

A MF OMEGAVERSE NOVEL

**BELIEVE IT
OR KNOT**
BELLE KENT

I WAS CURSED NEVER TO FIND MY MATE

I was cursed never to find my mate. Now, the only one who may be able to help me is my sworn enemy.

For years, Sebastian Cavanaugh has been a thorn in my side. He thinks I'm a petty town gossip with nothing better to do than make his life miserable.

Which is why I'm shocked when he offers to help me find a solution to my problem: find the warlock who cursed me to a life without a fated mate, a family, and true happiness. Now, I'm seeing a whole new side of Sebastian. He's protective. Strong. And the first warlock in years to send me straight into a devastating heat.

Rainbow Carmichael is the nosiest, most irritating witch I've ever met.

And yet, when she threatens to put herself in danger to find the warlock who cursed her, I can't let her go alone.

When her heat comes in full force, I'm the only warlock who's allowed to touch her, knot her, make her feel good. She may hate me for the rest of her life, but I promise this will be one heat she never forgets.

Believe It or Knot is book three of the Mystic Springs Series, a series where witches find their fated mates in powerful, protective alpha warlocks. This book has all the knotty, slick, heat-rich-rutting-wildness that makes Omegaverse so much fun with the slow-burn sweetness of a small-town, magical romance. This book is steamy AF, so make sure you're ready to handle this heat.

BELIEVE IT OR KNOT

A MF OMEGERVERSE NOVEL

BELLE KENT

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ONE

RAINBOW

“She wants you to look like who?”

Jax, a warlock hired by the heat lodge to attend the heats of witches who came into the lodge, leaned over whispering in my ear. He repeated the name of a certain popular Hollywood actor. I sighed.

I looked over at Anna, the proprietor of the heat lodge, who only shrugged.

“This is getting to be an issue,” I said, looking back at the warlock. He was a damn good-looking warlock. I’d employed him myself during some heats I couldn’t suppress. I couldn’t imagine wanting him to look like anyone else.

Though, I could see the appeal of the actor in question. And truth be known, I highly suspected he was a warlock as well. With the hold he had over the movie-going populace? Yeah. That was some grade-A persuasion magic.

Jax didn’t seem to be the least bit perturbed he was being asked to look like someone else. After all, I knew Anna paid her warlocks well to take care of the witches who visited her lodge.

“Second time this month,” he said, smiling a disarming smile that, honestly, was way more charming than any smile a marquee name could give. He was a young warlock, even by warlock standards. I also knew he was Anna’s most requested.

Gods help the witch who was his mate. They’d likely never see daylight for a month. I knew his appetite. He was also excellent at taking care of a witch during her heat.

“All I can say is thank the Gods that we haven’t started getting cease and desists yet,” I said. I held my hands before me and aimed them at Jax.

“I didn’t bring any of my supplies.” I channeled my magic toward the warlock. “This is going to be rudimentary at best. Your body is already close to his. All we need is a bit of magic around the facial features.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, Rainbow,” Jax said, never losing that smirk as he took on the visage of a certain famous Hollywood actor. It was disconcerting. And honestly, as I focused on the final touches, I could see why a witch might request this particular glamour.

“The gags we could pull over on the humans of Mystic Springs.” I smiled as Anna gasped as he turned around to face her.

“That’s some amazing work, Rainbow,” Anna said. I got the feeling that glamour was going to get a workout not only from the witch who was now employing Jax, but also Anna.

“Now, go.” Anna waved a dismissive hand at Jax. “Before I think better of it and leave Lara mewling in heat because I use you instead.”

Jax winked at the both of us, and admittedly, my heart somersaulted in my chest. He then turned and walked out of the main lodge building, leaving Anna and me alone.

“Your next session is on the house, Rainbow.”

Throwing myself onto the lodge sofa, I looked around at the lobby’s interior. Anna Kirby had really turned the place into a premier destination for witches in heat. Before Anna had settled in Mystic Springs, the lodge had been an old summer camp used by the humans in town. When she bought it, all the cabins and the main lodge building had been in a heightened state of disrepair.

The local humans scoffed at her efforts. To them, it looked as if some eccentric lady had purchased the land and then let it fall into even further disrepair. The going myth in town was that Anna was a spurned old maid who’d gone crazy after her

fiancee had left her for a younger woman. She'd used her family's fortune to buy the rotting campground and used it as cougar bait.

And she, along with the rest of the magical population of Mystic Springs, was savvy enough to let the humans in town believe that. It kept people from being too nosy. Even though there was a glamour placed on the property, it was always better to have less nosy humans nosing around whenever possible.

"It's just practice for when I finally open up my shop. You know I've almost raised enough money to buy the old Johnson place."

"Oh, Rainbow."

That sigh. That sigh was one of pity. I sat up, fixing Anna with a stare.

"What's the sigh for?"

Had the place burnt down? No. Impossible. I knew every piece of gossip there was worth knowing in this town. If something had happened to the building, I would be the first to know about it.

"Marilu Cummins came in this morning. Ben Peterson took her to Sebastian Cavanaugh's club last night. Helluva place to take a witch you want to rut, but Ben has never been the smartest bubble in the cauldron."

Just the mention of Sebastian's name set my teeth on edge.

Sebastian Cavanaugh had been a thorn in my side since the day I'd arrived in Mystic Springs, intent on fleeing my past. He hated how nosy I was. Considered me a busybody gossip.

What he didn't know was that I had a damn good reason for being a busybody gossip.

Not that I'd ever tell him the reason for it.

If Sebastian's name was coming up in conjunction with the building I'd been planning on buying for my glamour shop?

That could only mean one thing.

“What did Sebastian do?”

“Like I have to tell you, Rainbow. He bought the damn thing. You know how he is. He has to own every scrap of vacant property in this town.”

Another thing that irritated me about Sebastian. He had to have his finger in everything in Mystic Springs.

Including most of the unmated witches.

“Sebastian bought my damn shop. He did this on purpose. He did this for no other reason than to vex me.” I stood, beginning to pace back and forth through the lobby. Anna watched me, wordlessly.

That’s exactly what he did. That shop had been vacant for nearly a decade. It had once been Marv Johnson’s shop. An old drugstore. It needed repairs, but like Anna’s property, it wasn’t anything a little magic couldn’t fix.

“I don’t see why you two don’t just rut each other and get whatever this thing is out of your systems. You’ve obviously built up some tension.”

“We have *not* built up tension,” I said, continuing to pace across the lobby.

“Careful, Rainbow. Get that ire up too much and you’ll be redeeming that freebie in the next few minutes.”

Like hell I would. The thought of Sebastian Cavanaugh would always be a splash of cold water on anything that had remotely to do with sex, rutting, or mating. The very thought that he could get me going was laughable.

Get me going enough to put a spell on him and do him harm.

There was an idea.

A bad one, but still an idea.

“I have no intention of letting that man anywhere near my vagina, Anna. He’s a menace and I don’t see how I’m the only one who sees it. As I said, he did this to vex me.”

“Why would he suddenly do this to rile you?”

Well, shit. I didn't really want to tell her that story.

After our last war of words, in which Sebastian had referred to me as a "nosy gossip hag," I let him feel the full wrath of my penchant for gossip.

"I may have spread a rumor saying that he was having problems with his knot."

Anna gasped. "Rainbow!"

"He deserved it! He called me a nosy gossip hag!"

"But Rainbow, at least he called you that to your face. You can't just go spreading rumors about the man."

"Oh, I can and I will. He's got one coming that's going to make even him blush. I bet I can get Candy in on it, too."

Sebastian's "Witches I've Been With" list was long and well-known in Mystic Springs. Candy was the sort of witch who didn't care about being a has-been rut partner. I also knew she had a vindictive side to her witchery that she wouldn't mind putting to use if given an outlet.

I swear I'm not evil. Just tired.

Tired of warlocks manipulating and controlling my life.

"Why don't you just go talk to him, Rainbow? See if you can work something out?"

"Oh, I'll go talk to him alright. But I doubt very much if we'll be working anything out."

TWO

SEBASTIAN

“You insufferable bastard.”

I smiled up at the witch who was fuming in the doorway of my office. If it wasn't Rainbow Carmichael, a perpetual thorn in my side ever since she'd settled in Mystic Springs, I might be turned on. She was bristling. Chest heaving, eyes blazing, lips parted.

She was positively stunning.

Too bad she was a nosy gossip who did nothing more than irritate me.

“Is that any way to talk to the warlock who will soon be your new landlord?”

I settled back against the leather chair. I knew establishing my headquarters above an ice cream parlor in what would otherwise be a quaint small town — were it not for all the witches and warlocks — didn't seem befitting for a bastard like myself. But it gave me a good view of the town and it made it easy for people to find me.

And usually, when people wanted to find me, it meant that I got something in return.

Right now, I was getting just desserts.

“You did this just to piss me off,” Rainbow said, stepping further into the room. It almost appeared that she was afraid to approach me, but I knew her too well to think that. She was afraid to approach me only because she was worried if she got too close, she might be tempted to put a hex on me.

It was a delicious feeling. All that angry witch energy circling throughout the room. No doubt, it would work up an appetite that I'd have to work out with Alana later, the current witch who was spending her heats with me.

Too bad Rainbow was such a little shit. If she weren't, I bet she'd be a hellcat in bed.

“Do you expect me to deny that?”

“No. But I expect you to do the right thing and sell it to me at the cost you purchased it for.”

“And why would I do that, Carmichael?” I brought my feet up onto the desk and studied her. She was really quite fetching, unfortunately. Red hair that blazed like fire anytime it caught the sunlight. Blue eyes that were downright bewitching. Full pink lips that I was certain haunted the dreams of all those warlocks she employed down at the heat lodge.

And unfortunately, she mostly used those luscious lips to spread gossip in town. Like me, Rainbow liked to know everything that was going on in Mystic Springs.

Unlike me, if you vexed her, as I'd apparently done ever since she moved to Mystic Springs, she'd make you pay by letting a hint drop here or there about your sex life.

As far as I knew, she never peddled such gossip about anyone in town other than me. She just collected it. Dealt it out where she thought it might do the person good but wouldn't harm another.

But when it came to me? Hold on to your witch hats, boys. This one would spin a yarn, and because she had clout, everyone would believe it.

“Did you really expect that I would let your last little venture go unpunished?”

She narrowed her eyes at me. If it weren't for the fact that I could likely outmagick her — after all, I had a good few hundred years on her — I might be concerned.

Rainbow wasn't a silly witch, though. I didn't know how old she was. I only knew she was quite a bit younger than me

as far as witches went. But she had enough experience not to get into a magical battle she couldn't win. Or at least one that she didn't have a chance at winning.

And I had a reputation, fortunately.

“Oh, and we know how you like to punish people, don't we, Sebastian?”

“Ah, I see the book club has been talking. They like to talk, but did any of them actually complain about my brand of ‘punishment’?”

Her cheeks pinked. And damned if I didn't feel a stirring in my cock. I was definitely going to give Alana a call tonight.

“I bet you'd like to take a stab at it yourself, wouldn't you, Rainbow?” I was treading on dangerous ground. But it was entertaining to see how Rainbow's breasts heaved as she grew more and more agitated.

“You're despicable.”

“Am I?” Pulling my feet off the desk, I stood. I was a tall warlock. Typically, when I stood to my full height, I intimidated others — witch, warlock, and especially human.

But Rainbow wasn't easily intimidated. I sometimes wondered where she got that nerve of steel. Whatever her story was, she kept it under wraps. I'd pecked at it over the years, attempting to find out what it was she was hiding beneath those coy smiles she directed toward others. Or the look of irritation she always aimed toward me.

Years of pecking hadn't turned up anything. I was cautious enough about my past that I didn't pull too hard at any threads. I knew that if Rainbow ever got adventurous enough, she'd start pecking away at some loose threads herself.

And there were things I wasn't ready for anyone in Mystic Springs to know about me.

Rainbow stood, holding her ground and raising her chin to look me in the eye as best she could. There was still my wide mahogany desk separating us. I was tempted to round the thing and see how stoic she could be.

But I had my scruples. As much as Rainbow vexed me, I had no desire to make her feel unsafe.

Just to give her a little taste of her own medicine.

“Never fear, Rainbow. If you were the last witch on earth, I wouldn’t rut you with Old Lady Marsden’s broom. Neither of us would enjoy it. Especially me.”

That was a lie. I suspected that I definitely would enjoy it.

But in the end, it wouldn’t be worth it.

The barb had the intended effect on the witch before me. Rainbow’s nostrils flared. For a minute, I thought I might have finally made her angry enough to unleash some of her magic on me.

Part of me hoped she would. If we couldn’t meet in other ways, at least a duel would allow me to work off some of this energy.

“One damn way or another, I’ll have that shop, Cavanaugh. And you’ll pay for what you did.”

“I’m shaking in my shoes.” I propped my hip onto my desk and walked my fingers across the top of it. “Now, go along and play little nosy witch. Those of us who actually have jobs must get to work. As enjoyable as it is to pretend to be interested in your troubles, I have better things to do. Move along, now.”

I made a shooing motion with my hand that I knew would piss her off.

She opened her mouth. Then closed it. Weirdly, I was curious what she might say next if she allowed herself to say it.

But for once, it seemed I’d finally rendered her speechless.

She turned, giving me one last glare, then disappeared out of the office, slamming the door behind her.

