his chin with pride. “I’ve got this under control.”

“I know you do.” Stella stretched up and kissed his cheek.

“Ethan. Stella,” Marietta said, switching the bulging 7-Eleven bag from her right hand to her left. “Up to your kitchen.”

Stella gave her a nod, then headed up the sagging staircase with Ethan and Marietta following behind. They passed the second-floor meeting room, then Stella scrambled up the ladder that led to her attic apartment.

A shiver ran down her spine as she pushed open the hatch and crawled through the opening. Stella’s attic apartment was nothing like the attic in Lovey’s building, but it still managed to deliver déjà vu vibes.

The skylights and gabled window provided enough light for her to see her bedroom, the small kitchenette, the sewing area where she made her poppets, and the recliner and tiny TV that made up her living room. Even with magic, the recliner had been a bitch to get up the ladder.

Marietta and Ethan made it through the hatch and rose to their feet, though Ethan had to keep his head ducked under the sloped ceiling.

“Wow,” he said, taking a second to look around. “This is...”

Stella immediately saw her apartment anew, from Ethan’s point of view. The place was a mess, of course. A dead flower drooped in its vase on her nightstand, and the bed was still unmade from the morning she first left for Boston.

Her corset, black lace dress, other work outfits, and several pairs of jeans carpeted the floor. The red dress she’d worn to Ethan’s fundraiser hung over the arm of her recliner where Magnus must have tossed it when he’d repacked her bag.

And the books... Stella didn’t know where to start with the books, or the piles and piles of fabric and patterns.

While she preferred to call her apartment “organized chaos,” Jade called it “borderline hoarding.”

Ethan spotted the stack of books piled on top of her old, box-style TV. He picked up *Small Business for Dummies* and turned it over to read the back.

“I haven’t had time to clean,” Stella said sharply. Not that she ever

cleaned, but he didn't have to know that. "I've been busy. Not to mention exiled from my home trying to keep you alive."

Marietta winced at Stella's implied accusation and emptied the 7-Eleven bag onto the small kitchen counter space.

"Hey." Ethan set the book back on the pile. "Take it easy. I *like* your apartment."

Stella rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. Ethan couldn't possibly like it. He lived like a feng shui Mr. Clean. "You think I live like a troll."

"No, Red. I think you *own* your space."

He was right about that—both figuratively and literally. Or, he would be right if the bank didn't foreclose.

For the umpteenth-millionth time, Stella promised herself that as soon as this latest catastrophe was contained, she'd sit down with her banker and get caught up on all the payments she'd missed.

"Now..." Marietta said as she crouched in front of the lower cabinets, one hand resting on each of the two open doors. "Let's get to brewing."

She grabbed a soup pot, then rose to her feet and filled the pot with water from the tap. She set it on the electric burner.

Stella swallowed down a walnut-sized lump in her throat. This was really happening, and it was happening fast. She and Ethan were about to become paired witches.

"Now, let's see..." Marietta murmured to herself as she presumably thought through the pairing spell.

"It's been a long time, huh?" Stella asked. "I don't suppose you've done a pairing spell since Mom and Dad."

"Your mom and...?" Marietta clucked her tongue, sounding a bit like Alice. "I didn't do a pairing spell on them."

"Well, no," Stella said, realizing her mistake. Marietta would have been too young back then to have had that kind of responsibility in the coven. "But you were there, assisting whichever witch *did* do it. I mean...you know what you're doing. Right?"

Marietta didn't respond, apparently not hearing any of that because she was muttering and banging around Stella's little kitchen, trying to find whatever else she needed. It was making a terrible racket, made worse by the tiny, enclosed space.

"You said something before about opening windows?" Ethan asked.

"Right," Marietta said. "Usually this spell is done outside. You'll need to

open windows to release the pressure. Where's your mortar and pestle?"

"I don't have a mortar and pestle," Stella said while Ethan opened the window in the gable. "Cooking and brewing are your areas, not mine."

Marietta glanced over her shoulder at Stella, looking horrified by the prospect of a kitchen not having a mortar and pestle. "Guess I know what I'm getting you for your birthday."

She continued to shake her head in dismay, and her long, salt-and-pepper hair swooshed against the back of her fringed, purple tunic.

"I guess I can make do with a knife and cutting board." She chopped furiously at something that looked like dried lavender.

Also on the counter: tiny black balls, likely peppercorns or dried juniper; three bags of chamomile tea; a few chunks of dehydrated apple, then several leafy clumps that—now out of the bag—smelled as awful as they looked.

"Is there anything more we can do to help?" Ethan asked.

"It's just a tea," Marietta said, waving the knife at him in a dismissive gesture. "All the magic's in the heat and in the two of you. We'll let it steep. Then you drink. For now, why don't you both prepare yourselves."

"What are we supposed to do?" Stella asked.

Marietta dumped a handful of pulverized lavender into the simmering pot. "You could start by pushing the bed over by the window."

"Why?"

"If you fall down, you'll want a soft place to land." Marietta reorganized the piles of ingredients on the cutting board and crushed the bits of dried apple.

"Why would we fall?" Stella asked, and her question ended with a bit of a squeak.

"I've heard it can be overwhelming, honey." Marietta dropped the apple into the water with loud plops that ejected droplets onto the burner. They hissed like snakes.

"Will we stay conscious?" Ethan asked.

"That's up to you," Marietta said.

"Up to *us*?" Adrenaline spiked Stella's blood, and she thought she might be sick. "How in the hell are we supposed to *choose* to stay conscious?"

Ethan slipped his hand into hers.

"Stay focused, and you'll be fine." Marietta laid the flat edge of the knife against the dried berries and pressed down, smashing them flat.

"But you'll stay and monitor us, right?" Stella asked, frustrated by

Marietta's less than satisfying response.

"Oh, I don't think you'll want that," Marietta said.

"Oh, I think I do," Stella responded sarcastically. If there was a chance of her and Ethan losing consciousness, she wanted someone around to bring them out of it.

"Well, then... *I* don't want to be that close," Marietta said.

"This isn't making me feel any better," Stella said.

Ethan gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, and she looked up at him. He's expression was serious but not panicked.

"Soon, you'll feel incredible," Marietta assured them. "Better than you've ever felt. Powerful enough to put that demon in its place. And don't worry, honey. I won't let anything bad happen."

"I'll open the windows," Ethan said, and he reached up to crank open the first skylight, letting in a cooling breeze.

"What time is it?" Stella asked.

"I'd guess around eight-thirty," Ethan said, moving to the second skylight.

"This day feels like about three days wrapped into one." Stella could hardly believe she'd been dueling with a demon on a Medford rooftop only that morning. "Do you think we should check on how the others are doing downstairs with the banishment spell?"

"No," Ethan said. "They've got it. You can help me with your bed instead."

He tugged it away from the wall.

Stella hesitated for a second, then, seeing the wisdom of a soft landing, grabbed onto the footboard and pulled.

Once they got it a few feet from the wall, they moved the recliner out of the way and pushed the bed across the room and into the sewing area beneath the small gable window.

Ethan opened the window, and a comforting cross breeze blew through the attic.

Marietta was now leaning over the pot and stirring, three times in a clockwise direction followed by one time counterclockwise. The steam rose into her face and frizzed her hair.

"What's it going to taste like?" Ethan asked her.

"Probably not good," Marietta said, "but palatability isn't the point."

"Right." Ethan sat on the edge of Stella's mattress and bounced as if

testing the springs. When he looked up, he gave Stella a wink and a wickedly sexy smile.

Stella rolled her eyes. How could he be thinking about sex at a time like this? “How much longer, Marietta?”

“Two minutes.” She wiped her brow.

“Sit with me, Red,” Ethan said. “Your anxiety is palpable.”

“Aren’t you nervous?” She stood in front of him and ran her fingers through his hair. She knew how much he liked how it felt, and it always calmed her too.

“Not really.” He took her hand from the side of his head and kissed her palm.

Stella frowned. “Why not?”

He pulled her down onto the mattress beside him. “Because we’re together.”

Stella let out a breath. “Things have gone to shit in the past when we’ve been together. Remember last night?”

“And yet we’re still standing,” Ethan said.

“*Sitting.*”

“You know what I mean.” He put his arm around her.

Stella’s anxiety slowly slipped away, and her body warmed despite the cool breeze coming through the windows.

Blue ribbons of magic unfurled from her chest and undulated in the small space between them. It was as if her magic knew its urge to be paired would soon be fulfilled.

In a matter of minutes, they would be paired. Forever united and powerful. Powerful enough to banish the demon and put the last strands of this nightmare far behind them.

“That’s it,” Marietta said. “It’s been bubbling for a full three minutes now.”

She took down two matching mugs from the cupboard and grabbed a sieve from the drawer. She strained the tea into the mugs, then handed them to Stella and Ethan.

“Now,” she said. “It’ll be hot, but drink it as quickly as you can. You might not feel anything happening at first, but once you do, don’t panic.”

“You keep saying things like that!” Stella cried. “Why would we panic?”

“I’ve never gone through the process myself, but I’ve read that it can be unsettling. Just...breathe through it. Physical contact might help. Especially

if you feel like you're drowning."

"*What?*" Stella cried, rising off the mattress.

Ethan pulled her back down.

"Quickly," Marietta said. "Before it cools. Down the hatch."

Stella looked at Ethan as fear, hope, and love swirled in her heart, all of it on the tip of her tongue, but her lungs were too tight for her to say any of it.

Ethan gave her a nod as if he knew exactly how she felt.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you too," she said.

Then they lifted the mugs to their lips and drank.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

Before they lowered their mugs, Stella heard the soft sound of her attic hatch closing. Marietta had left.

Ethan remained sitting beside her on the edge of the mattress, and he stared down into his mug. “Marietta’s tea tastes like mud and chewing tobacco.”

Stella wrinkled her nose. He wasn’t wrong.

“Do you feel anything yet?” he asked.

“No.” Her mug was still half full, and the tea continued to bubble in the cup. *How strange.*

Then there was a hard yank, as if something had grabbed onto her heart and pulled her forward, though her feet remained planted on the floor.

“I felt *that*,” she said, standing up.

“Me too.” Ethan rose to his feet and turned to face her.

Heat seeped from her chest, spreading outward, down her torso and legs, down her arms and out through her fingers, which were still wrapped around the mug. Was it her own heat that kept the tea so hot?

She took another sip, and a less aggressive sensation filled her heart—this one felt like strength and confidence. It made her stand taller, and she noticed Ethan’s posture was much the same. It reminded her of the first time she saw him in that hotel ballroom—king of his domain.

Blue tendrils of magic unfurled from her chest.

Red ribbons undulated in the air, originating from him.

She’d seen this effect before—their magic wanting to braid together. But this time, it might actually succeed.

The first ribbons twisted together, almost caressing each other, like two

enamored snakes in some kind of intricate mating dance. More ribbons joined them. They wove together and encircled Stella and Ethan, who stared at each other with wide, unblinking eyes.

“Should we drink more?” Ethan asked. “Or have we had enough for the pairing spell to work?”

“I think we need to get it all down.”

Ethan stared back into his cup. “I was afraid you were going to say that.”

Stella took a third long drink, and another wave of warmth flooded her heart. It brought with it the image of her parents’ funeral. Marietta and George stood on one side of her; five-year-old Jade stood on her other side, squeezing her hand.

But there was also a new presence in the memory. Something strong and tall right behind her. Ethan, supporting her. Refusing to let her knees crumple and her body collapse with the weight of her grief.

Hot, salty tears pressed at the backs of Stella’s eyes, so moved by the intensity of their pairing, wishing Ethan really had been there with her during that terrible period.

She looked up through wet eyes, and saw tears streaming down Ethan’s face.

“Babe,” she said softly. “Are you okay?”

“I had the strangest feeling,” he said. “As if you were moving with me into foster care. You were sleeping in the twin bed beside me, reaching out across the gap and holding my hand.”

Stella nodded, then looked back into her cup. The remaining tea was still steaming with even the occasional bubble rising to the surface.

The warmth inside her chest intensified, making sweat prickle on her forehead. There was another yank at the center of her chest, this time even stronger than before.

Ethan lurched forward too, and their bodies collided. Ethan’s empty cup tumbled from his fingers and onto the floor.

Red and blue ribbons of magic undulated around them as more recent memories filled Stella’s mind: Ethan dancing with her in a hotel ballroom, wiping tomato sauce from her chin after she’d taken an enormous bite of Mr. Russo’s chicken parmesan, holding her hand in the Paul Revere Mall, standing in a circle of salt as a four-hundred-year-old witch broke through the restraints on his magic...

Stella relived it all, though this time in such vibrant colors, she felt as

though, before this, she'd been living her whole life in black and white.

This had to be different than the standard pairing. Two witches who joined together strictly as a business arrangement couldn't possibly experience the depth of her connection to Ethan.

She knew instinctively that their pairing would make a difference. Not just to them, but to everyone around them.

"Have I told you I love you?" he asked, his voice so raspy and rough, the words sounded as though they'd been raked over gravel.

"A few times now."

His pupils expanded. "Well, you're going to be hearing it a lot more often now. You're probably going to get sick of it, because my vocabulary has just shrunk down to those three words."

Another rush of warmth washed through Stella's chest. "You *do* realize you just used more than two dozen words to tell me that."

Ethan scoffed. "Semantics."

"What?" she asked on a laugh.

"Finish your tea."

She only had a little bit left, so she took the last gulp, then set her empty mug on the floor.

As soon as she straightened, Ethan's arms came around her, and he held her tight against his body. His head bowed, and his lips pressed against the side of her neck.

The red and blue ribbons of magic twisted and danced like seaweed caught in a swirling eddy. They were thicker than before, growing bolder as magic pushed against the inside of her body, wanting to explode out of her.

Stella closed her eyes and sank against Ethan's chest. She wondered what she'd been so afraid of. She wondered why she hadn't done this sooner because she'd never felt so amazing in her life. Like nothing could touch her. Or them. They were powerful alone, but even more amazing together.

The warmth in her chest spiked to a boil. She wanted to get even closer to him. She wanted to burrow into his chest and crawl into his heart, turn it into her own little nest, curl up and never ever leave.

"I need to be inside you," Ethan said.

Stella nodded. She knew what he meant. Hadn't she been thinking the exact same thing?

But then she gasped when she felt his hardness press against her belly. *Oh.* That's what he meant. Well, she could get behind that too.

In a rush of fevered lust, she took a step back, reached between them, and undid the buckle on Ethan's belt.

Ethan must not have liked even that brief second of separation because his mouth crashed down against hers so roughly their teeth clashed.

Stella got his belt undone, then moved on to the buttons on his jeans. She yanked the denim down his long, muscular legs.

Ethan matched her haste and, because she hadn't been paying attention to his maneuverings, she was surprised by the sudden coolness against her skin when he pushed her own jeans down to her ankles.

Stella whipped off his shirt. Hers was gone in a flash.

Her hands roamed the topography of his musculature, over his broad shoulders, down the backs of his hard biceps, around to his back and the rounded points of his shoulder blades.

Ethan groaned into her mouth as his hands explored her just as earnestly, as if this was the first time they'd touched and it was all virgin territory.

She put her palm to Ethan's warm chest and gave him just the slightest push.

He didn't need any further convincing. He fell across the mattress, landing like a fallen tree.

He reached up and pulled her down to him. She didn't fall though. She straddled his hips and stared into his perfect face, feeling the tip of his hard shaft nestle itself into her wet heat.

When she finally sank down over him, taking him inch by mind-scrambling inch. He seemed to grow even larger inside her.

When she was fully seated, Ethan let out a long, low groan. "Ride me, Red."

"Like this?" she asked, slowly rising up, then lowering herself just as slow.

"You were right," Ethan said, as she did it again. "This spell could quite possibly kill me."

Stella ignored the old familiar panic his joke inspired, refusing to let the past ruin her future. She continued her languid slides but growing in intensity and quickening her pace until, on one descent, Ethan bucked, slamming inside her with a grunt of frustration.

Stella tipped her head back and moaned. He felt so damn good.

Ethan bucked again, taking control of her wild ride. His hand went between them. He touched the exact right spot, and her hips jerked.

She moved with his hand and his bucking hips. She bent closer, her chest against his, her lips against his, her tongue moving against his...

She was close. Barreling toward an orgasm of cosmic proportions.

Magic swirled and danced around them, no longer contained within their bodies, but playing joyfully around them, around the edges of the room, across the ceiling, and along the open windowsill.

This was it. Their magic was pairing. They were becoming joined in every way possible.

The tugging sensation at the center of Stella's chest hit its pinnacle at the exact same time the rest of her body did, and the universe exploded, the sky filling with stars that had never existed before.

Pure unadulterated pleasure filled every corner of her body as magic blasted through her, pounding and throbbing in a way she thought might never stop until it slowly, ever so slowly tapered off, leaving its comet tail of warmth behind.

Ethan shuddered beneath her. They panted into each other's mouths.

"That..." he said...but that was all he said.

"What?" she asked. "Is your vocabulary now down to just one word?"

"Maybe," he said, and though the corners of his lips curled up, that seemed to be all the energy he could muster.

Stella rolled off him, but they stayed close, both of them on their sides, facing each other.

"Will it be like that every time now?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"But we are paired, right? That was it. It felt...incredible."

As happy as Stella was about the feelings still tingling through her, that needling fear of what it all meant staggered back into the room.

Their magic might be stronger, but they were more vulnerable too.

"Yeah," Ethan said, smiling broader. "It worked."

Stella tried to smile, wishing she could have his confidence. She tipped her chin down to look at her chest. There was the oddest tingling sensation.

"Do you—?" she started to say, but her lungs squeezed, refusing to let out any more sound.

"Stella?" Ethan asked. "Are you all right?"

Defensive magic rushed over the top of her like a rogue wave, its undertow sucking her down, refusing to let her go. Stella reached up and clawed for the surface, but she couldn't find any air.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

“Stella?”

Ethan got a sudden flash of *déjà vu*. He saw himself through Stella’s eyes, twenty-four hours earlier in that nature preserve. But it was more than just the visual image of him lying on the ground, unable to breathe. He *felt* every flare of Stella’s panic, and his heart raced to her erratic rhythm.

Last night, when he’d fallen to the ground, she’d thought he was dying. Now, their positions were reversed.

Stella rolled onto her back and clutched at her throat.

“Oh, shit! Stella. Breathe, baby.”

He’d thought they’d done it. The tea had worked. They should be perfectly paired. But something had obviously gone wrong.

If this was a case of another back-stabbing witch, he’d kill Marietta. He didn’t care if she was the only mother figure Stella had in this world.

Stella’s eyes were huge, the whites showing all around her stormy gray irises. Her gaze flung wildly around the room as if looking for an escape. Or possibly an anecdote?

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Tell me what to do.”

She clawed at her throat.

“No!” Ethan tipped her head back against the pillow and pried open her clenched jaw. He checked her airway. Nothing was blocking it.

He rolled off the bed, threw a blanket over Stella’s naked body and raced for the attic hatch while pulling on his jeans.

He yanked the hatch open. “Marietta!”

He called her name again and again, louder each time, while glancing

wildly over his shoulder at Stella, whose back arched and strained against the mattress.

A second later, the sound of running feet came racing up the stairs from the storefront below.

Ethan looked down through the hole in the floor.

Marietta looked up at him from the base of the ladder, already starting to climb. “Are you ready for the last part?”

Ethan couldn’t comprehend her question. He snarled, “You better pray you didn’t poison her.”

“What?”

Ethan gave Stella another glance. She wasn’t better. But then, she wasn’t worse. “Something’s gone wrong.”

Marietta was already halfway up the ladder. “Did you drink the tea too?”

“Of course I did.” It was then Ethan got her point. He and Stella had drunk the same tea, but *he* wasn’t choking to death. This wasn’t about any poison.

Ethan stepped out of the way so Marietta could climb through the hole in the floor. When she rose to her feet, she took one look at Stella and cursed under her breath.

“What’s happening?” Ethan asked.

Marietta rushed to the side of the bed. “She’s fighting you.”

“What? How?” Ethan reached the bed just a second behind Marietta. He dropped to his knees and squeezed Stella’s hand.

Her leg spasmed, and her foot shook against the mattress. Marietta reached into the pocket of her dress and pulled out a bundle of herbs that were so dry they’d turned a dark, greenish black.

She shoved them into Stella’s mouth, then covered Stella’s mouth with her hand.

“How’s that supposed to help?” Ethan asked.

“It’ll keep her calm.”

“Calm while she suffocates to death?”

Marietta gave him a quick, sideways glance of annoyance. “I would never hurt our girl. This is about you.”

“Me? Why me?”

Marietta didn’t answer that.

“Are you saying my magic is hurting her?”

“You tell me,” Marietta said. “Can you feel what’s going on?”

Ethan closed his eyes and searched for Stella in the darkness of his mind.

Marietta was right. He could feel Stella's magic. It was there, right alongside his—blue ribbons tangled with the red strains of his own. But that was just it. They were tangled when intuitively he knew they should be braided.

And there was something else. Stella's magic was tinged with fear. He felt it now—Stella's fear encircling his own heart. She wasn't afraid for herself. She was afraid for *him*. And it was holding her back.

"Stella, I'm right here. I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

"You got to accept his magic, honey," Marietta said with her hand clasped under Stella's jaw, holding her mouth shut.

Some of the tension had gone out of Stella's body, and her back lay flat against the mattress. Her nostrils flared. Air was moving in and out, but it was shallow and abnormally fast. She wouldn't survive much longer like this. At some point her oxygen levels would fall far too low.

"Can you feel her magic in you?" Marietta asked.

"I think so. There's something there that wasn't there before."

"Then she can feel yours too. You're almost there. It's up to you to get her across the finish line."

"What do I do?"

"I don't know. George and I aren't paired. You'll have to feel your way. But do it quick. We're running out of time."

Ethan closed his eyes and pictured the red and blue ribbons. He reached out with his mind and grabbed one of Stella's blue ones, which was loose and flailing like the tail of a kite.

As soon as he grabbed hold, he was whipped this way and that. Not literally; his feet were still firmly planted on the floor. But internally, he was being battered by a twisting column of fire.

It felt as though his skin was being scorched from his body, but if that were true, Marietta would have put a stop to it. Right?

With time running out, he threw his head back and opened his heart, letting Stella's fire mix with his water magic.

It sizzled and steamed, but the tingle of power he always felt whenever they touched whipped through him, filling him to the point he worried his physical body might not be large enough to contain it all.

He rifled through the tangle of their magic, trying to find a more placid blue strain, one that he could follow straight to Stella's heart. If he could only

just speak to her on that calmer plane, maybe then they could both be saved.

Finding one ribbon that looked promising, he focused on the way it undulated and flowed.

Ethan?

He heard Stella's voice faint in his ear though he knew it wasn't being spoken from her lips. Their magic, though not fully paired, was still connected enough for him to hear her thoughts.

I know you're scared, he said. Or rather...thought. It's okay to be afraid. But we can do this together. Don't hide from me, Stella. Accept me. I know my magic must feel strange, but it won't extinguish you. It's fire and water. Both alive together.

We could die, she whimpered.

We won't. Not today. Not if you open yourself up and just breathe. Please, breathe.

"What's happening?" Marietta asked, and she sounded very far away. Farther away than Stella. "Is it working?"

I need Marietta, Stella said. I need my mom.

Ethan empathized. Their mutual loss was one of the things that had connected them early on.

Marietta's here, he said. But she can't help you. You need to trust me and trust yourself. Trust both of us.

The wind and fire had settled down by then, enough for Ethan to have some sense of the room again. He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled Stella into his arms. He stroked her hair back off her face.

I trust you, Stella said, and the tension in her muscles eased. She drew a breath, deeper than the ones before.

"That's it," Ethan said, this time out loud.

"Is it working?" Marietta asked, her voice sounding frantic. "Ethan, is it?"

"It's working," Ethan said, but he was talking more to Stella than to anyone else.

"I think so too," Marietta said, and she pulled the herbs out of Stella's mouth. "She's calmed down."

"Come on," Ethan urged. "Accept it. Adapt to it."

How? Stella asked.

I don't know, Red, but I had to adapt to all kinds of new situations after I went into foster care. I think it just requires flexibility.

I'll try, she said.

It was slow at first, barely perceptible, but the first blue ribbons began to crisscross over the red ones in neat plaits. Ethan encouraged her, bending his own red ribbons over hers, making intricate braided loops and designs.

Stella's breathing leveled out, and she tucked her face against his neck.

Ethan stroked her back as their combined magic became more and more unified with each braided strand until eventually there was nothing separated or falling loose.

Stella pulled back, opened her eyes, and stared up at him. She blinked once and said with a tone of complete awe, "I did it. We did it."

Marietta let out a deeply relieved sigh. "Thank god."

"We're paired?" Stella asked, turning her head to look at her foster mother.

"Not yet," Marietta said. "But almost."

Ethan didn't know when she'd grabbed it, but Marietta suddenly had one of Stella's kitchen knives in her hand. She stabbed forward and, with a twist of her wrist, cut Ethan's chest, just above his heart.

"Fuck!" His arms loosened around Stella, who rolled out of his lap and onto the floor.

A second later, Marietta dropped to one knee and inflicted a similar wound above Stella's heart.

Ethan looked down at his chest, and realized the cut wasn't deep. He still had a chance. But after all he'd been through, did he have enough strength to wrestle the weapon away, even from a sixty-year-old witch?

Marietta grabbed each of their wrists and yanked Stella and Ethan closer together. She slammed each of their palms against the other's chest. Then she turned their hands around on themselves and pressed their bloody palms to their own wounds.

Ethan struggled to pull away, but he was too wiped.

"No," Stella said. "Hold still."

"Stella...she's trying to kill us."

"It's a blood oath," Stella said, more calmly than Ethan could comprehend.

"A blood oath?" he asked. "Whatever happened to just pricking fingers?"

"The blood closest to the heart is the strongest," Marietta explained.

"A little head's up would've been nice," Ethan said.

"No time," Marietta said.

Ethan didn't think that was exactly true. All these older witches had a proclivity for theatrics.

"Ethan," Stella said.

She was staring down at her chest, but it wasn't the blood that had her attention. Ethan knew this because a new and profoundly powerful warmth was spreading through his own chest as well.

He felt a hundred feet tall. His strength was returning so fast, he imagined he could tear down a mountain with his bare hands. His magic pulsed and surged like a boiling cauldron of molten gold.

Red and blue magic exploded thickly out of them, like the contents of two paint cans tossed into the air. It settled over them—coating them in magic.

"Marietta," Stella said, her voice filled with wonder. "That...thing I'm feeling. It's not what I think it is. Is it?"

"The fifth element," Marietta said.

"Oh my god," Stella whispered. She pressed her palm more firmly against her chest.

"The fifth element?" Ethan asked. He was familiar with earth, fire, water, and air. What was the fifth?

"Aether," Stella said.

"Also known as spirit," Marietta explained. "The classical four elements make up the physical world, but the spirit exists in all of them. It's...balance. It's...connection."

"That's why I can't see it?" Ethan asked.

"Aether has no color," Marietta said. "No season, no gender, no direction. It is everything. And now you are filled with it."

"We're paired," Ethan said. He'd thought they were paired more than once already, but now he knew it with utmost certainty.

"Now, you are paired," Marietta said.

She stood ten feet away with the back of her head pressed against the slanted attic ceiling. The bloody knife dangled loosely from her hand.

Stella rose deftly to her feet as Ethan stood from the edge of the mattress—their earlier exhaustion was but a memory.

They turned toward the open window, both of them knowing that with an explosion of magic that powerful, the demon could be there in seconds. They had to move.

"How's it going downstairs?" Ethan asked. "Do they have the feathers and snakeskin? Everything we'll need for the banishment spell?"

“Everything’s ready,” Marietta said.

“Including us,” Ethan and Stella said, their voices in perfect unison.

“Wherever we end up doing this banishment spell,” Ethan said, “the demon will obviously have to be present. It should be somewhere remote where it can’t hurt anyone else.”

“Yes,” Stella said, drawing the blood-stained blanket tighter around her. “And I know just the spot.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY

Twenty minutes later, Stella squeezed the pouch that hung from a leather cord around her neck. Inside the pouch were thirteen red chicken feathers and a dried-out snakeskin.

When combined in Magnus's copper pot with cream—not to mention with the joint effort of two covens, some newly paired magic, and a whole lot of luck—they had everything they'd need to banish the demon she'd unleashed on the world.

Maybe.

“You say there's a portal here?” Lovey asked, clutching the grimoire to her chest. She refused to let anyone else carry it.

Antoinette had the athame tucked into the back of her plum-colored corduroys.

“Absolutely,” Marietta replied, and she switched Magnus's small copper pot from one arm to her other.

The nine witches gathered at Proctor's Ledge, the site of the 1692 executions, now nestled within a quiet residential neighborhood. In front of them stood the low, curved memorial wall that bore a plaque for each of the nineteen accused witches who'd met their ends at that very spot.

Behind the wall, was the hill. It was covered in trees, green shrubs, and other forms of life, all doing their best to survive in a place so full of death.

Stella's pulse thudded in her ears as the Salem witches adopted their habitual positions in front of the plaques that bore each of their ancestors' names, with Ethan and the Boston witches filling the gaps in between.

Judith stood in front of Elizabeth Howe's memorial plaque. Marietta stood a few feet to Judith's right, facing the name Rebecca Nurse. Izzy

sparked and sizzled ten feet to Marietta's right, facing the plaque for her ancestor, George Jacobs, Sr.

Jade and Stella stood together at the far-right end of the wall, their gazes focused on the plaque memorializing the hanging of Samuel Wardwell.

Stella turned to look at her sister. Jade gave her a tight-lipped smile that both conveyed her nerves and her confidence that their plan was going to work. Stella hoped she was right.

The Salem witches stepped forward, closer to the wall, and recited in unison. "Cursed by the past. Magic thou hast. Take us now to the place first cast."

They pressed their palms against the Howe, Nurse, Jacobs, and Wardwell plaques respectively. Shimmering blue hazes burst out of each ancestor's name, and Stella's hair blew back as her coven's magic blasted through her.

When she peeked through her lashes, the memorial wall was gone, replaced by a circular portal of warped and waving air that was wide enough for a person to step through.

The residential neighborhood remained on the outside of the portal. Inside the portal, the wooded hill was exactly as it had been in 1692, without any houses, asphalt, or signs of modern life.

A narrow, pot-holed cart path did, however, lead up the hill and through the trees that would become thicker and darker the farther up the hill the cart path traveled.

"You're time benders?" Lovey asked.

"Generally, no," Judith said. "We can only bend this little strip of time, but it's all we need."

"It's so weird," Ethan murmured, too low for anyone but Stella to hear. "I don't have any memory of coming through this portal."