I sighed, watching the door for moments after she’d disappeared.

Admittedly, I felt like an ass for testing her like this. I knew how much she wanted that shop. She wanted to open her own magical glamour shop in Mystic Springs.

And it was a good idea. The witches and warlocks of the area could use a centralized location to come to for their glammers. As it was, I knew she worked out of her house or came to whoever needed her.

But letting her have the shop would also give her a good place to peddle her gossip.

Plus, it was fun to make her pay for being such a vexing little witch. Maybe I'd give her the shop.

If she behaved.

So likely never.

SETTLING BACK IN MY CHAIR, I closed my eyes, intent on getting Rainbow out of my head. Intent on calming the alpha warlock inside me that wanted to rut some sense into her.

When the door opened, I opened my eyes, a smile on my face, expecting to see Rainbow returning to deliver that final set-down.

Instead, Gabriel Winters stood leaning against the doorway of my office.

“Why do you toy with her if you hate her so much?” he asked, walking further into the room and taking a seat on the other side of the desk from me. Gabriel was a formidable warlock in his own right. Owner of Crimson, the premier fine dining restaurant in Mystic Springs, he'd made a name for himself in town among both the magical community and the humans.

“Because it's fun. It's like teasing a cobra snake. You always wonder if he'll finally strike you.”

“Not a thing about that sounds fun, Sebastian. Furthermore, I’m not sure she deserves all the shit you give her.

This time, I was the one to turn my squinty-eyed glare on a warlock. “Why are you acting as her defender, Winters?”

Gabriel laughed. “You sound like a bratty kid, Sebastian. She really has got under your skin.”

“She’s done no such thing, but someone needs to put her in her place. Did you hear the latest bullshit she’s been peddling about me?”

“The one about how your knot is soft?”

“Gods. That damned book club. It’s a menace of its own. I suppose Harper passed on that tidbit of gossip.”

“You know Harper is friends with Rainbow. Not only that, she’s our neighbor.”

Gabriel’s mate, Harper, had come to Mystic Springs under a spell that disguised her true witch nature. When Gabriel met her, he’d been under the impression she was human. Something that had nearly driven him mad at the time because not only was she a witch, she was also his mate.

Now that his mate was Rainbow’s best friend, he’d become annoyingly verbose in how he felt I was doing Rainbow wrong.

“Look, I’m not trying to upset your mate.”

“Good, because she’s pregnant, and I’d hate to pummel you.”

“Again?”

“Pregnant again or pummel you again?”

“Since you’ve never pummeled me, you know I mean pregnant.”

Gabriel growled. Holding up my hands, I leaned back and sized up the man. Ever since he’d become a respectable warlock, he seemed more at ease. It likely made some

warlocks wonder if they should get on with the business of finding their own mate.

Personally, I was damned glad never to have found my mate. I enjoyed being an undomesticated warlock.

“It’s just, this is number two and you’ve only been together for two years.”

“I know how long we’ve been together,” Gabriel snapped. “Maybe if you’d find your own mate, you’d settle down a little. Not let things get to you so much.”

It was my turn to growl.

“Those are not just things.”

“I’m not questioning your motives, Sebastian. And I’m definitely not saying that you should give up your quest. I think your quest to root out witch-trafficking in Mystic Springs serves the town and all of witchkind in general. I’m simply saying you could use a little more balance in your life.”

“My life is balanced fine,” I grumbled. Gabriel was right. I sounded like a petulant child.

But Penelope, my sister, had only been fifteen when she’d been taken by a Traditionalist warlock and force-bonded with him. It was my goal in life to root out every Traditionalist warlock who took part in force-bondings and make them pay. All of my investigations into the largest witch-trafficking networks had led me to Mystic Springs. Given some of the trafficking incidents I and my men had foiled, I knew I was in the right place. It was the least I could do to honor my sister’s life.

“Besides, as you said, thwarting the efforts of witch-traffickers benefits us all. At some point, you’ll have grown daughters. Don’t you want to keep them safe?”

Gabriel’s eyes grew dark. I once again put up my hands.

“All I’m saying is that I need to focus. Not just to put a stop to the traffickers in this town, but to stop them from taking anyone else’s sister or daughter.

“And Rainbow Carmichael is nosy enough that she could inadvertently hinder what I’m doing.”

“I daresay that if you brought Rainbow into the fold, she’d be a powerful ally.”

“I’m not bringing in any unmated witch on this,” I growled. Rainbow annoyed me. Most of the time, she made me want to ring her little witch neck.

But there was no way I’d put her in the crosshairs of witch-traffickers.

“Interesting,” Gabriel said, crossing his legs and looking at me as if he were studying some form of wildlife.

“Don’t you start, Winters. You know damn well how I feel about this. My attempt to protect Rainbow is nothing more than my distaste at seeing any witch at the hands of those bastards.”

Though, if I was honest, I had to admit that the thought of Rainbow having that troublesome mouth silenced by those bastards turned my stomach. It was nearly enough to make me go full berserker.

Luckily, she would never see me go full berserker on anyone like that because she’d never be in the position to see such a thing.

“Fine, Sebastian. All I’m suggesting is that maybe you could go a little easier on Rainbow. She may seem like a little badass witch, but she hasn’t always had an easy go of it. Maybe her prickliness comes from the things she’s seen. Not some hellbent crusade to vex you.”

I schooled my features.

Because I didn’t want the warlock before me to know how much the private life of Rainbow Carmichael intrigued me.

Maybe it was time to pull on a few threads. Just a few.

And keep myself under the radar as I did.

THREE

RAINBOW

The shop was a tiny little storefront at the corner of Main Street.

In reality, it was way too close to the little ice cream shop where Sebastian held court. He'd always find a way to annoy me that close, but it would also allow me to keep an eye on him.

But more than anything, it was a perfect little shop.

And Sebastian Cavanaugh might own it now, but that wouldn't keep me from sneaking in and looking it over. Just to see if he'd done anything with the place.

I knew the little shop inside and out. Had kept my eye on it for years. This wasn't the first time I'd snuck in. But it was the first time I'd snuck in knowing that it was going to be more difficult to get my name on the deed than I had first anticipated.

The shop had once been a little drugstore. It had a lunch counter with barstools and little booth seats to the other side of that where customers had once come in for a malt or a hamburger. The booth seats had seen better days. The vinyl on the booths was fraying, the insides spilling out like they'd been the victim of a heinous crime.

But I knew what my magic could do. It would take me no time to turn this place into the best-looking glamour shop in all the world. By the time I was through with it, witches and warlocks would come to Mystic Springs from all over to sample my wares.

I sighed, looking around at the place.

I looked over at a collection of haphazardly placed metal shelves. I imagined replacing that mess with a dais where people could step up before a mirror and watch themselves be magically transformed. Witches and warlocks had many reasons for wanting to hide their true appearance. Usually, they were benign. Sometimes, it was a bride wanting to look her best for her wedding after being bonded to her mate.

Other times, it was someone who wanted to update their look to blend in with the humans. Since witches and warlocks lived exceptionally long lives, it typically meant updating a look to appear younger or older. This meant taking on the visage of a younger relative or aging up to keep up appearances. Normally, only the magical community was aware of a witch or warlock's true age.

There were a few times when witches wanted a glamour for nefarious reasons. Usually to pull one over on humans or get away with unlawful deeds in the magical community.

But mostly, glammers were part of the spice of being magical. You could even use them for roleplaying with a partner, as I'd done earlier with the warlock at the heat lodge.

I couldn't let anyone take this dream away from me. I knew it was meant to be mine. Knew that one day, I'd welcome all sorts of magical people through the doors and make their dreams come true.

And if I gathered a little gossip in hopes of finding out where that someone was who could help me fix that other part of my life? That would just be icing on the cake.

The shop also had a decently sized apartment on the second floor. I was happy with my house on the outskirts of Mystic Springs. Loved having a new witch next door with whom I shared just about everything.

But it was easy to imagine some nights when work ran over. I could go upstairs and get away from everything. Then I could look out onto Main Street and watch the world go by. Pretend that someone in my past hadn't dealt me a shitty blow

when I'd been too young to do anything about it other than take it.

As I moved toward the steps that led up to the apartment that would someday be mine, I got the sense that someone was watching me.

I turned, looking through the large plate-glass window. The dirty glass still bore the painted name of Johnson's Drugs and Sundries.

No one was there.

Magically, I swept the room, trying to sense any other presence in the building. I sensed the little creatures that burrowed into the walls. Given the number of presences I sensed, I knew that — when I did finally get my dream of this shop — I'd have to install some sort of magical pest control. The place was crawling with mice and other creepy crawlies.

I didn't, however, feel any larger beings. And luckily, I didn't feel the presence of any other witch or warlock. Glancing back at the window one last time before I made my way upstairs, I shrugged.

Nothing here but me and the mice.

FOUR

SEBASTIAN

The damned nosy woman was going to sneak into the shop. After Gabriel left, I'd left the ice cream shoppe behind, intent on making it to my club, The Devil's Den, before nightfall. There, I'd work out some of my pent-up annoyance in the ring. It was Friday. There'd be several warlocks who wanted to take a swing at me.

I enjoyed making my reputation known. Not because I was insecure enough to need my ego stroked. But the more people who knew I wasn't a warlock to be messed with, the less likely they were to mess around in Mystic Springs and get on my bad side.

It was enough to keep most of the riff-raff in town at bay. I knew it would do little to stop traffickers from attempting to gain a foothold in Mystic Springs. That was fine. I wanted them to come out and play. I would always catch them.

My plans to make it to the club before dark were thwarted when I saw Rainbow sneaking around the back of the shop.

I knew she'd done this before. I'd seen her attempt to go unnoticed as she made her way into the old building many times. For most, her attempts would be sufficient. But old warlocks are hard to fool.

And I actually got the sense that, most of the time, she wasn't trying to hide from me. She didn't care if I saw her or not.

But now, I figured she was ready to exact her revenge. What would she do? Magically make the pipes burst so I had a

flooded mess to deal with in order to keep the tenants next door happy? Bring in all sorts of vermin for me to have to exterminate?

Like hell would she get away with anything else. At least not tonight.

I cloaked myself and my presence. Rainbow was a pretty powerful witch in her own right. Her glamours were well-known enough that I knew she got calls from all corners of the world to employ her services. Why she needed a shop was beyond me. It seemed silly to struggle to pay for a shop she didn't need.

Though I questioned why she didn't have enough money to buy the thing years ago.

Sufficiently cloaked, I edged closer to the building and slid inside, protecting my footfalls from being heard.

And then I watched her. Waited for what her next move would be.

Her next move wasn't what I expected.

She was walking around the interior, looking around at the shop, a dreamy look in her eye. She ran her hand over the counter that had once served humans and witchkind sweet and fatty concoctions.

For a moment, she focused on her reflection in the dusty, cracked mirror behind the counter. Then she turned, looking at the disarray in the back corner of the store. At some point, someone had gutted one half of the sales floor, ripping out the shelves and throwing them into a pile in the corner. It was a monstrosity of old, rusted metal that had likely once held rows of such things as pain relievers and cosmetics.

But when Rainbow turned and looked at the mess, she sighed. A dreamy, longing sigh that hit several places inside me. One that I would have to deal with later. But something in my heart pinched at the sound of it.

I knew she wanted this place. I'd seen her sneak inside, just as she was now, numerous times. But I'd never bothered to see what she'd done once she was inside. I figured she'd

been clocking the place for what repairs she would need to make.

But this witch? She was dreaming.

And she'd never looked more beautiful.

For the first time in a long while, I felt like the miserable bastard I was. Rainbow made me crazy sometimes with her gossip. She could make me gnash my teeth more than any witch I could ever recall.

But taking this away from her had actually hurt her. Sure, her constant pursuit to annoy me was taxing. The ribbing I got from the rumors she'd spread about me was annoying at best and downright infuriating at worst.

Still, I couldn't think of once that she'd taken something away from me.

And I'd done that with her.

I nearly uncloaked myself, walked over to her, and told her she could have it. That I'd sign over the deed to her and let her have it for free. After all, it wasn't like I needed the money. Sure, I bought plenty of property in Mystic Springs, but I never did it intending to own the town. I'd signed over my fair share of deeds in my time in Mystic Springs. And when I didn't, I rented the place to whoever needed it for a fraction of what anyone else would have.

The humans thought I was an idiot for not asking for more money.

The magical community knew I was keeping a watch over the place. And the best way to do that was to ensure you had all your bases covered.

I'd actually taken a step toward her when she turned, searching for someone or something behind her. I was still cloaked, but somehow she'd detected me. Confused as to how she'd felt my presence, I retracted my foot and stood back, watching her.

Then I sensed it. That magical pull as she reached out, scenting the area like a bloodhound. Looking for a presence. I

nearly sent my magic back toward her. Had she felt unsafe, I might have given in and done that.

Again, I wasn't an asshole. I didn't want to scare the witch. Just wanted to give her a taste of her own medicine.

But Rainbow wasn't scared or even alarmed, something that almost annoyed me. I knew she knew how many unscrupulous warlocks had been in the area over the years. It was almost as if she didn't have the bloody awareness that she was an unmated witch alone in the town with no one to protect her. Sure, she was a capable witch with glamours, but I questioned her ability to take care of herself in a fight.