Stella wasn't surprised. He'd been completely loopy the last time he was here, drugged by one of Marietta's potions.

"Shouldn't someone keep one foot on the outside?" Jade asked. She tucked her dark curls behind her ears, getting down to business. "If we all go through completely, the portal will close behind us. If we're trying to lure that thing *inside* the portal, we can't let it close."

"She's right," Antoinette said, towering over everybody else. She refastened the rhinestone clip at the side of her Afro.

Stella hoped Antoinette would have the good sense to kick off her stilettos if events dictated the need to run.

“I’ll do it,” Maddy said. “I’ll hold the portal open.”

“Are you sure?” Izzy asked. “Whoever stays in the opening will be close enough to *touch* that thing when it slides through. It could be a freakin’ suicide mission.”

“We should’ve thought through the logistics better,” Marietta agreed, and she nervously rubbed the beaded fringe on her purple tunic. Her long, salt-and-pepper hair was still windblown from the burst of magic.

“I *said* I’d do it,” Maddy repeated. “I’ll keep one foot on the outside. It’s not like I’m going to banish that thing by reading its future. I need to do *something* useful. It killed JP.”

“Prophetic magic will be useful,” Antoinette said. “You can predict where it’s going to go next.”

“I can already tell you where the demon is,” Maddy said.

“So can I,” Judith said. The bags under her eyes were extra puffy. The stress was getting to her too. “And it’s close.”

Judith held up a four-inch-long, blue lapis stone and rubbed her thumb across its beveled length. It was one of the many stone wands she used for gaining clarity.

Maddy furrowed her brow in obvious irritation and clicked her tongue. “No, it’s not. It’s in the country. I can see hay lying everywhere.”

“That’s not what I’m getting,” Judith said, and her patronizing tone suggested her age, experience, and lapis should trump Maddy’s intuition.

“I have an idea,” Ethan said.

Everyone but Maddy turned toward him with raised eyebrows. Maddy was still frowning at Judith.

“Stella’s good at invisibility spells,” Ethan said. “All she needs is the four elements, and she could make Maddy disappear. Maddy could hold the portal open, and the demon wouldn’t even know she was there.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Stella said, “but cups of water and little mounds of dirt aren’t going to create a powerful enough spell to fool a demon. We’d need an inferno, a flood, a tornado, and...I don’t know...an *earthquake*.”

“Last I checked, we’ve already made infernos and floods,” Ethan said. “And with our magic paired, we’ll make the spell even bigger. If I remember correctly, Lovey makes an excellent tornado. And I’m guessing between Electra Woman and Dyna Girl—”

“Who?” Jade asked.

“He means you and Izzy,” Stella explained.

The corners of Ethan’s mouth hinted at a smile. “I bet the two of them can do something impressive with moving the earth.”

“Hell, yeah, we can,” Jade said.

Stella chewed on her bottom lip, contemplating. “Okay. An invisibility spell that big might be enough to fool the demon. At least it’s worth a shot. No need for more martyrs.”

At the implication of Jean-Paul’s sacrifice, a gut-clenching wave of grief washed across Maddy’s face, then she steeled her jaw.

“Invisibility or not, this amount of power is going to get the demon’s attention pretty quickly,” Izzy said.

“No doubt,” Stella said. “As soon as Maddy vanishes, everyone scatter. Take a position where you can distract it long enough to give Ethan and me time to set up in the barn.”

“You heard her,” Marietta said. “Everyone through.” She tied her long hair into a knot and, with a swish of beaded fringe, stepped through the circle of warped and waving air.

One by one, they took turns stepping through the portal. Maddy stopped halfway through with one foot in the modern world and one foot in the seventeenth century.

Stella was the last to pass through the portal. Her hands shook with the memory of the last time she’d gone through. She’d barely escaped with a bleeding, bruised, and battered Ethan, not to mention with her own familial attachments broken and nearly permanently destroyed.

Marietta must have guessed how she was feeling because she gave her an apologetic look and extended her hand. Stella squeezed it and trusted in a brighter future.

“Let’s go,” Ethan said. “Where do you want us?”

“We’ll have to make a circle around Maddy to make her the focus of the invisibility spell,” Stella explained. “Jade and Izzy, if you’re doing earth, I need you standing on the north side of her. I’ll be on the south side with fire. Ethan, you stand to Maddy’s west, totally inside the portal with water. Lovey...”

“I’m to the east and outside the portal with air,” Lovey said. “As soon as the spell’s complete, I’ll step back inside.”

“Right.” Stella had a brief flicker of alarm that Lovey, who was still clutching the grimoire, would be outside the portal with the smoothest escape

route.

But Lovey gave her a nod of support, and Stella trusted the old witch wouldn't bail. At this point, what else could she do?

Once everyone was in position with Maddy at the center, Stella looked them each in the eye. "Ready?"

"Ready, Stellz," Jade said.

"Ready," Izzy repeated. Her hair was already lifting off her scalp as a current of electricity ran over her body.

Ethan gave Stella a confident smile. "Ready when you are, Red."

Judith, Marietta, and Antoinette stood ten feet behind Ethan, well within the portal and holding hands.

"Okay, then," Stella said. "Let 'er rip."

Stella flourished her fingers, creating a fire ball in the palm of her hand. Then she poured it out like molten glass, making a column of fire between her hand and the ground. From there, she fanned the flames until the fire was as tall as she was.

The heat was so intense, she squeezed her eyes closed just as the earth trembled under her feet. Jade and Izzy must have figured something out between them.

To Stella's right, from outside the portal, Lovey created enough wind to blow Stella's long hair all around her face and make her stick out her left hand for balance.

Ethan slipped his hand into hers.

She couldn't see the geyser he'd created, but she could hear how its escaping spray made her fire spit and steam. The aether of their paired magic added a greater sense of balance to the whole elemental recipe. It was powerful. And it would last.

"Remember," Judith shouted over the roar of elements, "the portal is still open, and this is a quiet neighborhood. You can't go much bigger than you are right now, or people will notice."

She wasn't wrong. It was now or never.

"Hold still, Maddy," Stella ordered, and she opened her eyes.

"I'm trying," Maddy said, but the nerves were clearly getting to her. She wrung her hands and shifted her weight. "Just finish the damn spell."

"Right." Stella held up her hands, and the pillar of fire grew taller. "*In virtute terra, aer, ignis, et aqua. Sinit team evanescet.* By the power of earth, air, fire, and water, allow her to disappear."

A silent explosion of magic concussed the air, and Antoinette cried out Maddy's name.

The wind ceded.

The earth stilled.

Stella slowly lowered her hands, extinguishing the fire.

Ethan also lowered his hands, and his column of water collapsed to the ground with a huge splat that soaked everyone's shoes.

"Jesus," Izzy muttered.

"Sorry," he said.

Everyone else still looked shellshocked by the blast of power—that is, everyone except Maddy.

"Well..." Judith said as they all gazed at the empty spot where Maddy'd once stood. "Looks like it worked."

"I can't see myself," Maddy said.

Antoinette let out a breath at the sound of Maddy's voice.

"Weird, isn't it?" Ethan said.

"Are you feeling okay though?" Stella asked, and she staggered. With everyone working together, they'd created the biggest explosion of magic she'd ever felt, not including the pairing spell itself.

Lovey entered the portal, so now everyone was inside except for Maddy's left foot.

"I feel the same," Maddy said, "just...transparent."

Stella let out a breath. The demon had to have sensed the pairing spell. If this secondary surge of magic didn't lure the demon straight to them, nothing would.

"Won't the demon feel the magic on me?" Maddy asked.

"It'll feel it, for sure," Stella said, "but it'll probably assume it's the scent of several witches it's after, not just one. And as long as you don't make a—"

"It'll *probably* assume?" Maddy asked, sounding a bit hysterical. "That's the best you've got?"

"So long as you stay quiet," Stella continued, "the demon should slide right past you on its way toward us. As soon as it's past the portal, you can step all the way inside too. The portal will close and trap the demon in here with us."

"Then it's just a matter of stewing a snakeskin with some chicken feathers," Izzy said.

Stella caressed the leather pouch around her neck. "No sweat, right?"

“Is that...?” Ethan asked. He’d bent at the waist to peer through the portal and get a better look at the modern sky. He raised his arm and pointed.

Stella followed the trajectory of his finger to a small dark spot that was growing larger against the wisps of cotton-candy clouds.

“That’s it,” Stella said. “It’s coming.”

“That didn’t take long,” Jade said.

“It’s like a shark that smells blood in the water,” Izzy said.

“Everyone, take to the trees.” Judith said. “Find a good striking position. Maddy, hold yours.”

“Yes,” Lovey said. “We need to keep it busy long enough for Stella and Ethan to set up.”

Lovey grabbed the copper pot out of Marietta’s arms, shoved the grimoire inside and wedged it in so tightly it wouldn’t budge. She tossed them both, together, to Ethan.

He caught the pot one-handed and curled it against his body as if he were a running back on a football field.

“Go, child,” Lovey said. “*Byen vit.*”

Ethan grabbed Stella’s hand, and the aether in their newly paired magic crackled between them.

Everyone but Maddy took off at a run, heading to their chosen posts.

Stella and Ethan’s goal was the farthest away—Jacobs’ barn, the site where Ethan had been tortured not two weeks earlier. It was the perfect place for the banishing spell and the perfect place to surround a demon.

That is, if they could make it there before the demon caught up.

Stella’s feet pounded against the ground, and while she might have struggled physically to keep up with Ethan’s long legs, that was no longer the case. Magic made up for the difference, and she matched him stride for stride.

They’d put fifty yards behind them when the air pulsed and wriggled as if radiating off scorching hot asphalt.

“What’s that?” Ethan asked.

“The portal just closed behind us.”

“Already?” He glanced back. “Did Maddy keep it open long enough for the demon to come through?”

The sound of Judith’s voice, shouting instructions, sliced through the trees and answered the question for him.

“Hurry,” Stella said. “The barn’s still another two hundred yards. They can’t keep that thing occupied forever. We need to go faster.”

A helpful burst of wind from Lovey's direction shoved them forward, increasing their speed beyond the point where their feet could keep up.

"Shit," Ethan cried. "I feel like I'm gonna—"

"Fly!" Stella cried out, the word coming instinctively rather than rationally.

At that utterance, they stumbled. Stella reached forward to break her fall but instead, the ground disappeared from beneath her feet. She leaned forward, drawing Ethan into a similar prone position as he also left the ground.

"Fuck!" Ethan cried out, and he clutched the copper pot against his body.

"Don't think about it," Stella advised.

Questioning things often took the magic out of life, and she didn't want to fall. Not from this height. They were rising quickly, and her stomach sunk like a stone.

"You've done this before?" Ethan asked as his head whipped around.

"Of course not," she said.

They were twenty feet off the ground, rising above the cart path, and traveling fast. At this rate, they'd be at the barn in seconds. Beneath them now, the treetops looked like heads of broccoli in a supermarket display.

A terrible groaning sound made Stella glance behind her. Trees were toppling like dominos while lightning stabbed down from a clear blue sky. It appeared to be striking randomly, but Stella knew better. The demon was agile and probably feinting left and right. Izzy was playing electrical Whac-a-Mole.

"Whatever they're doing to fight that thing," Ethan said, "will it buy us enough time?"

"It has to," Stella said. "Now, quiet. We need to focus or we'll lose altitude."

"How do we land?"

"Yeah...not sure about that."

Another burst of wind pushed them faster, but the deep, responding roar told Stella it hadn't been another helpful push from Lovey—at least not intentionally. The elderly witch was using her entire arsenal to slow the demon down. Stella and Ethan were simply benefitting from the surplus energy.

"There's the barn," Stella said.

The space between the trees was growing wider, and the clearing was just

ahead. George Jacobs' barn stood in the middle of it, partially scorched from the last time she and Ethan were there.

Ethan groaned. "I might not have remembered the portal, but I remember that place well enough."

Stella leaned back, slowing their speed.

"Keep your knees soft," she said. "Absorb the landing, and we should be okay."

Ethan tensed, but he did as she said.

When their feet hit the ground twenty yards from the barn, they stumbled forward and caught each other by the forearms, but neither of them fell.

Ethan let out a breath. "Efficient. But I think I prefer to have the ground under my feet."

"Let's get inside," she said.

They ran up to the barn, and Ethan grabbed the handle to one of the two big doors. He had to put his back into it before it budged.

Stella squeezed through the gap, then helped push the other door open from the other side.

With the doors now open and even more sunlight shining through a small square window on the opposite wall, there was enough light to see that the barn was mostly empty, save for the stack of hay in the corner, a broken plow, and the carpet of dry straw that littered the floor. A thick cloud of dust permeated the air.

Stella leaned against one of the rough-hewn support posts and caught her breath.

Ethan had just set the copper pot in the middle of the floor when a witch's muffled scream sliced through the trees.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Ethan and Stella whirled toward the barn doors, and Stella clutched the leather pouch around her neck. “Who screamed?”

“I don’t know,” Ethan said. “But it doesn’t have to mean the worst.”

Stella hurriedly grabbed the grimoire out of the copper pot and set the book on the dusty floor.

“That demon is very slippery,” she said as she took the leather pouch from around her neck and tossed it to Ethan. “I wouldn’t put it past it to attack every witch in sight, then somehow squirrel its way out of the portal.”

“It won’t,” Ethan said, his words still brimming with confidence. “It’ll come to the barn.”

“How can you know for sure?”

“I know because Maddy said so.” Ethan shook the feathers and the snakeskin out of the pouch and into the pot.

“She did?” Stella took “When?”

“She said she saw it in the country with ‘hay lying everywhere.’” Ethan gestured around the barn to prove his point. “I don’t think she was seeing where the demon *was*. I think she saw where it was *going*. It’ll come to the barn. I’m sure of it.”

“Then we better hurry,” Stella said. “Do you want to draw the circle or should I?”

“I can do it,” Ethan said.

“I wonder if your mom is somewhere, pissed at us for opening the grimoire. Especially after she worked so hard to keep that from happening.”

“She might be.” Ethan dragged his heel through the layer of dust and

straw on the barn floor, drawing a perfect circle near the spot where they'd set the copper pot.

"On the other hand, she was a prophetic witch. It's just as likely that she saw this day coming. Spellbinding my magic, hiding the athame with me... She might have been setting up a chain reaction that would put us in a position to banish this demon."

"Nice theory, except for one thing," Stella said. "The demon has nothing to do with your parents binding your magic."

"You don't know that." Ethan completed his ten-foot circle, then examined its precision.

Stella braided some straw together to make kindling. "We know why your mother locked your magic. She was hiding you from the Boston coven."

"My mother locked my magic to hide me from *whoever* was hunting my family."

"The Boston coven," she reminded him, then moved to the barn doors to keep watch on the sky.

"I don't think so," Ethan said. "If they wanted me dead, they've had plenty of opportunity to do it. I think you've misjudged them."

Stella glanced over her shoulder at him. He could be concerningly optimistic.

Ethan reached into his pocket and pulled out five capsules of regular coffee creamer. He quickly peeled back each of the plastic covers and dumped the cream over the feathers and snakeskin.

Stella snapped her fingers and shot a flame under the pot to begin the stewing process.

"Don't forget..." she said, because apparently arguing was the only thing that could help her nerves right now. "Goody Joan told us your mom didn't want Lovey to open the book."

"No," Ethan said. "That's not what Goody Joan said. She just said my mother hid it. She never told us her motivation. You came up with that all on your own."

Stella's back straightened with surprise. Was he right? Had Goody Joan left blanks that she'd filled in on her own? Was she just concerningly cynical?

Another shout followed by a scream pierced the air. The other witches were doing battle, and Stella prayed the seven-against-one odds were making a difference.

She abandoned the barn doors and peered down inside the pot where Alice's red feathers and Darren's blue skin were nestled in the pool of cream, stewing away. They look kinda pretty, in a disgusting sort of way.

"That asshole could be here any second," Ethan said. "I'll get the book."

Ethan flicked his hand toward the grimoire, which lay on the barn floor. With a gust of air, he lifted it off the ground and settled it in Stella's hand.

Stella opened the grimoire to the page that bore the alchemical symbol for sulfur—a triangle atop a plus sign—and recited the English translation of the first part of the spell—the part that activated the circle: "Evil spirit, demon, fiend...this fence may enter but not break free... 'til fire and rain diminish thee."

Now, the circle was penetrable from only one direction. The demon could pass across its border to the center of the circle, but once it was inside, it wouldn't be able to get out.

The second part of the spell—the *banishing* part—would have to wait until the demon was actually trapped inside the circle.

Stella squinted at the page, then blinked a few times.

"What's wrong?" Ethan asked.

She wasn't sure. Maybe it was the dusty air affecting her vision, but the writing seemed to be fading quickly.

"Stella?"

"I can't read the rest of the words." Stella looked up at Ethan with terror in her heart.

"What do you mean you can't read it?" He grabbed the book out of her hands and narrowed his eyes on the page.

"The ink is fading!" Stella cried, and the panic that sliced through her felt like a blade. "I can't read the second part of the spell anymore."

"It's fading already?" Ethan's fingers tightened around the edges of the book. "Shit. They're all gone now. We'll have to use the athame to reveal them again."

Stella's voice trembled when she said, "We can't."

"What do you mean, we can't?" Ethan's forehead furrowed into deep lines.

"Because Antoinette still has the athame."

"*Antoi*—" Ethan's head jerked toward the open doorway, and he cursed low under his breath.

Stella followed his gaze, then swallowed a scream.

Hovering inside the doorway, two vacant eyes stared out of a smoky, and somehow *dented* head. It looked like the other witches had got in some good shots. But Stella and Ethan had run out of time.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

“Ho...ly...fuck,” Ethan whispered as the demon floated in through the open barn doors. “Without that spell, how are we supposed to catch smoke?”

“It’ll change again,” Stella assured him, even as her own heart raced. “It does whatever suits its needs—smoke one second, solid enough to swipe the legs out from under you the next.”

“We’re not ending up like Jean-Paul.”

“Of course not,” Stella said, though she only half-believed it.

“We need to split up,” Ethan whispered. “Attack it from both sides.”

It wasn’t ideal; they were stronger together. But Ethan was right. So long as the banishment spell remained unreadable, they needed another Plan B. (It seemed their Plan As were never going to work.) Hitting the demon from both sides could double their chances of getting out of there alive.

Slowly, they eased away from each other, both of them walking backward.

The demon first focused its eye holes on Stella, then swung its head in Ethan’s direction before doing a doubletake on the circle drawn on the center of the floor.

Stella couldn’t be sure, but she thought she saw its mouth pull up into a smirk. *Bastard.*

Stella bumped into one of the barn’s vertical support posts, and the demon fell into a crouch before stalking toward her.

That was when Ethan blasted it with a gale-force wind that he was able to direct *around* the circle he’d drawn on the center of the floor. So long as the

circle remained intact, they could still trap the demon until they got their hands on the athame and read the rest of the banishment spell.

The gust of air reached the demon and blasted it up toward the barn's rafters.

Stella looked up to see a black, shapeless cloud hovering fifty feet above her. Her stomach pitched, while the rest of her felt impossibly numb. "Uh... Ethan?"

She wished she knew what he was planning.

"Don't move," he said, and he cut off the wind.

The black cloud swirled and twisted, stretched and writhed in the air. It didn't take long for it to regain its original shape with a head, long arms, and a body that tapered into a snail-like tail. This time, the demon turned toward Ethan and growled.

"Watch out!" someone cried.

Stella risked taking her eyes off the demon and found Marietta in the doorway.

"Marietta!" Oh, thank god.

"Why haven't you done the banishing spell?" she shouted.

"We didn't get a chance. The writing faded on the page." Stella swung her gaze back toward the demon just as it swooped down on Ethan.

Stella screamed and ran forward, but stopped herself when Ethan dropped to all fours and rolled out of the demon's path.

The demon left a smoky smear through the spot where Ethan had been standing, then it blasted through a crack in the barn wall, escaping to the outside.

"Where's everyone else?" Stella yelled at Marietta while keeping her eyes locked on Ethan.

"We've had some trouble," Marietta said, and her expression was grim.

"I'm here!" Izzy called from behind Marietta's shoulder.

"Me too!" Jade repeated from the opposite side of the barn.

Stella turned toward the sound of her sister's voice just in time to see Jade hoist herself onto the edge of the small, open window and hop through.

"*La! Danje!*" Lovey cried out, having appeared in the window herself. Her eyes were wide with horror, and she pointed toward the corner of the barn directly behind Stella.

Stella whirled. Why had she taken her eyes off of it? Now, that foul thing had snuck up behind her.

The demon lurched forward, dragging its tail through the dust in a serpentine path.

“Stella!” Ethan yelled.

“Ethan!”

She ran toward him with so much speed, they collided.

Stella turned in his arms expecting to see the demon right on her heels, but it had disappeared again.

“It’s up there!” Izzy yelled.

Stella and Ethan tipped their heads back.

The demon was eyeing the circle Ethan had drawn on the floor.

“Where’s Antoinette?” Ethan yelled. “We need the athame again if we’re going to read the banishment spell.”

There was no point in being subtle. Now that the demon had seen the circle, it knew what they’d come there to do.

“She’s not here,” Izzy said. “Neither is Maddy. And neither is Judith.”

Oh god. What happened? Stella’s eyes flashed to Lovey, hoping to find some answers, but the deep wrinkles on the elderly witch’s face appeared to be carved into granite.

The demon let out a ghoulish howl and plummeted from the ceiling, landing in a crouch beside the circle that Ethan had so perfectly drawn. It swiped its tail through the dust and straw, erasing one side of it.

“Damn it,” Ethan said. “Hold my hand.”

Stella laced her fingers with his, and the strength of Ethan’s magic flowed out of him, tingling through the spaces between her fingers, then up her arm.

“Now what?” Stella asked. They hadn’t discussed a particular spell. “Are you going to flood it?”

“Back me up,” he said without taking his eyes off the smoky form stalking toward them.

“Always.”

Before Ethan could call up another tsunami, a lightning bolt struck down from the ceiling. It pierced straight through the demon, but its semi-solid form wasn’t substantial enough to be affected by the impact. All the electricity did was dispel the demon like the sun burning off the morning’s fog.

But Izzy’s magic did manage to ignite the mound of hay, which went up like a torch.

“Shit, Iz!” Jade cried. “Be more careful!”

The fire roared like a dragon as the hay became fully engulfed, and a gray smoke filled the barn. It would soon be impossible to see the demon. Even now, it could be lurking anywhere.

Stella coughed and squinted at the ceiling, then at the exit where she found Marietta clinging to the edge of the doorway.

Ethan shoved his hands forward and extinguished the fire just as Antoinette limped up to the doorway, stopping beside Marietta.

“Sorry I’m late! That fucker—” Her forehead furrowed. “Why isn’t it trapped in the circle?”

“Wouldn’t matter!” Stella yelled. “The grimoire’s gone blank. We can’t read the banishing spell.”

“There it is!” Jade said, pointing toward the corner of the barn.

The demon had regrouped and was aimed toward the doorway.

Stella watched in horror as it coiled like a spring, gathering energy, before releasing itself on Antoinette and Marietta.

“Shit!” Antoinette cried.

She pushed Marietta out of the way, then reached into the back of her waistband. She pulled out the athame and held it in front of her with both hands.

The demon shot forward.

Antoinette stepped backward on one foot, then bent her knees, closed her eyes, and aimed the blade.

“No!” Lovey cried, and she ran across the barn as fast as her legs could carry her, following the demon on its path toward Antoinette.

What happened next happened in slow motion.

The demon reached Antoinette a second before Lovey did, and it immediately turned into a cloud of black smoke, so thick it choked out all of the light in the barn.

A flash of silver stabbed through the darkness.

Someone screamed.

Stella sucked in a breath, not knowing what happened.

Ethan’s arms tightened around her.

When the smoke finally cleared, Antoinette was bent forward, clutching at her hair.

“Jesus,” Ethan muttered.

“No,” Stella whispered. This couldn’t be real.

Lovey was on her knees, facing Antoinette with a shocked expression on

her face. The athame was buried in her bony chest. The front of her shirt was already soaked in blood.

Antoinette fell to her knees in front of Lovey and wept uncontrollably. “No! No! No!”

Ethan dropped his arms from around Stella and raced toward the doorway, dropping down beside the two Boston witches. He eased Lovey onto her back, and she stared up at the rafters.

“Marietta!” Stella cried out. “Can you help her?”

Marietta reappeared in the doorway. Her face was pale. She had a bag full of medicinal herbs, but Lovey’s wound must have been too grave for sage and dill weed.

Antoinette reached for the athame that was stuck in Lovey’s chest, but Ethan batted her hand away.

“Don’t,” he said. “You’ll cause more damage if you pull it out.”

“You can’t banish that thing without the blade,” Antoinette countered, her face streaked with tears.

“I don’t know where the demon went,” Jade said as she scanned the barn’s rafters. “Does anyone else see it?”

Lovey reached out and grabbed onto Ethan’s wrist.

From where Stella stood, she could see the old witch’s lips moving, but she couldn’t hear what she said.

Apparently, neither could Ethan. He leaned his ear closer to her mouth.

“Hang on, Gran,” Antoinette pleaded, then to Ethan, she ordered, “Get back to Stella. If you haven’t used your paired magic yet, the demon will be intrigued by the scent of aether. There’s still a chance to at least lure it back to the barn and trap it inside the circle.”

Ethan glanced up at Antoinette, then over his shoulder at Stella.

Stella nodded. Antoinette was right. As long they could trap it, they would have time to figure out what to do next.

Izzy dragged her heel through the dust and straw, retracing that part of the circle the demon had destroyed.

Ethan reluctantly left Lovey’s side and took Stella’s hands in his.

“It’s bad,” he whispered. “Lovey’s really hurt.”

“Then we better hurry so we can get her the help she needs.” Stella rested her forehead against Ethan’s chest unable to bear the pain on his face. “We just need to concentrate.”

Ethan drew in a long shaky breath. “What spell?”

“No spell. Focus on me. I’ll focus on you. It’ll create enough aether to make that fucker salivate.”

Ethan blew out a long, slow breath.

Immediately, red and blue ribbons of magic unfurled from their hearts, waving and undulating in the dusty air, before braiding themselves together. The ribbons lengthened and slid around them, binding them together—not as restraints, but rather as a thick, unbreakable covenant.

Their paired magic bubbled inside Stella’s chest like a natural spring. At first, she was scared. Not of the demon, but of all it meant for the two of them.

If one of them should die, the other would follow.

But that no longer felt like such a terrible thing. She couldn’t imagine going on without Ethan, either in this life or the next.

The ribbons tightened snugly, and a shimmering layer of aether engulfed them.

“And there it is,” Jade murmured, her voice filled with awe.

Stella barely heard her sister over the rushing sound of magic in her ears, but she hazarded a glance toward the window on the other side of the barn.

The demon was lurking there, its head tipped to the side in hungry curiosity.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

“Hurry!” Izzy yelled.

Stella couldn’t have agreed more. Embers were still glowing under the copper pot, which meant the feathers and snakeskin hadn’t cooled. They were still brewing. She and Ethan still had a chance.

“Let’s go, Red,” Ethan said. “We need to get it into the circle.”

Together, they took a step backward, then another, and another. They kept their eyes glued to the demon as it re-entered the barn through the window.

Now inside, it hovered several inches above the ground, seemingly oblivious to any of the other witches in the barn. Its ghoulish focus remained riveted on Stella and Ethan’s paired magic and the delectable scent of aether.

“A little bit farther,” Ethan said, taking another step backward and pulling Stella with him.

The demon followed their scent deeper into the barn. It didn’t seem to notice that Ethan had redrawn the desecrated circle.

“It’s working,” Stella whispered. She squeezed his hand tight, sending another burst of aether into the air.

“Of course it is,” Ethan whispered back. “Now, come to Mama and Papa, you nasty little bugger.”

Stella and Ethan took another step backward, luring the demon even closer. It was now only six inches from the border of the circle.

Ethan pressed his lips to Stella’s in a hard, desperate kiss—a bold move under the circumstances, because it required him to take his eyes off the demon.

But it was also genius, because the reminder of his love caused Stella's magic to surge and bloom in a cobalt bouquet of power.

Everyone could see it. Their mouths opened in amazement, and Marietta whispered an awestruck, "Ooooo."

Stella not only saw it, she felt it. The overflow of emotion brought tears to her eyes, and she pressed her hand to her heart lest it should grow too big for her chest.

Most importantly, the demon was equally affected. It lunged hungrily forward, widening its arms, then swiping them closed as if to capture them.

But Stella and Ethan jumped back just in time, and the demon found itself inside the circle and neatly trapped.

"Gotcha!" Izzy called.

"There's one way in!" Jade exclaimed. "But no way out!"

The demon jolted, then looked down at the floor. It thrashed this way and that, looking for a breach in the circle, but Jade was right. It couldn't escape.

"You've still got to banish it," Marietta said.

"The book," Lovey said in a weak voice from where she lay on the floor. "Hand me the book."

"Here!" Jade flourished her arm, and the grimoire lifted off the barn floor and sailed through the air.

Antoinette straightened from her bowed position over her grandmother's body and, with long nimble fingers, snagged the book out of the air.

She opened it and pressed the edge of the blank page to Lovey's chest, where the massive amounts of blood drawn by the athame had seeped through her shirt.

Stella shuddered and clung to Ethan's arm. It was all too horrible.

"Here!" Antoinette said. "Take it."

Izzy took the book from Antoinette and shoved it into Stella's hands.

"Ready?" Stella asked Ethan.

"Wouldn't matter if I wasn't." He held onto her hand and pumped his contribution of power into her. "Let's go, Red."

Stella wiped at her eyes, then read the spell aloud—slowly though, because even though someone had written out the English translation, the words were still reawakening on the page.

"No harm, no malice shall remain; In light's embrace, you waste and wane."

The gentle trail of steam rising from the copper pot began to settle all

over the demon's shape, coating it with a thin film of magic.

Stella continued the banishing spell, her voice rising above the demon's angry growl.

"By earth, air, fire, and water's glow..."

The demon wailed and grimaced.

"...your bowels be plucked by eager crows. Thus, hasten you from our sacred space, a demon banished from this place."

The demon's writhing suddenly stilled, and its entire form went rigid.

"Is it working?" Izzy asked.

"Maybe say the words again," Ethan said. "Maybe we aren't using our paired magic right."

Stella glanced down at the grimoire and bile rose in her throat as panic tore through her. Had she missed something? Did she say something wrong? Had she screwed this up again?

A slight tremor ran across the barn floor, and everyone looked down at their feet.

The vibrations intensified, making bits of straw and dust jump and dance across the floor.