She definitely couldn't best anyone physically. She was too slight, despite all those luscious curves. A powerful warlock of my stature would best her both magically and physically before she could respond. And here she was, scenting around for mice in the building.

I sighed. Maybe Gabriel was right. Maybe I was letting this witch get the better of me. The best thing I could do was wash my hands of her and let her get into the trouble she brought upon herself.

Turning, I made my way down the street and away from Rainbow Carmichael and whatever trouble she might bring upon herself.

FIVE

RAINBOW

Typically, the local witch book club meetings were the best place in town to get all the latest gossip. Between Belinda Sparrow and Blanche Mooney, two of the most gossipy witches in town (other than me), once you left a meeting, you were armed with all the best and latest gossip in town.

The book club was little more than a ruse. Each month, we all met at one of the witches' houses under the pretense that we'd read some random novel — usually about witches. This month's pick was *The Witches of Eastwick*.

And I knew without asking that not a damn witch in Harper's house, where the meeting was being held this month, had read the book. It was Harper's first meeting at her home, and I knew she was nervous. Her aunt, a witch in hiding herself, had passed the old Victorian down to her. But she'd made the home her own.

Not long after settling in Mystic Springs, she'd found her mate and now she was working on filling the house with babies. Her first was now toddling through the parlor as the other witches made themselves at home. They raided the kitchen for whatever they thought was missing on the spread Harper and I had prepared before anyone had shown.

Once everyone was settled, the ruse ended. The book was forgotten and the gossiping and bickering began.

“Tell me, Alana, how's it being the newest rut partner of Sebastian Cavanaugh?” Belinda Sparrow asked, never one for mincing words.

I looked over at Alana Blackstone. Somehow, I'd missed this bit of new gossip. I must be off my game. It wasn't as if I hadn't met plenty of Sebastian's partners in my time in Mystic Springs. He was the worst serial monogamist warlock I'd ever encountered. Most unmated warlocks didn't stick with one witch. They saw no reason to. But Sebastian liked to keep it down to one. I suspected this was his further attempt at controlling the narrative. If he had more than one rutting partner, he might mess up and tell two different lies.

Alana, his current partner, was gorgeous, just as all of Sebastian's partners had been.

Candy, his former partner, was a deceptively powerful witch. She hid her power behind her bright blonde hair and impeccable manicure. She gave Alana a quick once-over. Then she returned to picking through the Chex Mix on the table. She always pulled out all the brown wafers for herself, leaving none for anyone else.

Candy was tall, blonde, and looked like she'd stepped off a Paris runway.

Alana, on the other hand, was dark-haired and gorgeous with wide brown eyes that arrested anyone who looked in her direction. She had long lashes that even the worst near-sighted person could sight from across the room at 20 feet. She, too, was tall and Paris-ready. The one thing she also had like Candy was her impeccable fashion sense. I was dressed in a Green Lantern t-shirt and jeans. Alana, however, was styled to perfection in a tight-fitting dress that accentuated all her curves. A peek of cleavage at the v-neck cut of her dress promised delights I could never offer a warlock.

One thing that differed greatly from Candy? Alana loved to share her exploits with her fellow witches.

"Honestly, I've never been with a more giving partner," she began, picking up a finger sandwich with her dainty fingers and bringing it to her full, red lips. "The last time I was with him, Gods, the things that man can do. He does this thing where, just after he pushes inside you, he—"

"I'm going to the Traditionalist Conference in Lansville."

The words had come out of me unexpectedly and at full volume. Alana looked at me, those big brown eyes wide as she tried to grapple for a foothold in the conversation. Looking around, I took in all the faces that were now staring at me.

Next to me, Harper looked almost smug. What was that about?

Belinda, however, looked exasperated. She'd been wanting the goods on Sebastian and I'd interrupted Alana's gossip.

For some reason.

The others looked like they didn't know if they should speak or return to Alana and encourage her to continue.

“What the hell, Rainbow?”

Of all people to question me, it was Candy. One of those brown wafers was dangling from her well-manicured fingers. I was tempted to snatch it from her to see what she would do. It wouldn't hurt her to save some of the best parts of the Chex Mix for everyone else.

I shrugged, not sure what to say in the aftermath of such a revelation.

It was true, after all. I had been planning on it. I just hadn't told anyone about it.

“You can't go to one of those!” Candy continued. She stopped long enough to slam the latest wafer in her mouth. She chewed quickly and then began talking again. I could see a hint of crumb on her pink tongue as she spoke. I'd never seen her this animated.

“There are monsters there, Rainbow. Warlocks who, if they find out that you're unmated, will try to force you into a bond. Have you thought about what this could mean for you? The only witches who go to those things are the ones who've been forced to mate someone. Have you been forced to mate with someone and haven't told any of us?”

When I'd blurted out my plans, I hadn't counted on this sort of reception. The only thing I had counted on was

interrupting Alana's detailed account of what it was like to be ruttled by Sebastian Cavanaugh.

No one wanted to hear about that.

Ew.

Right?

Right.

What I hadn't considered was that I might have to weasel my way out of an explanation. I hadn't considered anything other than making Alana shut up. Now, I was going to have to get Candy off my ass without telling everyone here that there was no way that I could be force-bonded at the conference.

Not with things the way they were right now, at any rate.

"I'm going undercover," I said, stupidly. And usually, I wasn't this stupid. I was Rainbow Carmichael. I knew how to get information out of anyone and knew how to tell people just what they needed to know.

So, why was I acting like a newbie witch who'd never been in public before?

For a second, I directed a glare at Alana. It was all her fault for trying to tell us all about what Sebastian Cavanaugh's knot felt like inside her.

"I think what Rainbow's trying to say is that she wants to discuss this with me later," Harper said, delivering a wide-eyed glare my way. She then turned back to the others. "We'll sort this out."

I huffed. Ever since Harper had given birth, she'd adopted a mom-tone that was both soothing and infuriating. When she'd come to Mystic Springs, she'd leaned on me for knowledge and comfort. Lately, I felt like it was the other way around.

At times, I didn't mind it. Hell, sometimes I even relied on it.

But it also reminded me of things that I might never have if I didn't get to the bottom of the events that had happened in

my past.

Around me, a chorus of voices continued to ask questions. Unlike me, they weren't placated by the dulcet sounds of Harper's mom-tone.

"I'm pregnant!" Harper blurted out after she couldn't manage another break in the conversation. She blew out a frustrated breath. I gave her a smug smile. The kind that said, "See, not so easy, is it?"

Even as my heart ached for the one thing I might never have. As everyone's attention turned from me to Harper, I tried not to let the green-eyed monster get to me.

And remembered why I was going to that conference in the first place.

"OUT WITH IT."

I turned to Harper, who was now dumping the discarded pieces of the Chex Mix in the trash. Ever since the house had cleared out after the book club meeting in name only, Harper and I had managed the silence pretty well. But I didn't have to be a witch to know that she was biding her time.

I also knew it was pointless to think I could get one past her. I opened my mouth, intent on letting it out. Telling her everything. About why I wanted to go to the conference. About what I had been facing for years. About how my name wasn't even Rainbow Carmichael.

But then she opened her mouth and stopped me in my tracks.

"You're upset about the pregnancy, aren't you?"

I clamped my mouth shut. The sound of my teeth clicking together sounded too loud in the near-empty house. Her firstborn was upstairs asleep. The good thing about being a witch was that it allowed witchkind parents to sense when

their kids were into something they shouldn't be. It negated the need for constantly looking in on them or a baby monitor.

Of course, Harper was still human enough that she had the baby monitor, anyway.

"I was trying to save the day by blurting out my news. I didn't think about the fact that I was going to tell you first," Harper said, placing the empty bowl in the sink and making her way over to me. Looking down, I noticed I'd been scrubbing the same spot on the coffee table for the last three minutes. It had likely never been this clean in the table's existence.

"But that had been the plan, Rainbow, I promise." She took a seat on the sofa, placing her hands between her thighs. She had the look of someone who had done something wrong and was trying to figure out the best way to apologize for it. I sighed, sitting down on the sofa beside her. Reaching over, I put my hand on her thigh.

As I did, I felt that zing. That zing that came from touching a witch who was brimming with the possibility of a new life. I nearly pulled my hand back, the feeling making me ache, but I swallowed and kept my hand on Harper's thigh.

"I'm not mad at you for not telling me. You were trying to fix the situation like you always do. How long have you known?"

"Honestly, I think the minute I conceived," she said with a laugh. I wanted to laugh with her. But there it was again, that familiar ache in my chest. So, I did my best to smile and hope she didn't read my mood.

It was too much to hope for.

"Rainbow, I know you said a long time ago that you just planned on being a cool aunt. That you had no intention of settling down and finding someone, but sometimes I feel like maybe you want to find your mate. After all, don't all witches have mates?"

Ever since Harper had bonded with Gabriel, she'd become a relentless matchmaker in Mystic Springs. So far, I evaded

her scope. I intended to keep it that way.

“Mating bonds are a little more complicated than that.” A lot more. I could tell stories, but I saw no reason to give her nightmares. “I just don’t think that’s in the cards for me. Besides, I have quite an enjoyable time with the warlocks at the heat lodge.”

There. That wasn’t entirely a lie. I enjoyed the freedom of being a free witch at times. Anna employed the hottest warlocks in town. Hell, she’d even paid to have some move here so she could keep a good selection on tap. Being a free witch meant I could go there anytime I needed and get all the rutting I desired.

“But sometimes I feel like you want to be a mother. Have a family.”

I tried to tamp down my ire. After all, it wasn’t Harper’s fault that this was a sore subject for me.

“If I wanted to have a baby, I could have one without a mate.” I tried to keep the sharpness from my tone. When I saw Harper’s face fall, I knew I’d done a less-than-stellar job.

“Harper, I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be short with you. It’s just...it’s not something I want to discuss right now.”

She nodded. The subject was off the table.

“And I’m happy for you,” I added. That was true enough. Harper and Gabriel’s love story had been a tumultuous one. First, she had her abilities and identity as a witch cloaked from both her and her mate. Then she’d nearly been killed after someone tried to take her away from Gabriel.

I might be sad that I’d never have what Harper had, but not for one minute did I begrudge her or Gabriel their happiness.

“I can’t wait to meet him or her.”

“Him.” Harper’s smile could have lit up the room.

I smiled in return. “Fantastic! I’ll teach him all the little witchy things I know. There will be no young warlock in Mystic Springs with better glammers.”

“I can’t wait!” Harper squealed. She then began talking about all the things she wanted to do with the new baby that she’d been too scared to do with her first.

I let her continue dreaming aloud, content that she’d at least forgotten about the thing I’d blurted out during the book club meeting.

SIX

SEBASTIAN

The man across from me had a good few inches on me. His fists were bigger. His shoulders, which he'd tried to ram into me before I'd ducked him and let him fly headlong into the rungs of the ring, were massive. I knew he had a mate, and I hoped she was strong enough to take on the brute because, as skilled as I was in the ring, I was having a hell of a time with it myself.

Luckily, he didn't want to rut me. He just wanted to knock me out.

Everyone who faced me in the ring at The Devil's Den did so in the hopes that they would get bragging rights. Many warlocks had tried, but no one had been able to say that he had taken down Sebastian Cavanaugh.

I was determined to keep it that way.

The man, who had introduced himself as Marlon Longbourne, had come from two states over to try his hand at taking me down. I had local regulars who would sometimes commission a fight with me. Most knew that they wouldn't best me, but time in the ring with me honed their skill. If they paid attention and developed their form, at least their next fight with me might be longer.

Marlon sprang back from the ropes, shaking his head, and looking back at me. The rules were simple: no magic. No dirty fighting, usually. I sometimes allowed dirty fighting, but only at designated times and only with safeguards in place. And I didn't fight dirty with just anyone.

“Did you use magic?” he accused as he stared me down from the other side of the ring.

Around us, onlookers watched, no doubt curious how I’d handle the accusation.

“You damn well know I didn’t, Longbourne. Another accusation like that and the fight will be forfeited. I take my rules seriously and I expect you to as well.”

He squared his shoulders, nodding, and then stepped forward, taking his stance.

“Got a witch in town?” he asked. I chuckled. So, this one was going to try to get under my skin.

That was fine. I had a tough hide. And I didn’t count psychological warfare as dirty fighting. Most of the time, it was fun to see what they could come up with. I relished seeing what people said about me in Mystic Springs and beyond.

“Not anyone you need to worry yourself about,” I said, punctuating the sentence with a right hook. The warlock sputtered, then cursed. Blood and saliva sprayed from his mouth in an unholy cocktail on the mat. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and then looked at me. His eyes blazed fire.

“Uh, uh, uh,” I wagged my finger, but retained my stance. “No magic. One sniff of it and you’ll be barred from the club. So think carefully about your next move.”

“Oh, I’m thinking about my next move, Cavanaugh,” the warlock said, his words slurring around the swelling of his lip. “I’m thinking about moving in on that hot piece I heard you’ve been having your eye on.”

I groaned. Was that the way it was? He thought he could get to me by bringing up whoever my latest rutting partner was. Alana was a sexy little number, but we had an understanding, just as I did with all my partners. She didn’t expect me to avenge her, and I’d laugh in his face when the pitiful warlock brought up her name.

“Stupid name for a witch, anyway. Rainbow. What sort of name is that?”

Something like ice skittered down my spine.

“Who the hell told you I had my eye on her?”