Jade glanced at Stella. "What's going—?"

CRACK!

Stella's gaze whipped to the demon, thinking she'd just heard the sound of it being sucked into the depths of whatever hell it had crawled out of.

But it still stood inside the circle, though this time it was crouched forward, its smoky expression filled with rage.

The vibrations intensified, and Stella had to grab onto Ethan's arm to keep her balance.

"Is it working?" she asked.

"It's working," Marietta said.

"Hold on!" Izzy cried, and she wrapped her arms around one of the barn's support beams.

Whatever was happening, it was powerful. So powerful it would register on the Richter scale.

"We gotta get out of here," Ethan said, looking up at the ceiling. "This whole thing could come down."

"Not yet," Stella said.

She needed to see the final result. She needed to see the demon banished and know for certain that she wouldn't be responsible for any more deaths.

A loud groaning noise filled the air as the whole barn leaned an inch to the left.

“Gran!” Antoinette cried. “Someone help me get my grandmother out of here.”

Izzy, Jade, and Marietta picked Lovey up off the floor and, with Antoinette, they ran out of the barn.

The demon trembled, and its mouth opened wide. It tipped its head back and raised its arms toward the ceiling, clawing at the air.

“Is it really working?” Ethan asked, his gaze still cast toward the rafters. “Is the spell working?”

Stella still didn’t know, but something was definitely happening.

The demon expanded in size until it was a large, smoky blob, entirely filling the circle. It let out a wail of anger and frustration, then hissed like a snake.

Stella and Ethan both jumped back.

“It’s struggling,” he said, and he was right.

The demon drew in on itself, growing smaller, smaller, smaller, until it was nothing but a pinpoint of darkness.

Stella leaned forward, needing to see the moment it disappeared forever. She inched closer, stopping just shy of the circle.

That’s when the demon exploded outward, shattering into a constellation of a million points of blackness.

The concussive vibration sent Stella and Ethan flying backward. They landed on their asses and fell back onto their elbows, their gazes pointed upward. The flurry of black specks had consolidated into a tornado of debris.

A hole opened in the floor, right at the center of the circle. There was a loud sucking sound as the tornado was siphoned down through the hole.

An agonized howl of defeat rose out of the demon as the last of it disappeared into the abyss, and the floor magically sealed itself shut.

Nothing was left of the demon. It was gone. Stella might have been able to fool herself into thinking it had never been there at all, except for the bloody evidence it had left behind.

Stella looked over at Ethan with astonished relief.

His expression said he was feeling the same.

They’d done it.

They’d banished a demon.

A loud CRACK sounded above them, and their gazes shot to the ceiling.

A beam had splintered, and a large section of the roof had fallen in.

“Right,” Ethan said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Stella grabbed the grimoire off the ground, and they rushed out of the barn.

“Hurry!” Marietta called. “Over here!”

Stella had never felt such relief. She ran straight into Marietta’s arms.

“Sweetheart,” Marietta said. “I’m so proud.”

“Wh- what happened?” Izzy asked. “Is it gone?”

“It’s gone,” Ethan said.

“Where’s Judith?” Stella asked, even though, in her heart, she already knew the answer.

If Judith had survived the demon, she would have been at the barn.

“And Maddy?” she asked, her voice quaking.

“They’re gone,” Marietta said. “They put up a good fight, but they’re both gone. And now, it’s over.”

But Marietta was only partially right.

Antoinette cried, “No! Don’t!”

Ethan murmured a horrified, “Oh my god.”

When Stella stepped out of Marietta’s arms and followed the trajectory of Ethan’s gaze, she saw that Lovey had pulled the athame out of her chest.

With what energy she had left, she pushed the handle into Antoinette’s hands.

“Gran, no,” Antoinette cried.

Blood flowed from Lovey’s chest, and with a final sigh, her face relaxed, all the wrinkles softening as her magic faded away.

And now, it was really over.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

Moments later, Ethan found Maddy's ravaged body in a tree. Izzy found Judith near the road, halfway between the portal and the barn. Now, they all regrouped, holding their dead.

Ethan looked down at Lovey, still cradled in a weeping Antoinette's arms. The old woman looked as light as a feather, as if she'd shrunk in on herself.

It was then that he realized his whole family had been shrinking since he was a toddler. First his father, then his connection to his coven, then his mother. He'd only just found a family again, and in the last several days, five of the six members had perished. First two young men outside the Moseby cabin. Then Jean-Paul, Maddy, and now Lovey.

It left him feeling empty. He thought he would've had more time to strengthen the familial bonds—or *coven* bonds? Is that what they were properly called?

Ethan took one look at Stella and could so easily read her thoughts—maybe that was their newly paired magic, or maybe he'd simply come to know her so well, but she was sympathizing with his pain, even in the midst of her own loss.

She gave him a soft smile, then walked over to Antoinette and offered her the grimoire.

Ethan hadn't even noticed Stella grab the book in their mad dash from the barn. Thank God she had. He had no interest in going back inside.

"Are you sure you want to give that to me?" Antoinette didn't take the book, but only because her arms were occupied with Lovey. "You've worked really hard to keep it from us."

“If there was a resurrectionist spell in there...” Stella’s gaze slid to Maddy’s lifeless body on the ground, then back to Antoinette and Lovey. “You would’ve already used it. There’s never been a more perfect time.”

“Are you saying you’d want me to use it?”

“I don’t know,” Stella admitted. “I’m not sure of anything anymore.”

“Well, I can’t raise the dead,” Antoinette said bitterly. “We never could.”

“I’m sorry,” Stella said. “Ethan said I’d misjudged you, and he was right.”

“We always assume the worst of those we know the least.”

Before Stella could feel the sting of that truth, Ethan stepped forward with the question that had been weighing on his mind. “What do we do with the bodies? We can’t exactly call the authorities.”

“We’ll bury them here,” Izzy said. “By my ancestor’s barn. I’m sure my family would be honored to have this land be their final resting place.”

And so it was agreed.



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, when they finally exited the portal, it was the dead of night.

“Ethan,” Stella said, glancing over at Antoinette. Now that the burial was over, the statuesque young witch stood apart from everyone else with her arms wrapped around her body.

Stella squeezed his arm. “You should go talk to her.”

Ethan knew Stella was right. He’d been feeling the pull of his family ties for a while, ever since Lovey opened her photo album. Antoinette was like a sister. She shouldn’t be alone in this moment.

“I know,” he said, “but I can’t think of anything to say. Nothing that would help anyway.”

“She needs you.”

“How do you know that?” he asked.

“I’ve been wrong about a lot,” Stella admitted, sounding chagrined. “But not about this.”

“She’s lost nearly all of her family tonight,” Ethan said. He knew how that felt, and his chest ached to see that kind of loss etched into someone

else's face. "What could I possibly say?"

"You're her family too," Stella reminded him.

Ethan slid his eyes to Stella. His pair. The most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Even now, in this midst of all this crippling loss, he wanted to touch her. Or perhaps that was the pull of their magical bond.

"It's your coven," Stella said. "She's your coven."

"But you're my pair," he reminded her. "So, which way do I go?"

"Family is important," she said. "You should spend some time with her. My coven has its own healing to do."

"Judith," he said. "Who will take her place as high priestess?"

"Probably Marietta." Then Stella closed her eyes and shook her head. "I don't know. I can't even think about it. Just...don't worry about me."

Antoinette leaned back against a tree as if she didn't have the strength to stand on her own anymore.

"I need to take her home," he said, his heart feeling like it was being cleaved in two.

"That's a good idea," Stella said softly.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," Ethan said. "I promise."

Stella blinked as if hearing something unintended in his words. She smiled, but something about it looked forced. "Of course you will. And I'll be waiting."

Ethan bent down, cupped Stella's cheek, and kissed the top of her head. Then he walked to Antoinette and asked, "May I take you home?"

She was so tall that she was nearly on eye-level with him, and she stared at him for a few seconds with a vacant look in her eyes. Eventually, she nodded.

Ethan drew her arm through his, and they walked away. He didn't dare look back. The weight of Stella's worry pressed heavily between his shoulder blades.



ETHAN CALLED A CAR, and the driver took Route 107 back to Boston, hugging the coastline. Antoinette asked that he drop her off at Lovey's Charlestown apartment.

“I just want to see it,” she whispered to Ethan. “Everything that happened feels like a dream.”

Or a nightmare, Ethan thought, but instead he asked, “Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

He didn’t remember exactly how they’d left Lovey’s apartment, but after the demon tore through it, he knew it wasn’t in great shape.

“I have to see it,” Antoinette said.

“Then I’ll go up with you.”

When the driver dropped them off, Antoinette didn’t immediately enter the building. She just stood on the sidewalk, staring up at the fourth-floor window.

“They’re all gone, aren’t they?” she said. “Gran. Maddy. JP. Simon and Jeffrey.”

“Simon and Jeffrey,” Ethan murmured, knowing exactly who she meant, but never having heard the names of the two young men Dylan had destroyed outside the Mosebys’ cabin.

“They were only nineteen,” Antoinette said, though she didn’t seem to be blaming anyone for their deaths, only stating a fact.

“I thought you mentioned a cousin before?” Ethan suggested. He knew what it felt like to be alone in this world, and he didn’t wish that on anyone.

“Yeah,” Antoinette said, “but she just had a baby. She’s got her own life. She doesn’t come to circles that often anymore.”

“You’re not a coven of one, Antoinette.”

“Of course not,” she said, shooting him a brief but irritated look. “A coven requires two or more. I’m flying solo now.”

“I mean... You’ve got me,” Ethan said, though he felt odd saying it.

He barely knew this woman. He didn’t even know if she wanted his company long-term. Up until that point, she’d struck him as highly independent and able to handle most things on her own.

“You got your girl in Salem,” Antoinette said on a sigh. “You’ll be joining her coven soon, if you haven’t already. Though...” she glanced at him briefly, then back up at Lovey’s window. “If you ask me, that’s some sketchy history you’re going to have to work through with them.”

“Stella’s my pair,” Ethan said. “But you’re my coven. Ancestrally speaking. And we’ve got our *own* sketchy history to deal with.”

“I guess that’s right,” she said, and though her head was tipped up toward Lovey’s window, Ethan was pretty sure she smiled.

“Do you really want to go up to the apartment?” Ethan asked. He didn’t want the scene to cause Antoinette any more pain.

“I feel like I’m sleepwalking,” she said. “I need to know that it was real. Every part of it.”

She looked down at her hands and let out a heavy sigh. Dirt from the graves was imbedded under her fingernails.

Together, Ethan and Antoinette climbed the stairs to the fourth floor. The door to apartment 4B was cracked open. They hadn’t bothered to secure it when they left. Anything of any monetary value had already been destroyed.

“The light’s on,” Antoinette said. “We didn’t have any lights on, did we? It was still daylight when we left.”

“I don’t remember,” Ethan said.

Antoinette entered the apartment first. Her footsteps crunched over broken bits of furniture, then ceased. She rocked to a stop.

Ethan’s body jerked in response. “What is it?”

His gaze lifted to what had surprised her: a strange woman stood in the darkened hallway. She wore an olive colored, knee-length dress, a short, dark blue jean jacket, red sandals, and sunglasses that were pushed up to hold back her gray-blond hair.

She also cradled a broken coffee pot against her chest, and her eyes widened with surprise at the sight of them.

“Holy shit,” Ethan murmured.

“What the hell?” Antoinette took two steps toward the intruder, but her approach was impeded by the debris field. “How is it possible you’re standing in my grandmother’s apartment?”

The woman’s gaze slid from Ethan, to Antoinette, then back to Ethan. A soft smile spread across her face as she said, “Hello, Ethan. I’m relieved to see you’re still alive.”

“Miss Reed?” he asked, wondering if his eyes were playing tricks on him. It had been *years* since he’d seen this woman, and yet, it felt like he’d seen her face far more recently.

“Reed?” Antoinette asked, sounding confused.

“This is Crystal Reed,” Ethan said. “I hired her years ago to tell fortunes at one of my corporate retreats. She’s a prophetic witch. She’s also the one who put the ward on my front door.”

Ethan gave the woman a tentative smile. She was probably surprised he’d figured out so much about her since the last time they met.

“Well, you got the initials right,” Antoinette said. “*C. R.* But that’s not Crystal Reed.”

“Yes, it is,” Ethan said. This was definitely the woman he’d hired, and she hadn’t corrected him when he made the introduction.

The woman stepped out of the dark hallway and into the light, closing the gap between them.

Her dark blue eyes sparked with anticipation, and something in Ethan’s chest squeezed so tightly, he wondered if he was on the verge of a heart attack.

Antoinette squatted to retrieve Lovey’s photo album, which was half-buried under a broken chair. She flipped it open and shoved a photograph of a blond, laughing woman in his face.

“*C. R.* is Catherine Renaudin, Ethan. This woman is your mother.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

Ethan stepped backward as if he'd been slapped, nearly tripped over a pile of books, and fell against the wall. His collision caused the only family portrait still hanging to slip off its nail and crash to the floor beside him.

He flinched at the sound.

"Yes. Well... I'm sorry," said Crystal—no, not Crystal, *Catherine*. His freakin' *mother*. "I suppose this is quite a shock."

Ethan opened his mouth to say, "Y'think?" But no sound came out. This was probably a good thing. He couldn't get a handle on his emotions. Was he angry? Happy? Relieved? *Confused?*

Yes, to all of that.

"We thought you were dead," Antoinette said, and though she registered surprise, she didn't sound nearly as accusatory as Ethan thought she should.

This woman—his own mother—had stolen an athame, faked her own death, and abandoned them all.

But perhaps his mother's miraculous resurrection paled in comparison to the losses Antoinette had suffered. Maybe that's why Antoinette sounded so calm.

Catherine ducked her head and took another step into the living room, being careful not to step on anything or cause any more destruction.

"Are you for real?" Ethan whispered as he took in her faded blond hair and the full lips that were so much like his own. A part of him wondered if he was talking to a ghost.

Catherine's head jerked up, and her large, navy-blue eyes met his. "Of course, darling."

He put his hands up, not inviting her to come any closer. “You’re supposed to be dead.”

“I suppose I *was* dead. In a way.” She set the broken coffee pot she’d been holding on the floor.

“Uh-uh.” Ethan deserved an explanation, not some coy innuendos or stupid riddles, or whatever the hell that response was supposed to be.

“Tell me what’s going on,” he demanded. “Why are you here? How are you even alive? Where have you been for the last thirty years?”

Catherine rolled her lips inward and bit down.

“You left me all alone,” he said, sadness and fury mixing in his voice. He took a step away from the wall and something crunched under his foot.

Catherine’s expression softened. “I never left you.”

Ethan shook his head, the pressure was building. He wondered if his head could possibly explode.

“Don’t sugarcoat what you did to me. You abandoned me with strangers and put a target on my back.”

“A target?” Catherine asked, looking confused.

“You stole *their* athame.” He pointed at Antoinette. “Which somehow ended up in *my* desk. On top of that, you locked my magic and left me vulnerable to attack.”

“Ah,” Catherine said sheepishly. She adjusted the sunglasses on top of her head.

“Ah?!” Ethan repeated, his tone sarcastic. Where did she get off, waltzing in here as if she hadn’t ruined his childhood? “You—”

“It’s hard knowing your child’s future, Ethan.”

“It’s hard not knowing your own past, *Catherine*.”

She flinched, but quickly recovered and tugged at the bottom of her jean jacket. “I had my reasons. They were good reasons. And by the looks of you, they panned out. Believe me when I say I had your best interests at heart.”

This was fucking unbelievable. Ethan wanted to simultaneously hug this woman and shake her until her teeth clacked.

Ethan glanced over at Antoinette. She didn’t appear to be listening. She was staring down at the rubble of her grandmother’s life. There was so much pain in her eyes, that Ethan was embarrassed about the scene he was making.

He was torn between helping Antoinette process her losses and selfishly getting the hell out of there so he could process his own mess.

“Do you need a ride out of here?” he asked Antoinette. “I can get another

car and take you back to your own apartment.”

“No,” she said, still not looking at him. “I’m gonna stay here for a while. See what can be salvaged. If you need to go...”

Ethan looked at his mother. Surely if anyone should be leaving it was her.

“I can help Antoinette clean up,” Catherine said. “I can see you need some time to think.”

Ethan stared at her, both calmed and confused by how she could still claim to understand him that well.

“It’s fine,” Catherine said, and her expression warmed into one of consolation. “You can go, sweetheart.”

Ethan blinked at the endearment. He didn’t know what he planned to do with the time and the space she was offering him. All he knew was that he couldn’t deal with any of this while standing in the middle of so much chaos.

“Call me if you need anything,” he said to Antoinette, “or whenever you need to talk.”

Antoinette nodded.

To his mother, Ethan said nothing. Not even goodbye



ETHAN STORMED into his luxury Boston apartment for the first time since he’d been drugged and dragged out of there unconscious two weeks earlier. He flipped on the lights.

As he walked through the living room, he pulled off his T-shirt and tossed it onto the floor. *Why not?* The place was already trashed; there was even a big pile of black dirt on his dove gray rug, a contribution from an overturned plant, which now lay dead.

He had barely any memory of the day Stella’s coven kidnapped him, but he hoped that, even in his drugged state, he’d put up at least some kind of fight.

For now, all he wanted to do was get out of his clothes and wash the last forty-eight hours down the drain.

He stepped into the shower and let the hot water wash over his body. For a moment, the purging sensation allowed him to push all thoughts of his mother out of his head.

He searched for somewhere else for his thoughts to land, but not on the bodies he'd buried, or on his recent pairing with Stella and the demon they'd banished.

The only safe place, the only *normal* mundane thing he could think about without losing his mind, was his abandoned campaign. He'd only been out of the game for a week. Not even that. *Six days*.

No one was trying to kill him anymore. He had decent control of his magic, so it was unlikely he'd do something stupid in public and blow his cover.

One call to Doherty, his friend and campaign manager, and he could put the train back on the tracks.

But the fantasy didn't last long. Reality always had a way of creeping back in. His life would never be normal or mundane, and he needed to face it.

Ethan turned off the taps and dripped dry for a few seconds, breathing in the humidity before taking a deep breath and stepping out of the shower. He prepared to clear the steam off the mirror, but he hesitated, stopping with his hand raised in the air.

Maybe it was because he'd been constantly looking over his shoulder the last few weeks, but he had the eeriest sensation that if he wiped the mirror, he'd see someone's reflection standing behind him.

Slowly, he turned. But there was no one there.

And yet...he still felt a presence.

Ethan put his hand over his heart and realized the sensation was the pulse of paired magic. Stella was here with him, even when she wasn't.

Ethan had never been weak, but this was a new kind of strength. Maybe, if he'd been more conscious of it before, he could have tapped into it when he'd faced off with his mother. Maybe he wouldn't have stormed out of Lovey's apartment like a petulant child.

But seriously. What had that woman expected?

She'd shown up out of nowhere with a simple "Hello," and a casual, "I never left you."

What kind of bullshit was that? What could she possibly have meant by it?

Because she'd left him all right. Even surrounded by friends, he'd grown up alone.

Ethan toweled off, then wandered into his bedroom. He found a pair of loose basketball shorts and a T-shirt he bought at the Castle Island

microbrewery. He dressed and headed back to the living room. Perhaps cleaning up the mess would simultaneously clear his head.

There was a soft knock at the door, and he immediately thought of Stella. Of course, she'd feel the same odd pressure in her chest as he felt in his. She'd want to be near him, and thank God for that.

He checked the peephole, let out a defeated breath, then pulled the door open. "How did you know where to find me?"

"I know where you live," Catherine said. She took her sunglasses off her head and hung them from the neckline of her dress.

"That's right. You've been here before. What a perfect opportunity that would've been to tell me who you really were."

Annoyance mixed with pain flashed across her face. "I didn't raise you to be rude."

"You didn't raise me at all."

"I did for seven years."

"Yeah, I don't remember much about that."

A layer of tears washed across her eyes, and her mouth tightened. "I understand."

Her concession allowed some of the tension to ease out Ethan's shoulders. "Why didn't you tell me who you were the first time you were here?"

"The time wasn't right."

"Sure," he scoffed. "Witches and their need for perfect timing."

He remembered how Goody Joan had also insisted on making sure the time was right. She'd been willing to withhold information if the tarot cards hadn't fallen a certain way.

"When I saw your ad for a psychic medium, I couldn't resist the opportunity to see my son up close and personal. But I couldn't reveal who I was. Or who *you* were, for that matter."

Ethan gritted his teeth, his body still blocking the doorway.

"So?" She tucked a lock of her gray-blond hair behind her ear. "Are you going to invite me in a second time?"

Ethan thought about that for a moment. Should he let her in? Tell her to make herself at home?

Or would he feel better if he closed the door on her face?

Ethan took one look at her patient expression and knew his answer. He'd never been much of the door-slamming type.

“Sure. I guess.”

“Thank you.” Catherine entered his once immaculate apartment and immediately crossed the room to pick up the toppled floor lamp. “When I came here before, I was so proud to see how well you’d done.”

Ethan didn’t say anything to that.

She turned to face him, her expression deadly serious. “Is there a reason your apartment looks only slightly better than Lovey’s?”

“Unrelated incidents.” He folded his arms, not wanting to explain any further and not knowing what else to do.

It didn’t seem right to ask her to sit down, and it wasn’t like he was about to make coffee. Though...something stronger perhaps?

“Not by that auburn-haired witch I saw in my dreams,” Catherine said, sounding scandalized. “She wouldn’t do this.”

Ethan blinked, and magic surged in his chest. There was only one witch his mother could be referring to. “You... You had a vision of Stella?”

“Ah!” Catherine smiled triumphantly. “So, that’s her name. Makes perfect sense. I always thought of her as my little star.”

Ethan ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “Catherine...”

“*Mom,*” she reminded him.

Ethan shook his head. He wasn’t ready to call her that. He was still too angry to give her that honor. He was having a hard enough time calling her Catherine instead of Crystal.

“Please,” he said. “Just lay all your cards on the table. I need to make sense of the last twenty-five years.” He went to his kitchen and opened the liquor cabinet.

“Do you mean, start at the beginning?” she asked.

“Just start somewhere. What do you drink?”

“I avoid alcohol, actually. It messes with my visions. And I’m not thirsty.”

“Got it.” Thankfully Ethan had no trouble drinking alone.

“I was sick,” she said.

“I remember.” He poured himself a shot of tequila and tossed it back.

“Your father was dead.”

Ethan poured another shot, then downed that one too. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. “Goody Joan Wright told me someone had been hunting him.”

The corners of Catherine’s lips had twitched up with recognition at his

mention of Goody Joan, but by the time he reached the end of his sentence, an old sadness washed over her face.

She sat on the end of his white sectional. It had miraculously stayed clean and in its proper place.

“Your father didn’t grow up in a coven. Without guidance, his magic developed in...let’s just say *unusual* ways. He caught a lot of attention. Some good. Some bad. Mostly bad. And because of that...someone wanted him.”

“Wanted him?” Ethan knitted his brow at her odd phrasing. He left the kitchen and stopped ten feet in front of her. “You mean wanted to kill him.”

“Yes.” Catherine wrung her hands.

“But not our coven, right?”

“No. They didn’t exactly like your father, but they wouldn’t hurt him because they wouldn’t want to hurt me.”

Ethan felt a swell of mollification, knowing that his instincts had been correct. “Then who?”

Catherine clenched her teeth and shook her head. “By then, you were only a toddler, but you were showing signs of being a powerful witch. Your father and I talked about what we’d do if this witch hunter ever came looking for you too. Then, years later, after John died and I was sick... I thought it best to hide you while I still had the chance.”

“Hide me from the same person who killed him?”

“Yes,” she said.

This made sense. It was something he’d considered before, and it would have been forgivable if not for one thing.

“But you *didn’t* die,” Ethan said, his voice rising. “You got better. You could have come back to get me.”

He began to pace.

“I didn’t dare,” she said, still sitting primly on the end of his couch with her hands clasped tight in her lap. “You were safe, but the threat wasn’t gone. I was identifiable. No one in the magical community knew who you were. If I came back to you too soon, I would lead them right to you. I had to wait until the time was right.”

“Did you send my father’s desk to me? John Silence Mather’s desk?”

“That was me,” she said.

Ethan realized he’d known the answer to his question even before he’d asked it.

“And why did you hide your coven’s athame in it? Stella thought it was

because you wanted to keep Lovey from opening her grimoire. But that wasn't it, was it?"

"No," Catherine said. "Like everything else, it was all about timing."

Ethan started pacing again. "So, was the blade supposed to be some kind of defensive weapon for me to use while my magic was locked? Because I can tell you—"

He stopped pacing to point at her. "It didn't work. I didn't even know it was hidden in there. I never even got close to finding it."

"Of course not. I hid the athame in the desk because I knew, at some point, it would draw my little star closer to you."

"You mean Stella?" He laughed sardonically. "You're saying you saw her coming?"

Now, it was Catherine's turn to look at him in confusion. "I thought I said that before."

"Well, *news flash*: the athame didn't draw Stella to me. She came to Boston to *kill* me."

Catherine didn't look surprised or even discomforted by this news, but she did stand up and tug at the bottom of her jean jacket again. "Maybe so, but the athame drew her closer."

Ethan blinked. There was some truth there.

Stella had told him that discovering the athame in his desk had convinced her of his connection to magic. Before that, she'd only had a hunch, and her research hadn't turned up any proof. Maybe that athame really had brought them together.

"And then Stella restored your magic," Catherine said, sounding quite pleased with herself.

"Goody Joan restored my magic," Ethan said, wanting to give credit where credit was due.

"Stella got you to Joan," Catherine countered.

Ethan crossed his arms. "The *wolves* got me to Joan."

"Fine." Catherine crossed her arms too. "But *Stella* got you to the wolves, and now your magic is paired, right? I foresaw that too."

"Are you taking credit for our pairing?"

Catherine uncrossed her arms and held them out wide. "I set up a chain of events that I hoped would result in your pairing. Joining your magic with hers gave the world the best chance of banishing that demon. It was strong. It wanted into this world, and one way or another, it was going to break

through.”

His mother knew about the demon?

“I think I need to sit down.” He collapsed onto the couch.

“You look pale,” Catherine said. “Have you been eating?”

“When would I have had the chance?” He’d had nothing to eat since the one bite of beignet he’d had at Lovey’s apartment. After that, he’d been a little too busy trying not to die.

“I’ll make you a sandwich,” Catherine said, and she headed for the kitchen

“Mom. *No.*” Ethan rose to his feet and stuck out his hand, catching her by the arm.

She stopped, and her face broke into a grin at his use of the maternal moniker.

Ethan blinked with surprise at his unintended concession, and he looked at his hand on her arm.

It almost confused him to see it there, and the physical contact awakened old memories: reaching out for her arm and begging for another bedtime story.

Ethan sighed, released her arm, and focused on the small victory his mother had handed him. He’d always known the demon wasn’t Stella’s fault. She hadn’t believed him, but now he could prove it to her.

“Stella blamed herself for letting the demon into the world.”

“Poor girl” Catherine said, sounding equally aggrieved. “It wasn’t her fault that evil always looks for the path of least resistance. By reversing a curse, she simply opened a nice pathway, but demons have plenty of other options.”

“Wait,” Ethan said. “You knew about Bishop’s curse too?”

To this, his mother clucked her tongue. “Every witch in New England knows about the curse. With my own son being a Mather, did you really think I wouldn’t pay attention to something like that?”

“Then did you... Did you know I was running for office?”

She smiled again. “I was one of your campaign’s biggest contributors.”

Anonymous contributor, he assumed. Either that or she’d used another alias.

“I’m sorry you had to drop out of the race.” She sounded sincerely regretful.

“But why would you support my campaign when you knew about the

curse?” he asked. “It targeted Mathers who sought political office. The Salem witches wanted my head on a platter.”

She made another *tsk* sound. “I always knew you’d do great things. I put my faith in my little star to see you through.”

“Stella,” he said, and at the sound of her name, his heart seemed to swell in his chest.

“Sweetheart,” Catherine said, and her arms wrapped around him.

It felt too good to resist. Ethan embraced her and bent his head toward hers, letting a tear fall onto her hair.

He still had a lot of questions, but knowing he could now get those answers was enough to dispel the worst of his anger.

“Where is she now?” Catherine asked while rubbing his back consolingly. “When I saw your photo together online—”

“What photo?” Ethan asked.

“Oh, this one.” She pulled out of their embrace and took her phone from her pocket. She showed him a photo of Stella and him. He was wearing his Boys & Girls Clubs of America T-shirt. Stella was wearing her black linen dress.

Ethan checked out the name of the social media account. He didn’t recognize it, then he remembered. That kid...that *other* kid who’d come to Mosebys’ cabin for the father-son turkey hunt. He must have taken a photo of them and posted it online.

“I have face-recognition software,” Catherine said. “I may have prophetic skills, but technology can be useful too.”

“This is unbelievable,” he muttered toward the carpeting.

“So...?” Catherine asked. “Where is she?”

“Stella’s in Salem,” Ethan said, narrowing his eyes. “With her sister and the rest of their coven. Do you think I should have stayed with her instead of bringing Antoinette back to Boston?”

“Hmmm...” Catherine walked toward one of the three arched windows that overlooked the Park Place castle.

Ethan turned to keep an eye on her. “Is she in trouble?”

A burst of adrenaline raced through his veins at the sound of his own question. He didn’t know where the next source of danger would come from; all of their enemies had been put to rest. Some above ground. Some under it.

Still, he’d gotten used to living on the run, and he wouldn’t be surprised if there was more running to do.

“I don’t—” Catherine pressed her fingertips to her temples. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

“Stella said, once we were paired, it could be dangerous for us. Her parents were paired and—”

“What?” Catherine turned abruptly away from the window.

Ethan swallowed. “Her parents were paired, and when her mother died, her father died right afterward. That’s how connected their pairing made them.”

Catherine’s forehead furrowed. “Ethan, what are you—?”

“*Shit*,” he said as the aether surged in his chest. It didn’t like being separated from Stella anymore than he did. “You’re right. I should’ve never left her behind.”

“I didn’t say...” Catherine pressed down the air with her hands. “Ethan, calm down.”

He patted his hands against the back of his basketball shorts, looking for car keys that weren’t there. His car wasn’t in Boston. He’d hired a car to drive him and Antoinette back to the city.

“I gotta get back to Salem,” he said. “How did you get here? Do you have a car?”

“Son, listen to me. You seem to be operating under a misapprehension. Pairing your magic doesn’t kill those special couples who have that ability. It saves them.”

Ethan stopped pacing, and his back straightened. “But...Stella’s been so afraid. Why would she think paired magic killed her parents?”