What was I doing? Was I going to let this brute get into my head?

“You should see yourself right now,” he said, bouncing on his feet. He had got in his first shot. At least he was getting overconfident. “You’re fuming. She got you tied up in knots, huh? Is that what you do to her? Knot her like the dirty little witch she is? If she’s that good, maybe she should try out my knot. I’m sure the missus wouldn’t mind too—“

I sprang on him, fists flying, knuckles crunching against bone. He was on his back before the crowd around us could react. I felt hair and blood and snot beneath my fingers as I unleashed a rage I hadn’t felt in the ring in ages.

Hands were on my shoulders. Someone had an arm around my middle. I was still swinging even as I felt myself being pulled away from my opponent.

“Let me fucking go!” I wailed.

“He’s down, Seb!”

I barely recognized the voice of Frank, the manager of my club and the first friend I’d made when I’d come to town. He was nearly as strong as me, and it was taking him and a few others to pull me back.

The haze was clearing from my vision. Marlon was on the ground, moaning. Some of my men who worked at the club were surrounding him. He was moving. At least there was that, but with the way his face was swelling, I’d dealt him some serious, if not permanent damage.

Shit.

What the hell had come over me?

“What the hell, Seb?” Frank asked once he’d sat me down in a seat near the ring. Around us, my men were clearing out the spectators, pushing them away as they attempted to crowd me. They were as curious about what had happened between Marlon and me as Frank was.

Normally, I was controlled. The Den was a business, after all. The chance at fighting me was a service I offered. It was never taken seriously — not by me, at least.

But something had gone wrong in the ring just now.

“What the hell did he say to you to make you wail on him like that? If we hadn’t pulled you off of him, you would have killed him!”

I watched as they dragged away Marlon. He was still out of it, barely more than just conscious. I’d somehow pay for that.

“I had a bad day,” I lied. I wasn’t about to tell Frank what Marlon had said that had set me off. I still had trouble making sense of it myself. There was no reason for it. He mentions Rainbow Carmichael and I lose my shit?

How was that even possible?

“Usually, you’re a pretty decent liar,” Frank said, reaching over and taking a towel from one of the other men. He handed it to me and leveled a look at me that almost reminded me of my father. Frank was actually younger than me, but for some reason, he looked older. Acted older, too. He had a mate and Gods knew how many kids out there. Something about being settled down had turned him into a know-it-all.

It was annoying.

But not as annoying as Rainbow Carmichael. And not as annoying as the fact that I’d allowed her to get into my head. I still couldn’t believe I’d nearly beaten a warlock half to death for merely mentioning her name.

“It was nothing, Frank. Now go. Let me stew in silence and let my hands heal.”

It wouldn’t take long for them to heal being a warlock, but I had no desire to continue this conversation any further.

AS SOON AS I COULD, I got the hell away from the club and made my way home. Part of keeping up appearances in Mystic Springs meant buying the most ridiculous, ostentatious house on the market. I'd found that in The Lansdale Estate, a veritable mansion that sat close to the downtown area of Mystic Springs.

Once I'd bought the old mansion, said to have once been the home of a prominent businessman in the area, I'd magicked the place up. Then, I'd placed more wards on the place than any other place in town. I kept a housekeeper and a butler, but other than that, I rarely had company.

Which was why, when the front bell rang, I groaned. Of all the nights for someone to pierce the wards and bother me. I'd hoped to be alone, jerk myself off until I got whatever this thing was out of my system that had taken hold of me at the club. Then I could start over again tomorrow.

"I'll get it!" I called to absolutely no one. Carl, the warlock I'd hired as the butler of my estate, had long since retired. After all, very few people dared to breach Sebastian Cavanaugh's wards at this time of night.

When I opened the door and looked at the face of Alana, I schooled my features lest my weariness show.

Usually, I would have welcomed her in such a state. Whenever I'd spent most of the night fighting, I'd usually worked up an appetite. And Alana was a more than willing partner. Up for just about anything I could come up with and a few surprising things I hadn't yet thought of.

"Sorry," she said, no doubt reading the weariness on my face. I'd tried to school it. After all, she was my current partner, and I had no desire to make her feel undesired. "I know it's late, it's just...I was at book club."

I huffed.

"I know. You hate the things. Anyway, they were talking about, you know, warlocks and it got me thinking of you and, well, feeling a certain kind of way."

She slinked closer, placing a hand on my chest. My cock reacted even though I knew I was in no mood for this. I was going to have to put her down lightly. I didn't need to take on any witch in this state. The best thing I could do was punish myself with a bruising jerk-off session, then jump in the shower, and call it a night.

At the very least, I could invite her in for a hot drink and then have someone drive her back home. She could pick up her vehicle tomorrow.

“Come on in, Alana,” I said, moving back from her caress and making room for her to pass. I didn't miss the look of disappointment on her face and I felt bad about it. But not bad enough to give in to it. “I'm afraid I won't be much company tonight. But perhaps you can tell me what happened at the book club.”

I didn't want to know what happened at that sorry excuse for a hen session. As if they ever actually discussed a book. I had it on good authority that Blanche Mooney hadn't read a book since the printing press had been invented. And then she'd only done it for the novelty of the thing.

“What's got you in such a lather?”

Couldn't tell her that either. Not that there was room for jealousy in our partnership. We'd worked out those details when our partnership had begun.

But I also knew that witches could sometimes get more invested, even if the details had been worked out ahead of time.

“Long night at the club,” I lied. “Got into a pretty gnarly fight with a warlock twice my size.”

As I led Alana to the living room, I watched as her eyes grew wide. Unmated or not, hearing about a warlock who was currently rutting you, taking on a bigger, stronger warlock, awakened things in a witch she couldn't control. If I didn't watch myself, she'd go straight into a heat and I'd have no choice but to rut her.

“Anyway,” I said, moving away from that topic of conversation as smoothly as possible. “He had to be placated. I’m sure I’m going to be serving him free drinks for the next few decades. And then there’s a lot of other stuff that I’m dealing with at the moment. Usually, I’m not as tired as this, but I’m afraid that the week has taken its toll on me.”

In other words, there would be no rutting tonight.

A new one for me. Usually, I was always in the market for a good rutting. Especially with a witch who was as beautiful as Alana.

She stepped closer to me, once again petting my chest, and looking up at me with those large, deep brown eyes.

“I admit, I was about to brag on your...prowess before Rainbow Carmichael blurted out that she was going to some Traditionalist conference. Then the meeting devolved into chaos as everyone tried to tell her what an idiot she was.”

Something like ice flooded my veins. “She’s what?”

The words sounded like a croak. Luckily, Alana didn’t seem to notice. She continued petting me, practically purring as she focused on the exposed skin beneath the collar of my white dress shirt.

“I know. For some reason, she declared she was going to this damned conference. Anyway, I was about to spread the gospel of what a magnificent lover you are before she interrupted me.”

Reaching up, I took her hands in mine. Gently, I pulled them away.

“Alana, I’m afraid that something came up.”

“Well, I certainly hope so,” she purred.

“I don’t mean that. I realized I forgot something at the club and if I don’t take care of it, it’s going to be a right mess in the morning. Can I see you home?”

She huffed. “Something wrong? Usually, it takes nothing to get you going, Seb.”

“I know. I’m sorry, love. But this day has been a little...
strange. Make it up to you later?”

SEVEN

RAINBOW

Someone was pounding at the door.

At first, I was certain that I was dreaming of the sound. Just keep sleeping, Anabelle. If it goes away, it means you can go back to sleep.

Only in my dreams did anyone still call me Anabelle. Even myself. When I'd disappeared from my former life, leaving my family and everything I knew behind, I'd taken on a different name.

I chose Rainbow because it was something that no one would have ever expected of me back home. It also promised a bright future.

So far, I hadn't found that bright future. I wouldn't until I could find the one who cursed me.

Right now, however, I was intent on finding out who the hell was banging at my door at...

I looked over at the clock. It was two in the morning.

My mind jumped to Harper. Years ago, I remembered a similar time when Gabriel had come banging on my door, intent on needing my help because someone had taken her.

Throwing on my t-shirt — whoever was at the door could live with seeing a bit of skin — I fled down the stairs and threw open the door.

And stared into the face of Sebastian Cavanaugh.

His eyes slid down the length of me. I should have taken the time to throw on the pajama pants as well.

“What the hell, Cavanaugh? It’s one in the morning. This better be good.”

He looked...devastatingly handsome, the bastard. I might hate the man, but I understood why witches everywhere wanted to at least experience one rut out of the man.

Not me, mind you. But there was no doubt that he was something delicious to look at.

Too bad he was an asshole.

“Can I come in, Miss Carmichael?”

Miss Carmichael. So formal. I couldn’t remember the last time he’d called me that. Maybe when we’d first met? It had went downhill shortly after. I think the last thing he had called me had been, what? Nosy gossip hag?

Sounds about right.

“Are you going to curse me? Magick me so that I have to tell you all my deepest, darkest secrets? Set my house on fire?”

“If I wanted to do any of those things, I assure you, I would have already done them. Now, I’m asking nicely: can I come in?”

“And what if I say no?”

He huffed. “I’ll turn around and leave, but I really need to speak with you. I’m not here to cause trouble.”

Something about the way he said that. He almost sounded resigned. Worried, too. Curiosity killed the cat and all.

“Fine. Come in. But if you get out of hand, I’ll up my wards and make it so uncomfortable for you to stay here that you’ll run out screaming.”

“Duly noted.”

I stood back and let him pass. He smelled like the bloom of an early spring. It was that scent that attracted other witches to

him. I wondered if it smelt like that or even better to the ones he rutted.

And thinking about him rutting anyone right now was not a good idea. It wasn't ever a good idea, but especially not right now.

“What can I do for you, Sebastian?”

It was weird saying his first name like that. We either referred to each other only by our last names or by some insult we'd thought up on the fly. His name passing my lips made me feel...strange. Like a ghost had passed through the room and was peering over my shoulder, teasing me.

He stopped, looking around the room, taking everything in.

“You don't have photographs,” he announced after I'd let him peruse for far too long.

“Observant. Now, what brings you here at...”

I glanced at the clock above the mantle. “Nearly two in the morning.”

He turned toward me. Sebastian was a tall, sturdy man. The kind of man that looked like he'd been cut from stone, right down to that exquisitely sharp jawline. Even though he stood in the dead center of my living room, it was like he took up every inch of space around him. Like Alice when she grew too big for the house in Wonderland.

“It's come to my attention that you have plans to do something foolish.”

I tried to diagram that sentence in my head. Diagram it into what I could make sense of and what irritated me about his words. Annoyed that he had just referred to me — in a roundabout way — as foolish. Confused that I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Explain yourself.”

“You apparently have some foolish notion that you should make a trip to a certain Traditionalist Conference that's taking place not too far away.”

I stomped away from him, making my way to the kitchen. We were not having this conversation ever. Let alone at this time of day.

I also knew that, after this, I'd get no sleep. Might as well make my morning coffee now and get on with it. Those three hours of sleep had been nice, I guess.

Sebastian's footfalls behind me told me he had followed me into the kitchen. Now, who was foolish? If a witch turns her back on you and walks off?

You steer clear. She's getting angry.

"Nothing to say about that?"

"I can just imagine how you got that information and from who."

Damned Alana. It was easy to envision what they'd been doing when she gave him that information, too. It didn't bother me they were rutting.

It didn't. It really didn't.

Next meeting, I was bringing this up. Sure, the book club was nothing more than a glorified gossip session. But that didn't mean we had to blab everything we heard to whatever warlock we currently had rutting us.

"Does it matter?" he asked, leaning on the counter and watching as I scooped coffee into the coffeemaker. That damned scent. He had to somehow magically alter his scent. That was the only explanation for why so many witches found him so appealing.

And no. It didn't matter. Or it shouldn't. It shouldn't matter that I was imagining him with Alana right now, driving into her and her calling out his name. I hated the man. No matter how damned distracting he was.

"No," I said, turning to face him and jutting my chin out. His eyes dipped to my waist, and I remembered I still wasn't wearing pants. "Eyes up here, warlock. I wasn't dressed for company."

“I apologize. It’s just...I’ve never seen you in anything but jeans and a t-shirt.”

“And I’m still in a t-shirt, so focus. Now, why does it concern you that I’m going to this conference?”

I jabbed the button on the coffeemaker and then crossed my arms. If I could have, I would have pinched my nose closed so I didn’t have to smell that intoxicating scent of his.

Damned warlock. I really was going to have to take Anna up on that free session offer soon. Maybe tomorrow. For now, I had to focus because if I started making slick and he scented it, I’d never hear the end of it.

“You know those places are no place for an unmated witch to go alone.”

“I have to go.”

“Why?”

“That’s none of your business.”

He blew out a huff of air and ran his fingers through his hair. I’d never seen him so disheveled before.

And then he began to pace. Back and forth across the kitchen, like a caged tiger. I silently said a spell to calm my nerves as I watched him. Seeing a warlock like this gave a witch ideas.

And none of those ideas were ones I wanted to have about Sebastian Cavanaugh.

“So, you just want to go to this madhouse, unmated, and put yourself in danger? Why?”

He stopped his pacing, turning to face me. His long body looked downright elegant as he did it. Like the most graceful dancer. I knew Sebastian was a fighter. According to rumor, he was one of the most formidable warlocks on earth when it came to a physical fight. Right now, I completely believed that. He was strong and capable, but he moved with precision. And it was effortless.