Catherine didn’t answer right away. Something in her dark blue eyes flickered with indecision, then she let out a breath. “Probably because somebody lied to her.”

Ethan rocked back on his heels. “Yeah. There seems to be a lot of that going around.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

Stella sat on the bottom step of the sagging staircase that connected Broomstix to the second floor. She'd used her inheritance for the down payment and renovations on the Colonial-era building.

Now, a stack of bank notices lay at her feet, all of them stamped in big red letters: PAST DUE.

Two more months of missed payments, and she'd be looking at foreclosure.

She held Alice in her lap and stroked the Rhode Island Red's soft feathers. After a while, Alice rested her tiny chicken head against Stella's shoulder and clucked sympathetically.

High on one of the many bookshelves, Darren slithered past the store's collection of books on medicinal herbs and magical gardening. The tip of his blue tail gave a flick, knocking one book out of alignment.

"How does that bad boy keep escaping his terrarium?" Stella murmured to Alice.

Alice clucked in response.

The door opened, and a bell tinkled. The rumbling sounds of traffic and the excited voices of passersby filtered into the store.

Stella scooped the bank notices off the floor and rose to her feet without looking at the customer. "Welcome to Broomstix. Blink and you'll myth it."

"Cute," Jade said. "Did you make that up?"

Stella's head jerked at the sound of the familiar voice. "Oh, hey."

"Did you get any sleep?" Jade asked.

"Not much. You?" Stella set Alice on the floor, then walked behind the sales counter. She shoved the bank notices into a drawer before her sister

could ask about them.

“Same,” Jade said. “It seemed every time I closed my eyes...”

“Yeah, I know,” Stella said.

There was a reason she’d slept on the floor behind the sales counter with all the overhead lights brightly lit. It didn’t take much for images of the demon and the scent of freshly dug graves to permeate her thoughts.

Now that she was awake, she’d turned off the lights and gone back to the dozens of battery operated candles. Part of Broomstix’s appeal was its ambiance.

“Where’s Ethan?” Jade glanced around the store, then up the curved staircase.

“I think he’s still in Boston,” Stella said, shuffling some papers just to look busy and nonchalant.

“You *think* he’s still in Boston?” Jade asked.

Stella gave her a one-shouldered shrug. “I haven’t wanted to bother him.”

Jade’s eyebrows drew together in an inverted V. “Why would you be bothering him?”

Stella let out a sigh and planted her hands on the counter. “We came through the portal around one in the morning.”

“Yeah,” Jade said, drawing the word out. “I was there.”

“It takes thirty minutes to drive to Boston and drop Antoinette off.”

“Right.”

Stella pinched her lips together in frustration. Her sister wasn’t cottoning on to her point. “Thirty minutes back.”

“Uh-huh,” Jade said, narrowing her eyes.

Stella placed her palms on the counter. “It’s now seven o’clock, and he’s not here. There must be a reason.”

Jade looked like she was fighting a smile. She thought Stella was being ridiculous. “Maybe he was tired and slept at his apartment.”

Stella rolled her eyes. “Maybe.”

“What exactly are you worried about?” Jade asked.

“What if he doesn’t come back?”

“Of course he’ll come back.”

“You don’t know him,” Stella said. “He’s always lived in Boston. He loves the city. And there’s the matter of Antoinette.”

“Oh, please,” Jade broke in. “Don’t tell me you think he hasn’t come back yet because he’s hooked up with Antoinette. That’s crazy!”

Stella shook her head. She didn't think that. "What I think... What I know is that Ethan is a *really* good guy."

"And really good guys don't come back?" Jade asked. "You're not making sense."

"Ethan takes care of people. Antoinette is alone now, and historically, the Boston coven has been Ethan's coven. He and Antoinette are basically all that's left of it now. And, like I said, he loves Boston. It makes sense that he'd want to stay there."

"You two are paired witches," Jade said. "And not just the business-partner kind. He loves you. He'll be back."

Memories of the pairing rite came back to Stella in flashbulb images. Another reason for sleeping downstairs was that she was afraid to go up to her attic apartment. She was afraid of what the place might look like, afraid of the memories overwhelming her, afraid of what it all would mean for her future if Ethan decided to stay in Boston.

"Stellz..." Jade said reassuringly. "You put your love and your faith in him when none of us did. You saw it through. Ethan knows that. That's why he loves you. He'll be back."

Stella pressed her hand against her chest. Ever since she'd watched him walk away, there'd been a scrambling sensation in her chest, like the aether was clawing to get out. No, *reaching* out. Trying to find Ethan and to draw him back to her.

But maybe Ethan didn't feel the same. She couldn't imagine him abandoning Antoinette in her moment of need, though why he hadn't called to let her in on his plans, she didn't know.

She glanced at her phone on the counter and willed it to ring, but it lay silent.

The door opened, and she sucked in a breath.

Marietta and George walked in. The strands of silver in Marietta's long dark hair seemed more prominent than before, though their ordeal hadn't affected her fashion sense. Her long, blue and purple batik-print dress swished around her legs.

George's dark eyes looked harder than normal, probably because his low-level magic always kept him out of the more serious skirmishes—not that their coven had seen many of those until recently.

"How did it go?" Jade asked them.

"How did what go?" Stella asked.

“We just got back from Judith’s house,” Marietta explained grimly. “We had to let Linda know what happened to Judith. George is always better with those kinds of conversations.”

“How’s Linda doing?” Stella asked, her heart squeezing with sympathy for Judith’s non-magical wife.

“As you’d expect,” Marietta said.

Stella winced as her imagination painted the scene. “This whole thing feels like a dream.”

The door opened again, and Izzy walked through. It must have started to rain because her shirt was spotted with droplets. Glitter makeup glistened on her cheekbones, and a rectangular sticker was stuck to her chest. The sticker said, *VISITOR: Izzy Jacobs*.

“Where the heck did you go this early in the morning?” Jade asked.

“Hospital,” Izzy said. “The Blys were all there visiting Charlie. I got them up to speed on what happened inside the portal last night and...” Her throat clogged with emotion, and she cleared it. “I let them know about Judith.”

“That was good of you,” George said.

“Charlie was being discharged,” Izzy said. “He’s all healed up from the car accident and should be back home within the hour.”

“Let’s see how long it takes that fool boy to get himself into more trouble,” George muttered, then he glanced around at the people gathered. “Now, where’s this Ethan Mather I’ve been hearing so much about? I figure if he’s got any manners he should introduce himself to the man who raised you.”

“He’s not here,” Stella said. “He’s—”

The door opened again.

“What is this?” Jade asked. “Grand Central?”

Jade and Izzy moved apart, giving her a view of the new arrival.

It was a woman in her late-fifties, maybe sixty. She wore a short, olive-green dress, a jean jacket that hit her hips perfectly, and the cutest red sandals.

Her shoulder-length hair had obviously been blond once, though now it was mostly gray. But beyond all of this, it was her dark blue eyes that caught most of Stella’s attention.

That—and the fresh-bread scent of the woman’s prophetic magic. Whoever she was, her magic was intense.

“Welcome to Broomstix,” Stella said tentatively. “Can I help you?”

“Hello,” the woman said. “Are you Stella Aldren?”

“Yes.” Stella glanced at Jade, then back at the woman. “Do I know you?”

The woman’s eyebrows arched. “You’re more beautiful than I realized.”

“Oh... Um....” Heat rushed into Stella’s cheeks.

“Sorry,” the woman said. “My name’s Catherine. Is this the rest of your coven?”

Everyone bristled. Stella was the only one who sensed magic, so up to that point, everyone else likely assumed she was a regular customer.

“Um...”

“It’s raining, so Ethan dropped me at the door. He’ll be in once he’s parked my car.”

“Ethan?” Stella asked. “You’re with Ethan?”

“Of course. I’m his mother.”

What the...? Ethan’s mother? Stella curled her fingers around the edge of the counter.

The bell over the door rang out and Ethan walked in, wearing loose basketball shorts and a T-shirt bearing the name of a local microbrewery. He might not have been in a tuxedo, but just like the first time Stella saw him crossing the ballroom at the Liberty Hotel, her knees went a little weak.

He made quick eye contact with everyone in the store, then his gaze locked on her. He let out a relieved sigh that Stella felt in her own lungs.

Their six hours apart had been long enough to gently soften her memory of his physical impact—his jet-black hair, square jaw, and devastating eyes... Oh god. His *mother’s* eyes.

“Ethan?” Stella asked, her voice wavering.

“He’s taller than I expected,” George whispered, probably to Marietta.

Stella swallowed hard. “This woman says she’s your mother?”

Ethan’s eyes turned as dark as ink, and they glittered with unrest. “Red, we need to talk.”

Oh god. She didn’t like the sound of that. Nothing good ever started with those four words.

“Privately,” he said, adding the definitive kill shot. “We have things to discuss.”



ETHAN TOOK Stella's hand and dragged her to the stairs, then up to the second floor. She pulled back on his arm. "Ethan, what's going on?"

"In private," he repeated.

"Is that woman really your mother?" she whispered, glancing briefly over her shoulder at the people gathered on the sales floor below.

"Yes," Ethan said. "I'm still processing."

They climbed the ladder that led into her attic apartment, Ethan heading up first. He pushed open the hatch and crawled through.

When Stella made it to the top of the ladder, Ethan reached down and pulled her up. They closed the hatch and stood with their arms around each other, smack dab in the middle of the disaster that was her apartment.

She couldn't even blame the mess on a demon. It was entirely of her own creation, though Ethan was partly to blame for her mattress being off kilter on its frame and clear across the room, under the window.

"Ethan," she said, tipping her head back to look at him. "Your mother's supposed to be—"

"Dead? Yeah. Antoinette and I both told her that, but she insists she's alive."

Stella stared up at him. His words suggested he was joking, but his face was hard and his eyes were serious.

"How...?"

A muscle jumped in his jaw. "You remember what I told you about Crystal Reed?"

"The psychic you hired for your retreat? Of course, I remember. She was the one who put the ward on your door."

"Crystal Reed...C. R...is Catherine Renaudin. My mother."

Stella glanced down at the hatch as if she could see all the way down to the ground floor where her coven and Ethan's mother were gathered. "Where has she been all this time?"

"Apparently nearby and watching over both of us. She knew about my campaign and, Stella..." He kissed the top of her head. "She saw you coming. She's a prophetic witch, and she knew we were destined for each other. She knew that, *together*, we were the only way that demon could be banished."

Stella shook her head and looked back at him. "A demon *I* summoned."

"It wasn't your fault. My mother was very clear about that. You have to stop blaming yourself."

“So...now your mom wants to be reunited with you?” Her fingers curled against the muscles in his lower back.

Ethan gave her a one-shouldered shrug. “She seems confident I can defend myself against whatever threats might still be out there against our family, so yeah.”

“Your family. You have a family, Ethan.” She smiled, happy for him at the same time her heart was breaking. It was just like she told Jade. He wanted to go back to the life he’d lost so many years ago.

“I have a family,” he said on a sigh. “A weird one, but yeah.”

“I’m happy for you.”

A strange expression flickered over his face, surprise mixed with confusion mixed with frustration. “I’m still mad at her for leaving me.”

“I don’t blame you,” Stella said. “I’m sure she doesn’t blame you for being mad either. But you’ll get over it.”

“You know who’s *not* going to get over things? Antoinette.”

Stella exhaled heavily. “How’s she doing?”

“I took her to Lovey’s apartment. That’s where we ran into my mother, by the way. The apartment was even more destroyed than I remembered. I left Antoinette picking through the rubble.”

“You just left her there?”

“I had to get out of there, and Antoinette wasn’t ready to leave.”

“Poor thing.” Stella pressed her forehead against Ethan’s chest. “She’s lost everything and nearly everyone. Thank God she has you and your mom.”

“Mmmm,” Ethan said, humming his agreement. “So how do I go about joining the Salem coven?”

“What?” Stella’s head jerked up, not following his train of thought.

Ethan didn’t seem to notice her confusion. “Is there a petition I have to file?”

“I... I thought you were going to join the *Boston* coven.”

Ethan gave her an annoyed look. “Stella, I’m with you. Always. I thought I’d made myself perfectly clear about that, even before we were paired.”

“I know, but I assumed after all that happened...”

Ethan dropped his arms from around her waist and instead wrapped them around her shoulders, pulling her tight against him.

“After all we’ve been through, do you seriously think I’d want to be somewhere else? With *someone* else? Are you crazy?”

Well, when he put it like that...

“So, how do I go about joining?” he asked again.

“We’re paired,” Stella said, laughing. “If you want in, you’re automatically a member.”

“And what about Antoinette and my mother?” he asked. “Do you think your coven would let them in, too?”

Stella blinked. She hadn’t seen that coming, though it did explain his earlier comments, and it did make sense under the circumstances.

“That question’s not up to me, Ethan. Judith was our high priestess. She’s gone now. No one new’s in charge yet to make that decision.”

Ethan turned Stella’s body so her back was to the window. “I thought a coven was a democracy.”

“There’s a balance of power in the magical sense, but the high priestess makes decisions for the betterment of the group. We’ll need to choose a new leader before any new witches can be welcomed into our circle.”

“Antoinette shouldn’t be left alone.” Ethan’s hands returned to Stella’s hips, and he gave her enough of his weight that she took a step backward.

“I agree,” she said.

“And Judith was your only prophetic witch, right?” Ethan took a step forward, which made Stella take another step back.

“With her gone,” he said, “won’t you need someone else to provide those skills? My mother has proven her talents in that area.”

“It sounds like you’re on your way to forgiving her.” Stella wrapped her hands around Ethan’s biceps and held on tight as he continued to walk her backward, toward the bed.

“I’m still pissed,” he said, “and I still think she should have said something to me a lot sooner, but I can appreciate her motives. I know I would do anything to keep *you* safe.”

Tears flooded Stella’s eyes. “I really was afraid you weren’t coming back.”

Ethan kept moving her backward as a teasing smile spread across his face. “Sometimes you can be such an idiot.”

Stella pushed back and slapped playfully at his chest. “I’m not an idiot!”

He laughed. “When did I ever give you any indication I wasn’t coming back?”

“Every time you told me how much you wanted a family.”

“You are my family.” He kissed her forehead, then the tip of her nose, and finally her lips. “You can’t get rid of me now.”

“I never wanted to get rid of you,” Stella said.

“No? I thought you wanted to kill me.”

“I never *wanted* to do that,” she said, wishing he wouldn’t joke about that moment in time. It wasn’t funny. “Not even then.”

“Do you know what I thought when I saw you walking across that ballroom toward me?” He pushed her backward another step.

Stella’s heels ran into the mattress. “No.”

“I thought you were a wardrobe malfunction waiting to happen. Did you use a shoehorn to get yourself into that dress?”

“Ethan Mather, I may just kill you after all.”

He leaned back and looked down at her body, lingering a few seconds longer at her breasts. “You always do.”

Ethan’s firm, full lips met Stella’s softer ones, and she groaned at the contact. His fingers at her hips slid around to dig into the curve of her ass. Their recently paired magic throbbed like a burning ember receiving a rejuvenating burst of oxygen.

His kiss went hot, demanding, claiming, and at the same time there was a tenderness that stripped away the last of Stella’s worries.

Another surge of magic rushed out of him, and it crashed into her so hard she gasped.

Ethan held her tightly against his body, his mouth never leaving hers. She heard his thoughts as clearly as if he’d spoken them aloud. *Love. Family. Forever.*

Stella’s arousal moved right past hot and threatened spontaneous combustion.