Suddenly, I had an image of what he must look like in that ring at his club. Shirtless, sweaty, and taking down one warlock after another.

I shut the door on that thought like a steel trap. If I cut off the arm of that thought as I did, all the better.

“I have my reasons, Sebastian. I have no desire to be force-bonded. But I have things in my life that...you don’t know about. Those are mine to know. Anyway, why are you concerned with what I do? You hate me, remember?”

He glared at me. And then he stepped closer, towering over me.

And I couldn’t help it. I let out a little gasp. Just a little breath of air that sounded louder than it had any right to. It wasn’t like I was panting or anything.

Yet.

“No unmated witch belongs at those things. I know what they do, Rainbow. I know the minute they find out that you’re unmated, you’ll be outnumbered and outmatched. And you may not be my favorite person, but I’ll be damned if I’d let you walk into a lion’s den like that alone.”

Good. Gods.

Be strong, Anabelle.

I wasn’t even on my fake name game at the moment. Sebastian Cavanaugh was seriously about to fuck everything up.

I had to get this under control and quick.

“You act like I’ve never had any dealings with these people,” I said. There. Cryptic. And true.

His eyes, already a deep rich brown, went nearly black.

“Who?”

His voice was low and dangerous, and it had that quality of tone that would send most witches straight into a heat. Squaring my shoulders, I turned away from him and focused on the coffeemaker.

Get the mug. Put it on the table. Pour the brew. Walk away. Sit down. Compose yourself.

And that's exactly what I did. Taking a sip of the stuff hot and black — not my normal concoction, but it would do for the moment — I let it scald my tongue. The sensation brought me back to reality. Centered me.

“Sebastian, this is really unnecessary. I appreciate the whole alpha thing you're doing here, but it's not for me. I'm not your mate. I'm not your responsibility.”

“The fact that I know about this makes it my obligation,” he said, stepping closer. For a minute, he hesitated. His eyes volleying between me and the other chair at the kitchen table. All my furniture was mismatched, outdated, and scuffed. When I'd run, I'd made quick work of it, taking only what I needed. I'd slowly gathered the things I needed to survive. Four matching kitchen table chairs were low on that list.

Finally, he pulled the chair back, the legs screeching across the worn kitchen floor, and took a seat.

And I was hit by how odd this situation was. Sebastian and I had hated each other for as long as we'd known each other. Now he was in my kitchen — at two in the morning - going full alpha as he tried to talk me out of doing something he thought was dangerous.

I just couldn't figure out why.

“Sebastian, I get that you have thoughts about trafficking.”

He growled. I continued, ignoring how that sound made me feel something in the pit of my belly.

“But that doesn't mean that you owe me your protection. Once again, I'm going to remind you that, according to you, I've been a thorn in your side from the minute we met. You don't need to worry about what I do in my free time.”

He gripped the edges of the table. I could see the tips of his fingers growing red from the blood pooling there. For some reason, this situation was really getting to him.

“I want to go with you.”

Unfortunately, I'd just taken a sip of my scalding hot coffee. I spit the brew out, jumping back. He stood up quickly, grabbing a napkin from the roll on the counter. He stepped back toward the table, wiping it down. He was too close right now. I could feel the fabric of his pants brushing against my bare leg. I cleared my throat.

Whatever he heard in that gesture, it made him stop, toss the napkin, and then return to his seat.

I was still sputtering, wiping the coffee from my now-soaked t-shirt.

And his eyes were fixated on the motion. I stopped rubbing the spot, putting my hands beneath the table and clenching them between my thighs. I really needed to get this warlock out of my house as soon as possible.

“Now that I'm not drinking coffee, care to repeat what you just said?”

He cleared his throat. His eyes were wild, but he focused on me.

“I want to go with you. To the conference.”

“Why in the hell would you want to do that?”

“We go as a mated couple,” he began, popping out of the chair and beginning to pace once again.

“Whoa. I think you need some sleep.”

“We can be newly mated. No kids yet. We'll use your glammers. No one will see who we are but each other. Whatever it is you hope to accomplish there...”

He turned to me as if he expected me to give him that tidbit of information. I stared at him. He huffed and continued.

“It will be easier to accomplish if people aren't sniffing around you because you're alone. What were you even planning to tell them? That your mate allowed you to go to this damned thing alone?”

I hated how stupid he made the idea sound. But yeah. That had been the plan. When I said nothing, I had as good as

confirmed his theory.

“That settles it. I’m going with you.”

“Why would I allow you to do that?”

“Why would you forbid me? It’s suicide to do anything else.”

He nearly choked on the word suicide. His eyes were still blazing as he stopped, watching me.

He didn’t know what I’d been through. Had no idea that I’d perfected my ways of dealing with these types of warlocks over the years. If I had my way, he never would.

“What’s in it for me?”

He repeated the words as if they were in a foreign language he didn’t understand.

“You stay safe! Rainbow, I get that you’re headstrong, but this is ridiculous.”

I watched him, chewing my lip.

I could work this to my advantage. If he wanted to go so badly, maybe he’d give me something in return.

“I’ll let you go with me on one condition.”

“As your mate,” he reiterated.

Those words from him made my belly flutter with all sorts of tingly feelings. I pushed it aside.

“Fine. As my mate. If I allow you to go, you sign over the shop to me.”

“Deal.”

“Deal?” I hadn’t expected him to agree with me that easily.

“If you go with me as my mate and stay with me, don’t run off or do anything stupid, I’ll sign over the shop to you as soon as we get back to Mystic Springs. Good. It’s settled.”

He turned and began heading toward the living room. I jumped up, following him.

“Where are you going?” Why did I care?

“I’ll be here tomorrow for you to fit me for my glamour.
And I’m driving us.”

And with that, he stomped out of my house, slamming the door behind him.

Good Gods. What the hell had just happened?

EIGHT

SEBASTIAN

That blasted witch was going to be the death of me.

I wasn't even sure what had come over me. That was three times in the last 24 hours that Rainbow Carmichael had gotten the better of me. First, watching her sighing wistfully as she walked through that shop. Then the fight in the ring.

Now, the bloody little witch was going to get herself force-mated at some damned Traditionalist gathering.

Traditionalists had always been a thorn in my side. Once upon a time, their ways were considered tradition, hence the name. They were warlocks who believed they had the right to claim any witch they desired and force her to mate bond with them. They shirked the idea of destined mates for witches and warlocks.

It was a barbaric way of life that hurt both witches and warlocks, even if the warlocks didn't see the harm in their brutish ways of life.

I could at least chalk my ire up to never ever wanting to see another witch force-mated. Ever since I'd lost my sister to such a diabolical scheme, it was my life's mission to make life hell for as many Traditionalists as I could.

But that still didn't explain why Rainbow got under my skin.

As I stepped into the safety of my bedroom, I realized my little tête-à-tête with Rainbow had done more than just get under my skin. My cock was hard and begging for attention.

Fuck.

Stripping off my suit, I thought about drenching myself in a hot shower and jerking one-off in there.

But I stopped.

And I hated myself when I realized why.

I didn't want to wash the scent of her off me. Just that little time spent in that Craftsman house of hers and I had her scent on me. It smelled like cinnamon and clean soap, a scent that was all Rainbow. I'd scented her before. Noticed how damned intoxicating her unique witch scent was.

I'd once heard one of the warlocks that worked at the lodge talk about it.

And then I'd ignored how much I wanted to beat his face in. Particularly his nose. As if I had some sort of claim over Rainbow's scent.

As if I'd want to.

Flopping down on my bed, I regarded my stiffened cock like a foreign invader. How dare my dick get so hard over Rainbow Carmichael, of all Gods forsaken witches?

And yet, when she'd opened that door in nothing but a t-shirt and panties, I'd known right then that I'd wind up right here with my hand around my cock.

"Well, no point in beating around the bush," I said, denying to myself that I was talking aloud to my cock. "Might as well just get around to beating this."

I grasped my cock in my hand and hissed. As I ran my hand up the length, I tried to focus just on the sensation.

I tried to exorcise the thought that flit through my mind.

Of Rainbow in those tight little panties and that short little t-shirt with the fucking kittens on it. Ridiculous, like all the little graphic t-shirts she always wore. I wasn't sure I'd ever seen the woman dress in anything but casual bullshit.

But those little pink panties. They'd had a frill around the thighs. It was almost as if she'd hidden that little piece of

femininity away from the world and I'd caught her red-handed.

Or pink-pantied.

Might as well give in to it. Might as well imagine sliding my fingers across that fabric, pulling it from her skin and sliding it across those chubby little thighs.

Then I'd find her cunt damp, her slick leaking out onto her thighs, clearing the way for me to impale her on my knot.

At the very least, if I was going to give into this fantasy, I could imagine a good grudge fuck. Imagine getting all of that pent-up tension that had always been between us. Slamming into her, hard and fierce. She'd scream when I took her, both in pleasure and pain.

And by Gods, she'd beg for me to knot her for hours.

Beg me to fill up her womb with my seed. Plead with me to make her swell with our child.

I didn't know what the fuck was wrong with me, but I was jerking my cock as if I was punishing myself. Whether punishing myself for giving into the fantasy or for having it at all, I wasn't sure.

But right then, I didn't care because it felt damn good to imagine plowing into Rainbow Carmichael's tight, pink pussy.

This wasn't the first time I'd had this fantasy. It was downright embarrassing how many times I'd gone home after having a row with Rainbow and then wound up jerking myself off. Each time, I'd imagined Rainbow's face contorting with ecstasy.

Unfortunately, the fantasy had become more prevalent as of late.

And now the damned woman was putting herself in the crosshairs of hundreds of Traditionalists at that damned conference. I should have walked right into her house, bent her over my knee, and slapped that pink-covered backside until she promised not to put herself in danger.

And then begged me to claim her.

“Fuck!” I moaned, long and loud, as I came, my spend covering my hands. My brain, barely functioning, imagining it flooding her cunt and womb.

I had no desire to be mated to anyone, least of all Rainbow Carmichael.

But what happened in this room, stayed in this room.

Looking down at the mess I’d made of myself and my sheets, I was almost embarrassed that I’d allowed Rainbow to get inside my head this way.

And if I was going to spend a week at this conference under the guise of her mate, I was going to have to get this reaction of mine under control. Because grabbing a few minutes every half hour to beat myself off in the men’s bathroom would probably raise some eyebrows.

All I had to do was get through the week with her and make sure she didn’t get herself into trouble.

I’d been an idiot to sign myself up for this.

But I’ll be damned if I was going to let her walk into that bear’s den alone.

Or with anyone other than me.

NINE

RAINBOW

Usually, it was me who made my way over to Harper's house when I'd seen a strange car in the driveway. It was me who was clamoring for all the information I could find out about what was going on in Harper's life.

I hadn't always been this nosy. Circumstances had just made me this way.

Now, Harper was standing on my front porch, baby on her hip. Reaching out, I took the baby from her. She clung to me after giving her mom a quick backward glance. Witch babies were especially in-tune with their moms and dads. But I'd been in her life since moments after she was born. Furthermore, the baby recognized me as a fellow witch. She was lucky enough to have both witch and baby intuition in order to recognize I was a good one who'd never hurt her.

"Come on in and get the scoop," I said, turning with the baby in my arms. Just having her near to me set off that pang inside me that longed for something that I was afraid I'd never have. It was the whole reason I was risking the trip to the conference.

If I could find the one who cursed me all those years ago and put an end to him? Maybe I could finally find my mate.

Until then, I was cursed to never find the one who would complete me.

Sitting on the sofa, I played with the baby as Harper made her way to the kitchen and began shuffling around.

“Herbal tea is in the cupboard above the dishwasher,” I called out. I settled back onto the sofa as the baby turned in my arms and began patting my cheeks and giggling.

“I miss coffee,” Harper called back.

I bit back the retort that I’d love to have that reason to miss coffee. But that would be petty. And I tried my best not to be petty.

Even if I sometimes wanted to.

Once Harper had a mug in hand, she came back into the living room and took the seat opposite me.

“So, what was Sebastian doing at your house so early?”

“What were you doing paying attention to my house at two in the morning? You should either be asleep or Gabriel should be rutting you. If this pregnancy is anything like your last, your hormones have to be working overtime.”

She blushed. She was still new to the sex drive of witchkind. It was honestly kind of adorable.

“He was the one who noticed. We’d just, um...”

She took a sip of her tea, looking embarrassed.

“Anyway, he went to the window when he heard a car. You know how he is. Ever since that night when those bastards took me, he’s always on alert. I honestly wasn’t trying to be nosy, but when he told me he saw Sebastian’s car over here, well...”

“You wondered what was going on.”

I sighed. It was natural, after all. And furthermore, how could I be annoyed when I’d so often stuck my nose in other people’s business?

The two of us spread out a play-mat for the baby and I settled in, deciding how much to tell Harper.

“He found out about me going to the Traditionalist Conference.”

“Oh. That’s interesting. Do I want to know how he found out?”

“Alana. Apparently, after the book club meeting, she went to his house and told him everything. Most likely with his cock lodged—“

I cut myself off. I hadn’t meant to sound so bitter. Harper raised an eyebrow at me over the rim of her tea mug.

“Anyway, she told him and I guess when they were finished, he hightailed it over here.”

“Interesting.”

“I don’t like the way you just said that.”

She shrugged.

“It’s just, ever since I moved to Mystic Springs, you guys have been at each other’s throats. Now, he gets wind of you putting yourself in danger and he’s over here demanding answers.”

That wasn’t all he had demanded.

“What is it?” Harper asked, leaning forward. Was this how I looked when someone dangled a juicy piece of information in front of me?

“He didn’t just demand answers.”

Harper’s lips parted. She was practically brimming with excitement. Surely she got enough excitement from being Gabriel Winters’ mate. Was my life really this intriguing?

I was used to having others be the subject of gossip. I liked it better when I disappeared into the background.

A far cry from what my life had been like before I’d left home.

“I agreed he could go with me. And we’re going to...”

I hesitated. Harper was going to have a field day with this next bit, if her reaction to the first part of this was any indication.

“You’re going to what?” She was about to fall right off the edge of the sofa.

“We’re going to pretend to be a mated couple.”

Harper was beginning to remind me of the Cheshire Cat in that Disney cartoon. The slow smile that spread over her face was downright devious.

“You’re going to pretend to be a mated couple,” she repeated.

“Is there an echo in here?”

“It’s just so delicious.”

“It’s not delicious. There’s nothing to it and don’t you start, Harper. You know how he feels about the Traditionalists. He’s got a hard-on for sniffing them out and ending them.”

“Sounds like a decent warlock.”

“And it’s not like I’m not getting anything out of it either,” I continued, ignoring whatever Harper was attempting to do by pointing out all the good things about Sebastian.

“You’re getting a safety net. No matter his reasons, it makes me feel a lot better that you’re not going to this thing alone. Gabriel and I have been talking about it and—“

“You and Gabriel have been talking about it?” I hated how shrill I sounded.

“My best friend is going into a near suicide mission with a bunch of warlocks who think they have a right to do anything to an unmated witch’s body they want? You’re damned right I talked to my mate about it.”

I huffed. And relaxed. If the tables had been turned, I would have been doing the same thing.

If I had a mate, that is.

“Fine. But that’s not all I’m getting out of it. He’s agreed to sign the shop over to me if I allow him to go with me.”

“Holy shit.” Harper punctuated the sentence with a long whistle. “There’s something else here other than just him

wanting to protect an unmated witch.”

“There’s nothing else to it, so get it out of your head. I’ll die hating Sebastian Cavanaugh. It will be a cold day in hell before anything other than grudging acceptance of each other exists between us.”

“If you say so,” Harper said, picking at her nails. Smug little witch.

TEN

SEBASTIAN

“How does this work?”

Standing in the middle of Rainbow’s little living room, I was reminded of the night before. When I’d come to her house and become intoxicated at the sight of her luscious, thick thighs.

Luckily, she was now clad in her typical attire: a t-shirt, this one bearing a retro-looking Spider-Man, jeans, and her Chucks. She had topped off the outfit with an ill-fitting green hoodie. Between the pink shoes, the Spider-Man t-shirt, and the hoodie, she practically embodied her name.

“Have you ever worn a glamour before?” she asked, crouching to her knees before me and extracting a tape measure from the bag on the floor. I looked away, the sight of her on her knees threatening to expose me.

Something was off. Usually, it was very easy to want to strangle Rainbow. Right now, I just wanted to fuck her.

I imagined those thick pink lips around the head of my cock. Which was why I was intently studying an elephant figurine that was sitting on the table beside her sofa. The thing had a chip on one ear. I wondered if it had sentimental value.

Then I wondered why I was wondering about that.

I looked back down at Rainbow on her knees and turned back to the elephant.

Right. Because I’m trying not to think about her mouth around my cock.

“I’ve worn a glamour before,” I said, remembering what she had asked me. “But usually crude ones. I don’t think I’ve been fitted for a glamour since my first mating ball.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw her head pop up.

“You went to a mating ball?”

I sighed. This was a reminder of how many years I had on Rainbow. Mating balls were a thing of the past. Unless you were a Traditionalist and then you were all about bringing them back en vogue.

“I’m an old warlock, Carmichael. I don’t agree with the old ways. Hence the reason I do the things I do.

“It’s also the reason I don’t like any unmated witch among a bunch of old warlocks — and new stupid ones — who think they can control what a witch does with her body. I know these people. I’ve been around them.”

Never mind that it bothered me a great deal to think about Rainbow in their clutches. She might drive me up the wall, but she was a vibrant witch — full of life. Those warlocks would take her, force-mate her, and suck the life out of her.

Just like they’d done with my sister.

“You don’t know what they can do,” I said, looking down at her. She turned away from me, standing as she measured me with her tape measure. It was a charmed tape measure, meant to help her fit me with a glamour that acted like a second skin. She bit her lip as she studied it. I tried not to focus on how she pulled that bottom pink lip between her teeth.

“I know more than you think I do.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

“What?”

My heart pounded. I remembered what Gabriel said about how Rainbow had been through enough. Now, seeing that haunted look on her face, I wanted to know what put that look there.

She shrugged, nodding as she noted whatever the tape measure told her, and then put the tool away. Looking down

into her bag, I saw it wasn't unlike the one I remembered Mary Poppins carrying around in the film. Probably had about as much space, too.

"I know people," she said. An evasive answer if there ever was one.

"You're not being completely honest with me, Rainbow."

"And you're here for a glamour. Not a heart-to-heart. Let's get you fitted for this glamour and then you can go do whatever it is you usually do on days like this."

"Monday?"

"Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. Whatever."

She wasn't going to tell me right now, but I would get the information out of her one way or another.

She continued to measure and take notes as she stood back and scrutinized me. A few times, my skin prickled with magic as she tried different things.

"The idea is for you to have a glamour that fits you perfectly. Not something ill-fitting that looks like a glamour," she began, stepping back and studying me again. She walked around me, taking all of me in. I nearly flexed and then thought better of it.

"You want people to think you're being your genuine self. We also need to see each other clearly, so it has to be tailored to recognize our unique magical signature. That will ensure that we only see each other, not the glamour, lest we forget what we're about.

"If we're to go as a newly mated couple, it won't do for us to appear as some stodgy couple who's been rutting for decades or centuries," she continued. I couldn't focus on her discussing what we'd be like as a rutting couple. Certainly not after the fantasy I'd beat off to last night.

"We also want you to retain the form of a powerful warlock. Someone who no one wants to fuck with. It will help keep people from getting too curious about who we are."

And now I was trying to ignore the fact that she wanted me to retain the form of a powerful warlock.

So, she thought I was powerful, did she?

Why was I preening over this?

I didn't realize she was staring at me.

Because I was too busy taking in all the lines of her body. Too busy watching how she moved.

And that scent that was stinging my nose.

Get it under control, Cavanaugh.

"You're insufferable," she said, huffing.

"What did I do now?"

"You're gloating."

"I am?" I was?

"Because you think that my referring to you as a 'powerful warlock' is some kind of win for you in this ongoing war of words we've had going on forever. Everyone knows what kind of business you run over at that ridiculous club."

"My club isn't ridiculous."

"Anyway, let's just get this over with," she said, stomping back over toward me and beginning to incant some spell as she fit me with glamour after glamour.

With each incantation, she grew more and more agitated.

And me? I just enjoyed the show.

ELEVEN

RAINBOW

This whole enterprise was a terrible idea. Sebastian and I would either wind up killing each other.

Or something much, much worse.

I'd tried several horrible-looking glamours on him. It was useless. Something about his virile magic made even the most hideous glamours look good on him.

And I'd nearly told on myself right there in front of him. Each time I studied him, it was a reminder of how damned attractive he was.

I needed to focus on getting my glamour in place.

And doing something about this damned slick that was pooling between my thighs.

How in the hell had Sebastian Cavanaugh nearly sent me straight into a heat?

Focus, Rainbow.

Once Sebastian's car backed out of my drive, I bound up the stairs. Standing before the full-length mirror, I thought about what I should look like at the conference.

And reluctantly, I flipped through a mental pictorial Rolodex of all the witches I knew Sebastian had been with over the time I'd known him.

All had been tall.

Unlike me.

All had been beautiful.

I might be cute, but I couldn't recall anyone ever referring to me as "beautiful."

All had been the type of witch who would turn heads.

If I was going to look right and proper on Sebastian's arm at the conference, I needed to look like someone who made sense as his mate.

In reality, witches and warlocks had little say over who destiny chose for us. But something about the pairings always worked, even when it looked like it shouldn't.

But it was hard to imagine Sebastian with someone who didn't have long, thin legs, a flat tummy, and looked manicured beyond measure.

Me? I had thick thighs, an ample ass, a pair of tits that might qualify as "okay," and a tummy pooch. The thing that was remarked most on was my red hair, and I'd heard it remarked on disparagingly.

So, I played dress up. I pulled out old grimoires I'd confiscated when I'd left home. I toyed with old glamour spells I hadn't used since I was a young witch playing around in my bedroom.

And before long, I'd come up with something that looked feasible.

But nothing that looked nearly as intriguing as Sebastian.

It mattered little, anyway. He would always be able to see me, not the glamour. That was the deal we'd come to in order to keep our heads on straight. To not get lost in the mess that might happen at the conference.

Still, as I looked at my glamour, it was easy to imagine that I was someone Sebastian would find intriguing. Sexy, even.

How different would this week go if he did?

What was it that Alana had almost said that night at the book club meeting?

He does this thing, just after he pushes inside you...

I'd cut her off, not wanting to hear what Sebastian Cavanaugh did right after he pushed inside her. Because if I started imagining what Sebastian did after he pushed inside her, I might just imagine...

Looking at myself in the mirror, it was impossible not to imagine it. I still had that scent of him in my nose. All masculine. All warlock. All alpha. I could still see the way he'd gotten so angry in my kitchen that night when he thought I was going to the conference by myself.

Never having a mate, it was tempting to imagine that he was mine. And I'd just threatened to do something he thought would put me in danger — just as I had.

And how mad he would get. How damned protective.

My breath hitched at the thought of how his eyes had grown so dark. Of how he towered above me.

He could have easily stepped forward, pulled me to him, dragged me to that chair, and bent me over his knee.

Shit. I'd never imagined or wanted a warlock to do that to me. Why the hell was I thinking about Sebastian Cavanaugh doing it?

I was practically dripping with slick.

“Dammit!”

I had to get myself under control or I was going to go headlong into a heat and wouldn't that make an uncomfortable situation even more uncomfortable?

There was only one way to deal with this.

Making my way over to the bed, I pulled off my jeans and panties and placed my hand between my legs.

Soaking.

I hissed as my hand grazed my clit.

I imagined that I'd not pushed Sebastian out the door. That I'd invited him to stay. That he was standing at the bedroom door right now. He'd push the door open and lean against the door frame, giving me that insufferable smug smirk.

“Well, Carmichael. Isn’t this a way to greet the man you hate more than anyone?”

And just the thought of his voice made my cunt weep.

I flicked my swollen clit, imagining that he was instructing me.

“That’s right, Carmichael. Pleasure yourself. Show me what makes you come. Show me so I know what to do when I finally sink my knot so deep inside you, you don’t know where I end and you begin.”

I moaned. Momentarily, I worried that I’d not locked the door, but I knew my wards were secure. They’d alert me if someone came onto the porch without my approval. The only reason I’d not known that he was here that night was that I’d been fast asleep.

I definitely wasn’t fast asleep now.

“Focus, Carmichael,” imaginary Sebastian demanded. “You’re getting off, not checking off items on a list. I want to hear what you sound like when you come. Show me you can go for just a little while without a jab or telling some piece of gossip.”

Angrily, I slipped my fingers between my folds, imagining that he’d walked over to me and was now helping me.

“Right here,” he’d say. “That’s where I want to touch you. Will you let me, Carmichael? Will you let big, bad Sebastian Cavanaugh touch Rainbow Carmichael’s sweet little pussy?”

“Yes,” I said aloud, as if the ghost of him was real and could hear me across the distance.

Gods, I hoped not.

I increased the pressure and the speed. In no time, I was coming, imagining Sebastian standing over me, praising me, cheering me on.

“That’s it, Rainbow. That’s my good little witch. Now rest. And don’t make yourself feel bad because you imagined it was me here helping you get off.”

Even a bastard in my fantasies.

Asshole.

I WONDERED how many times I was going to say to myself that this was a bad idea.

When Sebastian had all but demanded we travel together to the conference and pretend we were mated, it seemed like a silly idea. After all, we hated each other. No matter how I'd spent the other day pretending he was coaxing me through masturbation, something I would never think about again. The idea of us being mated was ludicrous. All we had to do was sell it to a bunch of people who were likely already in forced pairings.

All I had to do was appear docile and simpering, and we could sell it.

What I hadn't considered was that I'd have to spend two hours in a vehicle with him.

"Stop fidgeting," he demanded as he focused on the road. Since he'd picked me up from my house, he'd barely stolen a glance at me. It was as if he was mad that he had to be in the car with me.

"I don't get why you're in such a snit. This was your idea, Cavanaugh. Not mine."

"My idea because if I didn't offer, you would have gone and gotten yourself force-bonded."

I bit my lip. I couldn't tell him that was an impossibility because of what had been done to me years ago. I wondered if I told him now when we were 45 minutes from home and he'd already committed to this plan, if he would be pissed with me or if he'd be sympathetic.