Ethan’s kiss deepened, responding to her urgent movements. His lips moved against her neck as his hands deftly removed all her clothes, save for a cobalt blue bra and matching panties with bright pink lace.

She heard him chuckle low, deep, and oh-so-sexy at his discovery. “I see you were saving your best pair for last.”

“Are you saying this is the last?” she asked, teasingly.

His expression grew impossibly hotter. “Not a chance.”

With a playful shove at the center of her chest, Stella fell backward onto the mattress.

A second later, she was naked on the bed with her bra and panties quickly discarded.

“God Almighty,” Ethan murmured as the ribbons of magic swirled

around them, weaving together like a protective canopy above the bed.

“If you’re trying out a new nickname for me, Goddess Divine is probably more appropriate. But no need to be so formal.”

Ethan smirked, and his hot mouth descended over her breast, sucking her nipple *deep* while his fingers slipped between her legs.

Stella whimpered when he hit the target, and she tugged at the hem of his T-shirt. He understood what she wanted and shucked it off, only briefly letting up on her breast.

The basketball shorts went next, and then they were skin to skin, magic rising and twisting like steam from their bodies.

“I can’t believe we made it,” she said. “Through all the shit to here. Now.”

“I never had any doubt,” he said. “We’re like Goody Joan.”

“What?” Stella panted as his fingers circled that magic spot of pure decadence. Goody Joan was the last thing on her mind right now.

“*Survivors*,” he said.

“Aren’t you afraid you’re speaking too soon?” Stella asked, still teasing, but a little serious too. He was killing her with that mouth and those wicked fingers of his.

“No.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

Ethan rolled over onto his back, and his thick cock strained upward. “Okay. Do your worst, and let’s see if I survive.”

“I only *ever* do my best,” she said suggestively.

His eyes sparked with lusty interest, and his reply was deep and throaty. “That you do.”

Stella slid her hands over the round muscles of Ethan’s shoulders, then lightly trailed her fingers along the ridges of his abs. Goose bumps popped up on his skin, and his nipples hardened to tiny points.

She wrapped her hand around his shaft, causing a shuddering moan to slide out of him and steal around the attic.

Encouraged by that lustful sound, Stella touched her tongue to his thick blunt tip, then sucked half of him deep into her mouth.

Ethan’s abs hardened under her palm, and his shoulders lifted off the mattress.

Stella pressed him back down, returning to her work. He was thick and hard. The tip of his cock touched the back of her throat while her hand

wrapped around the base.

His fingers curled into her hair, and tightened, pulling at her scalp.

Stella liked the sharp sting and continued to massage his length with her tongue until she heard Ethan nearing his breaking point. At that low warning, she straddled his thighs and slowly lowered herself onto his shaft.

She reveled in the burning stretch as his impossible girth parted her, filling her so completely that once he was fully seated, she couldn't move.

She felt like a beautiful butterfly, completely on display for Ethan's eyes, which continued to move over her body as his hands clenched around her hips.

"Beautiful," he said. "My perfectly paired witch."

Love consumed her at his words, and tears sprang into her eyes yet again.

Ethan lifted her, then gently rolled until he was positioned above her on the mattress. He pressed up on one hand, then reached down with his other hand and hitched Stella's leg up over his hip.

He stared into her eyes, moisture gathering in his own, then he blinked, dropped to an elbow and with a powerful surge, filled her completely again.

Stella arched into him as a long, satisfied moan slipped from her throat and reverberated off the attic walls. She wrapped her arms around his back, dug her heels into his rock-hard ass, and clutched him tight with her inner muscles.

"Fuck," he groaned. "You get so tight."

"Ethan," Stella whimpered. Her walls were already vibrating with anticipation of what was to come.

She knew he felt it. She could see it in his eyes.

He slowly pulled out, dragging his thick cock through her slick channel, then drove into her again with so much power, she had to hold on to him for dear life.

He moved faster and harder, and the faster and harder he moved, the tighter and more desperately she held on.

Ethan was pure magic when he fucked. Pure power. Sex had been great before. Now that they were paired, it was earth-shattering. How could she ever go on alone if Ethan was gone?

She tipped her hips. Ethan slid out, then in. A vein in his neck popped out with the strain, and Stella's inner muscles squeezed in response.

"Christ," he muttered. "Are you close?"

"Do you want me to be?"

“A man has only so much endurance before—”

His words cut off with a groan, then he pressed his thumb to her clit. “Get there, babe. You gotta get there now.”

He made one more delicious circle with his thumb, and it was as if the world spun so fast it flung her right off. She was flying again! This time without leaving the ground.

Stella gripped his shoulders, pressing down on his ass with her calves, calling out his name, and coming *hard*. Her orgasm ripped through her with such intensity, she thought maybe the world had simply disappeared for the both of them.

Ethan drove his arm underneath her and around her back. His arm tightened and held her still for his final thrusts. Deep, throbbing, abandoning all control.

She loved this. She loved him.

Ethan grunted, then his mouth opened in a silent shout. And Stella watched his orgasm like it was the most beautiful magic she’d ever seen.



WHEN STELLA and Ethan emerged from the attic, Ethan’s mother took one look at them, then turned toward the shelves as if she were suddenly in need of a good book.

Jade fought a smile and shook her head.

Ethan dipped his head and whispered in Stella’s ear, “Please, tell me my mother and your coven didn’t just listen to us having sex.”

Stella shook her head. The attic apartment had been well insulated for sound. “I should have checked myself in a mirror before we came down.”

Ethan’s gaze slid over her hair, and he smiled. “Yeah, that mane of yours keeps no secrets. Your lips look a little swollen too.”

Great. That probably meant that *everyone* knew what they’d been up to, but the rest of them were simply pretending not to notice—and by ‘the rest of them,’ that meant *the rest of them*.

Every surviving member of her coven was standing in a circle at the center of the sales floor: Marietta and George, Izzy, Jade, all *five* of the Bly siblings, the freckle-faced Sparrow twins, and their great aunt, Anne Crisp.

Magnus had also returned during Stella and Ethan's absence, and Stella was both happy and relieved to see him.

He stood behind the sales counter, talking to someone on the phone. His expression was serious as he nodded at whatever the caller was saying. "Thanks. I'll tell her."

When he hung up, he spotted Stella at the bottom of the stairs, and his face lit up. "Stella!"

"Hey, Mags," she said, wanting to match his smile but troubled by the serious tone of the call. "Who was that?"

"Hawk," he said. "What the hell happened? He said to tell you that Max was out of the freakin' *I...C...U?*"

Stella let out a breath. That was very good news.

She would have taken the time to explain everything to Magnus right then, if not for Marietta stepping forward to say, "Stella, there are some things we've been discussing."

Uh-oh. That didn't sound good.

Stella glanced around the circle of familiar faces. Ethan's mother turned away from the bookshelf and stood apart from everyone with her hands folded in front of her.

"Normally," Marietta said, "we might allow for a respectable mourning period before having this conversation, but circumstances being what they are..."

Marietta glanced up at George.

He gave his wife a smile, took her tanned hand in his darker one, then turned toward Stella and Ethan.

"Judith is gone," he said. "We need a new high priestess. As you know, that position is usually filled by the most senior—"

"Marietta!" Stella said excitedly. "Yes! I'm sorry I missed the vote, but I support it one-hundred percent. Congratulations!"

Stella took a step forward to give her foster mother a hug, but George held out his hand, palm flexed, to stop her.

"The most senior," he said, "*or* the most powerful."

"That would be you and Ethan together," Jade said.

"*What?*" Stella asked. The high priestess role had never been held by two people, not even two paired witches. It wasn't like her parents had ever been asked to lead the coven.

"We've already voted," Izzy said.

“But...” Stella glanced around, then up at Ethan. She didn’t know what to say.

Ethan, on the other hand, knew exactly what to say. “We accept.”

They did? Stella blinked once, then swallowed hard.

“Great,” George said. “That’s that.”

“Okay,” Stella said slowly. “If that’s the case...we’d also like to propose a new member. That is, if Catherine would like to join us.”

Catherine’s head shot up, and her gaze shot to Ethan.

“What do you say, Mom?” Ethan asked.

From Catherine’s surprised expression, it was clear she hadn’t expected him to be on board; they still had a lot of history to work through.

“Mom?” Ethan pressed after a few seconds. “You *are* looking for a new coven, aren’t you?”

Catherine looked shyly at everyone else. “Oh. Oh my... *Um...* How did I not foresee *this*?”

“I think you’ve been too focused on keeping me alive to bother with anything else,” Ethan suggested magnanimously.

“Well, if there’s room for me,” she said, keeping her anxious gaze set on the rest of the coven.

“Of course,” Marietta said.

“And Antoinette,” Ethan said in a rush. “She’s all alone. I don’t know when or even *if* she’d want to join us, but I want to extend the invitation.”

“Is she the tall witch with the personal magic and the ‘fro?” George asked. “Marietta told me about her.”

“Yes, hon,” Marietta said. “She’s the one.”

“Maybe I should pay her a visit,” George said. “Marietta and I aren’t getting any younger. You’re gonna need some more diversity once we’re gone, and I wouldn’t mind having a sister in our circle for whatever time I’ve got left.”

Stella’s nose began to sting, and heat pressed at her eyes. She’d never been one for tears, but lately they seemed to be coming all the time. Emotion kept getting the better of her, and when she caught Magnus’s wide grin, it made her nose run, too.

Yes, they’d lost people they loved, and their absence would be keenly felt for a long, long time. But there was some sort of happy ending in all of this. Stella knew, with Ethan’s love, she could live in that future instead of dwelling on the sadness of her past.

He put his hand in hers, and the ribbons of their magic—visible to only them, and no longer red and blue, but purple—unfurled from their chests and entwined around them like a lover’s wreath.

“I could get used to this,” Stella said.

“You’re going to have to,” Ethan said. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Actually,” she whispered, “couldn’t we both use a little fresh air?”

Maybe a cool breeze on her face would keep the fresh batch of happy tears from running down her cheeks.

“Everyone,” Ethan announced. “Stella and I are going for a walk. She’s going to show me around Salem.”

“That’s a nice idea,” Marietta said. “But stay in town. Don’t wander too far.”

That ridiculous motherly warning was just what Stella needed to banish the tears, warm her heart, and make her laugh. “I think we’ll be fine.”

“*Seriously*, Marietta,” Jade said. “After all we’ve been through, your cautionary tales aren’t going to have the same effect as they did when we were kids.”

“Excuse me?” Marietta asked, looking at Jade in confusion.

“Don’t you remember all the spooky stories you told us about the Collector?” Jade asked.

Marietta and George exchanged a guilty look.

“I mean...who makes up stories like that to scare the crap out of two little kids?” Jade asked, laughing.

George said, “I think we should—”

“George, no.” Marietta grabbed his arm.

“They’re adults, honey,” George said. “It’s about time they knew.”

Jade stopped laughing.

The smile dropped off Ethan’s face.

“Knew what?” Stella asked, not liking the sound of George’s voice, or the sight of Marietta’s vise grip on his arm.

“The Collector isn’t a made-up story,” Anne Crisp informed them.

Jade scoffed. “Come on, Anne. You’re telling us there’s a man in the woods who collects children like insects?”

Stella’s mouth felt like cotton. She didn’t think that’s what any of the senior members of the coven were saying. No. She figured it was something far, far worse.

“Not like insects,” George said. “Marietta made that part up. But there’s a

man in the woods who collects powerful witches.”

Marietta turned her attention to Stella and Ethan. “And I dare say he’d like to collect the two of you.”

“W- What?” Jade sputtered. “What are you saying?”

Stella felt her knees give way, but Ethan caught her by the elbow. He was having the opposite physical reaction to this news; his back was ramrod straight, and his legs were locked.

“We’re saying,” George said slowly, “that this...*man*...is someone who’s been exiled from his coven, and he’s been trying for many years to become a perfected witch.”

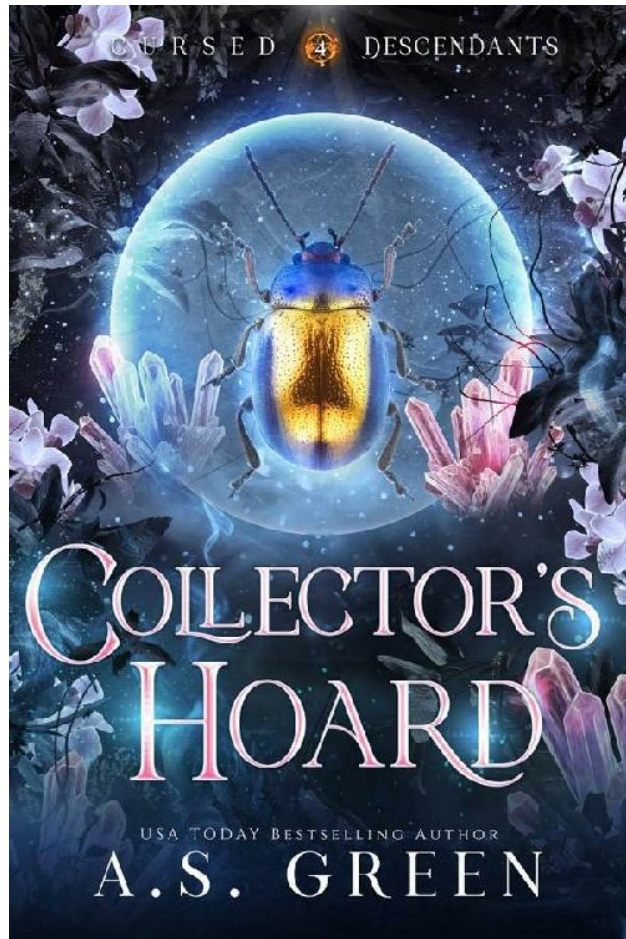
Stella’s heart sunk like a stone. She felt as though she were drowning. She tried to breathe, but there wasn’t any air.

“What the literal hell?” Ethan murmured, and Stella could tell from his tone that he remembered what she’d told him about the fifth kind of witch.

There were prophetic, physical, personal, and paired witches. But to become a perfected witch was a process so heinous, it was taboo to even speak of it.

“So, please, you two...” Marietta said, repeating her initial warning. “*Please*. Don’t wander too far from home.”

The end for now...



Stay tuned for Book 4, *Collector's Hoard*, coming winter 2024. And be sure to [subscribe to my newsletter](#) so you're one of the first to get the pre-order announcement.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today bestselling author A.S. Green lives in chilly Minnesota and spends the all-too-short summers on Lake Superior, which is the muse for her paranormal and contemporary romances—many of which are based on, or inspired by Celtic legends and American folklore.

She writes complex characters, action-packed plots, and snarky in-your-face banter. And, of course, loads of steamy love scenes.

When she's not writing romance, she's probably watching *Outlander* or pleading (unsuccessfully) with her husband to don the kilt she bought him last summer.

She's also descended from Samuel Wardwell, one of the last people hanged in Salem for the crime of witchcraft.

You can find her on most social platforms at [@asgreenbooks](#). For the latest news and to get your hands on exclusive content, subscribe to A. S. Green's [newsletter](#) today!



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

On the day of this book's launch, I am in Salem, Massachusetts and thinking about how many lives have been lost—down through the ages—as the result of hatred and fear. May we all find the strength required to love others as ourselves.

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If you're reading this, that probably means you made it through the first three books in this series, so thank you for diving into this world with me. It's been fun so far, and there's more to come!