Pissed, I decided. Definitely pissed.

He was making it very clear by his demeanor that he would rather be just about anywhere rather than here. With

me.

“Let’s go over the plan,” I suggested, determined to get away from any talk of why I was going or why going by myself might not have been a big deal.

I mean, sure. It could have, but it wasn’t as likely as he thought.

He huffed. “I thought the plan consisted of us pretending to be mated and get through this, for whatever reason. You still haven’t told me why you’re so dead-set ongoing to this farce.”

“That wasn’t part of the deal. You don’t need those answers. The only thing you need to know is what to do when we get there.”

“Fine. Then I’ll begin. We’re a newly mated couple, and we’re definitely not fated.”

“Definitely not,” I scoffed. “Can you imagine? If you and I were fated mates?”

I laughed. For a minute, his jaw clenched and then he smiled.

“Gods, our kids would be just as annoying as you are.”

“I beg your pardon, jackass. My kids are going to be great.”

If I ever broke this curse and could have them.

“It’s your kids that are going to be utter terrors, Cavanaugh. Their mother will be chasing them around the neighborhood, trying to keep them from either beating up all the other little warlocks or charming all the little witches.”

“At least you admit that I’m charming.”

“I did no such thing. But you have to admit that you have a reputation.”

His hands clenched the steering wheel. Was I actually getting under his skin? He’d become an easy mark over the years.

“A reputation that you’ve helped cultivate.”

I snorted. “If your reputation depended on anything I said, there wouldn’t be a witch in Mystic Springs that would get within fifteen feet of you, Cavanaugh. No. Your reputation is built on word of mouth from people like Alana. If I hadn’t stopped her, she would have regaled the entire book club with the details of your last rutting.”

“Interesting, Carmichael. You almost sound jealous.”

“And you sound like an insufferable ass. No ‘almost’ to it. It’s got nothing to do with jealousy. It’s got to do with the fact that I can’t have anyone using the book club to give your sexual prowess good reviews.”

“I always leave my witches satisfied, Carmichael.”

Something about the way he said those words, his voice so deep, made me remember what I’d imagined when I’d gotten myself off. Suddenly, it seemed like I couldn’t get far enough away from his scent. It was as if it had taken over the interior of the vehicle. I was tempted to reach over and let the window down, but if I did that, I’d give myself away for sure.

And what I was giving away, I wasn’t sure. It wasn’t as if I actually wanted the man.

“Anyway, you’ve gotten us off track. So, we’re a force-bonded pair. What’s the story behind that?”

I looked over at him and watched as his jaw ticked as he went deep into thought. His dark lashes fluttered as he watched the road and calculated the social impact of what we were about to do.

“I dueled for your bond.”

“That’s ludicrous. No one does that anymore.”

He cut his eyes toward me.

“What? No! That’s some 15th-century witch shit. You’re having me on.”

“I assure you I’m not having you on, Carmichael. I’ve seen a bonding duel happen in the last five years. Not far from Mystic Springs. Although, in that situation, I didn’t step in and stop it like I have in the past. Then, the warlock was vying for

the bond of a witch who was being paired against her will. The warlock who was dueling was dueling for her freedom.”

“Gods, that sounds like something out of a witch romance novel.”

“Maybe, but a lot more bloody, I suspect. Not that I read romances.”

I imagined him reading a romance. Maybe he’d wear glasses when he read, even though he likely didn’t need them. It would give him a Clark Kent vibe. I nearly sighed before I remembered who I was thinking about.

“Is she okay now? The witch?”

“She’s mated. To the warlock who dueled for her. Turns out, he was her mate, after all. Neither of them knew it yet. Explained a lot. He was willing to go to great lengths for her. That doesn’t just...”

He cut off.

That doesn’t just happen.

But Sebastian wasn’t going to any great length for me. He was going because he had a thing about Traditionalists. Any decent warlock did. He just had the power to put behind any promise to kick another warlock’s ass if it came to that point.

“So,” he continued. “I dueled for your bond. I won. If anyone wants the particulars, we’ll change the subject. Or I’ll threaten to kill them for getting too close to my mate.”

“Jeez. This should be fun.”

My heart somersaulted at the thought of him stepping between me and some nosy warlock. Again, something I was going to have to get under control.

But maybe, for a little while, I could use this for a test run. Pretend that the man beside me wasn’t Sebastian Cavanaugh, a man I’d fought with for almost as long as I’d known him. Instead, he was a warlock that I’d met and instantly been attracted to. We’d known within days that we were fated. And then I’d presented for him. We were in love and on our way to increasing the witch and warlock population.

For a week, I could pretend.

“What are you thinking about, Carmichael?”

I looked over at Sebastian and hoped he couldn't read my thoughts.

“Thinking about how in the hell I'm going to make it through this week with you.”

“Indeed, Carmichael. Indeed.”

TWELVE

SEBASTIAN

“Did you not check the air pressure before you left?”

Rainbow was standing with her hands on her hips. She was still wearing her jeans and t-shirt with the promise she would change when we got closer to our destination.

Which was going to be much later than we presumed, because this was one helluva flat.

“I can’t believe it. All the stupid luxury cars you have and then this thing—“

“It’s a Bugatti, Carmichael. Not a thing.”

“Does it matter? Can you drive it right now?”

She was infuriating. I’d half a mind to call Frank, have him come get us, and put this whole thing behind us. She wouldn’t go to this damned conference and I’d be rid of her. Rid of that damned scent and her ridiculous questions.

Once we’d nailed down the details of her story, she’d started in with 20 questions.

Why did I have to buy so much land in Mystic Springs?

Why did I have to fight all the time? What did I have to prove?

Why wasn’t I mated by now? After all, she explained, I was practically ancient by warlock standards.

By the time the pop sounded and we’d made it over to the side of the road, I was imagining pulling over anyway, taking her out of the car, and wringing her neck.

“All cars get flat tires, Carmichael. Even luxury cars.”

And Carl was going to get a stern talking to when I got back. I paid him well to take care of the cars.

Granted, I hadn't taken this one out in a long while, but it still should have been in good service if he was doing his job.

“And you can't just magick the thing into not being flat?” she asked, walking over to the tire and kicking it with her toe.

“Can you? Car magick isn't my specialty.”

“Then why do you have so many damned cars?”

“Gods, again with the questions. Do you ever stop?”

“No. Do you ever stop being insufferable?”

“Insufferable, insufferable, insufferable. How limited is your vocabulary? Do you have any idea how many times you've accused me of being insufferable?”

“Only because you are.”

“Then why are you here, Carmichael?”

She raised an eyebrow at me. Right. She was here because I demanded to come along with her on this trip.

Maybe I was insufferable.

She huffed and walked around to the side of the car that edged the highway.

“What are you doing? You're going to get hit.”

Looking back at me, she rolled her eyes.

Then, she thrust out her chest, pulled her hair out of the ponytail, and swished the locks.

And I'll be damned if my heart didn't jump in my throat. She looked like some 1970s vixen come to life. The kind you sometimes saw in old cigarette ads. If only she had the short shorts and a pair of gym socks to complete the look.

“I'm going to ask you again, what are you doing?”

“I'm going to get someone to stop and help us.”

“By what? Offering to flash them?”

It would work, I had to admit. Even if she wasn't the most endowed witch I'd ever seen, there was something about the promise of that curvy body. Soft little places that made a warlock's mouth water. I knew if I wanted to investigate all those little bits, some dipshit driving down the road would want to do the same.

I almost pulled her back into the car, intent on telling her we would just call a tow, when a pickup truck slowed and pulled in behind us. Because of course they did.

Narrowing my eyes at the man as he got down out of the cab of the truck, I nearly told him to get back on the road when he did a once over of Rainbow's body.

“Hi!” she greeted him in a sing-songy voice I was certain she'd never used on me. It was official. I hated this man.

“Hello yourself,” he said. He was young. Probably late twenties. He was tall. Not as tall as me. He also looked like the type of man who did hard labor. It made him appear thick and cut. I didn't miss the way Rainbow's eyes checked out the length of him. “What seems to be the problem here?”

“We have a flat and my boyfriend, bless him, doesn't know a thing about changing a tire.” Somehow, she'd gained a Southern accent in the past five minutes.

I choked back a growl. Especially when the man looked over at me and gave me a once-over.

Step back, son. I could end you.

“Well, let me have a look at it.” He gave her a wink. As he passed her and he crouched down to look at the flat, she watched me. I'd never seen her look so smug.

Or so damned sexy. I don't know if I'd ever seen her with her hair down like that. Not even when I'd showed up at her house at two in the morning. Even then, her hair had been in a messy bun.

But now it flowed over her shoulders in flaming red curls.

I had a sudden vision of her with her legs spread wide open, toying with herself. I could see her sliding her fingers through wet curls that mirrored those that were now cascading over her shoulders in the breeze.

“Doesn’t appear to need much more than some air right now. I don’t see any big punctures. I’ll get the air compressor and get you guys back on the road, but you’ll need to get it seen about when you can. It’ll continue leaking until you have it plugged.”

He raised up to his full height. He was nearly as tall as me.

But not quite.

“I appreciate your help and, of course, I’ll be happy to compensate you.”

“That won’t be necessary. Just helping some nice folks out,” he said and his eyes shifted over to Rainbow again.

“I insist.”

He looked back over at me and the look on my face must have told him I wasn’t in the placating mood. He gave me a nod.

“I’ll go get the compressor. I’ll have you guys back on the road in a sec.”

THIRTEEN

RAINBOW

“If you’re going to make this work, you need to stop fidgeting. You look as nervous as a virgin on her wedding night.”

I huffed. “Again with the antiquated ideas, Cavanaugh.”

But he was right. I needed to stop fidgeting.

After the flat, we’d arrived later than we’d expected. In the end, that had been a blessing. Most of the attendees had either retired for the afternoon to their suites or were in the community building with the other attendees.

The conference was being held at an old luxury campground. In some ways, it reminded me of the lodge back in Mystic Springs. Only this place was full out luxury. Large, luxurious cabins. A large ballroom for guests. Well-manicured paths allowing everyone to move easily through the property.

And it was all owned by Manfred Winchester, one of the biggest names in the Traditionalist Movement. No doubt, the suites would be tricked out with all sorts of amenities meant to entice mating between force-bonded pairs.

This had definitely been a terrible idea.

Our cabin was near the back of the property. At least no one would notice that Sebastian and I weren’t rutting every night. I suspected the warlocks in attendance would want to show off their prowess by making their witches scream as loud as they could each night. Being at the back of the property at least ensured that no one would be savvy to the fact that we weren’t making a lot of noise.

I'd changed at a gas station thirty miles out from our destination. I didn't really need to. Our glamour covered most of it, but I needed to feel like I was playing the part. I'd changed into a nice pair of dress slacks and a button-up top. It didn't feel all that different from my normal attire other than the dress flats I'd paired with the ensemble.

Once we'd checked in, our attendant led us to our cabin, gave us a wink, and then disappeared.

I stepped inside. As soon as I did, I realized the one thing we'd neglected to consider. And being that I'd read my fair share of romance novels over the years, I'd been stupid not to think of it.

"There's only one bed," I said. I'd not meant to say the words aloud.

"What did you think they were going to do, Carmichael? Put us in a room with two twin beds like we were fucking Lucy and Desi?"

Stepping into the cabin further, the sound of Sebastian shutting the door with a click sounded like a hammer coming down. Loud and obnoxious.

Like him.

The damned cabin was a honeymoon suite on steroids. There was the large, silk-covered bed in a bright shade of red that made me think of blood. Then there was the blazing fireplace with a bearskin rug before it. I looked away before my brain betrayed me with an image of Sebastian sprawled out naked on the thing.

"This is—"

"Obscene," Sebastian finished for me.

My eyes slid to the jacuzzi and the bathroom beyond.

In which the shower was completely exposed to the room beyond. How the hell were we going to get a shower when doing so would mean we were so...exposed?

Fuck. This was a nightmare.

Looking back at the bed, I could see that it was easily big enough for the both of us to sleep on either side of the thing. Still, there was too much room for error.

There would have been too much room for error if it had been as big as a football field.

“I get the bed,” I announced.

“Fine,” Sebastian said, sighing. “I’ll sleep on the floor. It looks clean enough.”

“You’re not going to argue with me?”

“Do you want me to?”

Weirdly, I wanted him to argue with me. I just wasn’t sure why. Probably because it was what we usually did. Not arguing made me feel as if I was off my game.

I squinted at him, letting the magic take hold so I could see his glamour. He looked good, even under the disguise. Still tall. Still formidable. But not as dark-haired and not quite as...

No. Not as good-looking. It was okay to say that. Just because I admitted he was handsome didn’t mean I didn’t still want to throttle the man.

“I should get ready.”

He finally turned toward me, looking me over from head to toe. I felt myself flush in response and hoped he didn’t notice.

“Why? You’ve got the glamour. You could go in a potato sack and no one would know the difference.”

It was likely as near to a compliment on my glammers as I was going to get from him.

“If that’s the case, then why are you dressed like James Bond?”

“This is how I dress, Carmichael. You know that. You dress like a teenager on summer break. It’s who we are.”

Something inside me bristled at his assessment of my style. Before I’d left home, I’d always been dressed impeccably. My father had insisted that, in order to attract the

attention of the best warlock, I needed to look like I'd stepped off a runway.

Father didn't believe in fated pairings. He was determined that my mate would be chosen. By him.

Which was how I'd wound up in my current situation.

But it wasn't just the fact that I was hiding my past behind my t-shirt and jeans. It was the knowledge that — and this was very hard for me to admit — I wasn't someone who Sebastian would have considered beddable. Sebastian might be a serial monogamist, but he had a type. They were all tall, stylish, and looked like they belonged on the cover of a fashion magazine.

His insistence that I looked like a silly teenager poked at my resolve. I didn't like the way it felt.

"I'm comfortable in my skin," I lied. I hadn't been comfortable in my skin since the day I'd left home. "But I'd feel more like I belonged if I looked the part for myself as well. And besides, it's hard to fake wearing heels. Better to just wear the things."

"Do you even own a pair of heels? Better yet, do you know how to walk in them?"

Again, I felt my ire rising. It only strengthened my determination.

"Why don't you find something to do outside while I get ready? And give me a bit of breathing room. You're too...you right now."

He huffed. "Fine. But don't take long. I need to scope out the people here and see what we're up against."

"Fine."

"Fine."

When he slammed the door behind him, I let out a breath.

And told myself that the reason I was getting dolled up was for me only.

It certainly wasn't because I had something to prove to him.

FOURTEEN

SEBASTIAN

No matter what I said, somehow, I always managed to piss Rainbow off.

I'd thought that when I'd agreed that I would take the floor, she would have been happy with the situation.

Instead, she'd huffed. And then she'd gotten annoyed about the clothing situation. Why I couldn't fathom. It was clear she was most comfortable in her casual clothes. Was suggesting she remain comfortable such a bad thing?

As I stood outside the cabin, scanning the area for anyone who might be watching us, I tried to get a handle on how I was feeling. Seeing her take control of the situation with the flat tire had done a number on me. I'd done my best not to be short with her after the fact. After all, it wasn't going to do either of us any good if we went through this week at each other's throats.

And I could use this trip as a reconnaissance mission. I might get some intel on the next attempt to use Mystic Springs as a haven for witch-trafficking.

If I could keep my head on straight.

When Rainbow stepped out of the cabin, I didn't know if keeping my head anywhere other than around her presence was possible.

She was exquisite. She'd donned a long, red, strapless dress with a split that went nearly to her hip. The fabric hugged her ample hips. Hips that would make a warlock want to hold on to them tight as he drove into her.

She was also wearing heels. More importantly, she seemed to have no problem doing so. They accentuated the muscles of her calves, smooth, pale skin that made me want to reach down and run my palm up the length of them.

Her flaming red locks spilled over her bare shoulders. Bare shoulders that were sprinkled with the lightest dusting of freckles. I ran my tongue along my teeth, imagining what it would be like to run my tongue along that delicate shoulder.

And those full lips? They were glistening with blood-red lipstick.

She looked...

“You look beautiful, Carmichael.” Somehow, I’d managed to temper my voice, but it still came out a little shocked. As if it surprised me she was beautiful.

I wasn’t surprised. I’d thought she was beautiful many times as she’d pissed me off. It was the fact that she kept pissing me off that kept me from thinking about it too much.

It was just...I’d never seen her like this. So vibrant. It was almost like she’d just stepped out of her shell. As if she’d been hiding this part of herself for years.

“Don’t sound so shocked, Cavanaugh. I can clean up. And yes, I can wear heels.”

So, that had gotten under her skin. Interesting.

I offered her my arm. She stared at it as if it might bite her. I stepped closer. Someone could be watching us.

Placing my hand on her stomach and the other around the small of her back, I didn’t miss the way her abdomen jumped as my hand made contact with her.

I bent lower, whispering into her ear. To anyone who was looking, it might look as if I was whispering sweet nothings to her.

“Relax, Carmichael. We’re supposed to be mated. If it looks like you’re afraid to touch me or be touched by me, no one is going to buy this ruse. So look alive and for crying out loud, remember not to call me by my real name.”

“Remember,” I whispered in her ear as we entered the main building. “I’m Nick and you’re Jessica.”

“Got it,” she replied. She was doing her best to pretend like she didn’t want to shrink away from me. And I was doing my best not to make her so uncomfortable that anyone noticed. It was hard to remember why I’d signed up for this gig.

Then we took one step into the room and I saw all those predatory warlocks give her a once-over. Then the reason was crystal clear. I nearly growled at the thought of her among these bastards alone. Instinctively, I pulled her closer to me. She looked up at me, questioning in her expression, but she didn’t pull away.

“And remember, we’re newly mated,” I said out of the corner of my mouth so only she could hear me.

“Why do you keep insisting on that, Nick?” Amazingly, she didn’t even trip over my alias.

“Because, even glamoured, no one would believe that a warlock as virile as myself hadn’t yet impregnated you.”

She looked at me, lips parted, no doubt ready to deliver some set down. One look at her and she seemed to recall where she was and what she was doing. She clamped her mouth shut, her teeth clicking as she did.

But I could see it. Right there in her eyes.

She’d thought of the same thing I had. It had almost caused her to react with a barb.

But the vision of her pregnant with my child stuck in my mind like a fly in honey. The way that dress fit over her body, I could imagine the slight swell of her tummy as she carried my child. Could imagine her looking up at me and not with the readiness to joust, but with something like anticipation. Hope.

Happiness.

You know, looking at me in ways she’d never looked at me before.

I pushed my mind away from the image of Rainbow pregnant. That wasn’t going to do me any good, and I wasn’t

even sure why my brain wanted to focus on such a thing.

“Alright, now tell me what the purpose is in our being here,” I said, looking over the crowd. Among the warlocks in the room, I saw several who, if they knew they were in the presence of Sebastian Cavanaugh, might either start a riot or bolt. This could be a good place to gather intel. I usually depended on my network to report back to me on these things, but this one hadn’t been on my radar. Way too close to Mystic Springs for someone to risk detection by those who reported back to me.

“I’m looking for someone,” Rainbow whispered back. Looking down at her, I could see her scanning the crowd. Who in the hell could she be searching for at a place like this, and why?

I was definitely going to get to the bottom of that before this week was over.

“Mind giving me a description?”

“Right now? Yes. Let’s mingle.”

We’d barely stepped into the crowd before we were intercepted. Now we would test the bounds of Rainbow’s glammers. If people detected we were glamoured, they would become suspicious. While I suspected we weren’t the only ones under glammers, the trick was appearing as if we were not.

The warlock who’d stepped before me was a robust man overflowing with magic. He extended his hand. I cautiously accepted it. Giving it a hearty squeeze, I returned the gesture, relieved that I felt no magic being extended my way.

After all, that would be downright rude.

“Landon Carlson.” He looked down at the tiny witch at his side. She was blonde, attractive, and wore a perpetual look of boredom on her face. Not that I could blame her if this was her mate. “And this is my mate, Rena. Haven’t seen you at one of these events before.”

Rainbow’s fingers tightened around my arm. I tried to send a shot of soothing magic toward her and was rewarded when I

felt her body sigh next to me.

“Nick Cavendish and my new mate, Jessica. We were just bonded, so not a lot of reason to come to one of these events before now.”

“Ah. So the freshness of a new pairing. When Rena and I were first bonded, we barely saw the outside of our bedroom. I commend you on your determination to get out there and socialize with the rest of us.”

I reached over, pulling Rainbow closer to me. Not only to help with the ruse. I also didn't like the way Landon's eyes shifted toward her when he mentioned being ensconced in his bedroom with his mate.

“I'm afraid my mate needed a break,” I said, running my hand down the length of Rainbow's arm. She moved her arm around my waist and I could feel the tension in her body as she did. The tension wasn't because of my nearness, however. She was uncomfortable with the situation.

To think that she had actually thought about coming here on her own.

Finally, she remembered herself and looked up at me, and smiled. “Yes. He's quite the randy warlock, I'm afraid. Amazed I can even walk.”

Thankfully, I hadn't grabbed a glass of champagne, otherwise I might have choked.

“My goodness,” Landon said, his eyes volleying between Rainbow and me. “You two are brimming with sexuality. Sure you don't want to take it to one of the side rooms? They're kept close in case one of the witches goes into heat.”

“No worries.” Rainbow's nails dug into my side. “I tended to her as soon as we got here. Just a quick fix. I'm sure I'll have her screaming before the night's over.”

I delivered a wink to the warlock and knew I would pay for it when we got back to our room.

When we finally extracted ourselves from the couple, Rainbow's nails didn't release their hold on my side.

“You’ll have me screaming before the night’s over?” Her teeth were clenched. Her voice was low enough that only I could hear it as we wound through the crowd. I nodded at people that Sebastian Cavanaugh would have punched in the face, but Nick Cavendish was determined to pretend didn’t know existed.

“Just part of the ruse, my dear. Now if you will, darling, please stop making me bleed. Unless you’re trying to give me a preview for later.”

The look she gave me was thunderous.

“Eyes everywhere, darling,” I whispered to her, sliding my hand down her back.

Yes. I was going to pay later. And I wasn’t even certain that I cared.

FIFTEEN

RAINBOW

I was going to kill him.

Then, when I got home, if I made it through this, I was going to slap myself for agreeing to this.

We'd mingled with the most disgusting warlocks I'd met since I'd left home for the first time. I'd had my body remarked on more than if I'd put nudes online. Some ridiculous warlock had told Sebastian that he would get me knocked up sooner if he knotted me doggy style more often.

Amazingly, Sebastian had been stalwart. When my body had come up in discussions, he'd pretended to go full alpha, which hit all the high notes in making our ruse look real. When warlocks tried to give him mating pointers, he'd taken mock offense that he couldn't please his mate.

It had all come off looking very real.

Unfortunately, it made me feel a certain kind of way as well.

And anytime he ran his hand down my back or pulled me closer to him, all it did was make me realize what a bad idea this had been all the way around.

“And now, witches and warlocks, if I can have your attention!” a warlock bellowed from the stage that looked over the room. I recognized him as the warlock who earlier had stupidly asked Sebastian whether he regretted choosing a mate who didn't have a more impressive set of tits. Right in front of me, as if I was made of cardboard.

“Now we begin the mating cotillion. If you’ve ever been to a mating ball, you know how this works. Warlocks, please guide your witches to the floor and we shall begin.”

Fuck.

Fuck fuck fuckity fuck.

I had no idea this was part of the package. Had no idea anyone still did this obscene display, even among Traditionalists.

And now? Sebastian and I were going to have to pretend that this was completely normal for us.

The mating cotillion was the witch version of peacocking for one’s mate. The steps were smooth and controlled, like one of those damned dances you saw in Jane Austen movies. Only, with these movements, the steps and gestures were without question meant to mimic the motions of mating.

“Do you think I can fake getting sick?” I asked, trying to hide my terror from anyone who might be around. “You can tell them I actually am pregnant or something.”

It wasn’t really all that more appealing to pretend I was pregnant with Sebastian’s baby, but at least I might get out of doing this.

“I think that if we don’t do this, we’re going to become suspect way earlier than we’d hoped to. And whatever you hoped to accomplish, which you are definitely going to tell me about later, would be a lost cause.”

“Fine. But I’m not going to enjoy it.”

Sebastian raised an eyebrow at me. A challenge.

Asshole.

Taking my hand, Sebastian led me to the floor. He took his spot next to another warlock, and I took my spot in the line of witches across from him.

The music began, a symphony of drumbeats that I suspected would grow in intensity as the dance continued.

Once again, to simulate the movements of a couple in the throes of sex.

Magic swirled around us. Somehow, without reason, the steps came to me naturally. Sebastian and I stepped toward each other, our bodies coming together, meeting in all the right places. My breasts brushed against his chest. As he spun me so that my back was to his front, I swallowed a gasp as his arm hooked around my waist, bringing my body close to his.

For a minute, I thought I could feel the telltale bulge of his erection, but he pushed me away before I could be sure. I licked my lips, my throat going dry.

Breathe, Rainbow. Keep your head on straight. No going into heat right here.

To our left, I saw a couple moving quickly off the dance floor. Some of the other couples giggled. The witch had gone into heat. I kept my eyes focused on anything. Anything but witches in heat and Sebastian.

I counted the times my foot hit the floor. Ignored how, at one point in the dance, Sebastian twirled me into his arms. Then he dipped me before bringing me up into a movement that brought me to him and away from him and to him again, matching the increasing tempo of the drums.

I recited the name of every street in Mystic Springs as the tempo grew alarmingly fast.

Finally, Sebastian brought me against him one last time as the drums ended in a crescendo.

Against my better judgment, I looked up into Sebastian's eyes. They were black. His eyelashes fluttered against his cheeks as he looked down at me, lips parted.

In the periphery, I saw the other couples move away from each other and walk away. I mimicked them, ignoring my traitorous body.

Somehow, I'd make it through this week. But I was getting the feeling that, whatever happened, it was going to leave a mark.

“YOU’RE BREATHING TOO LOUD.”

“I’m breathing too loud?”

I huffed. I knew I was being ridiculous. And it was all that damned mating dance’s fault. Sebastian had been a true gentleman ever since we’d parted on the dance floor.

But he’d also been sexy as hell. Commanding. Virile. I’d noticed several other witches looking his way. The unfortunate side effect of being in a forced-bond. Eventually, you came to your senses and realized that the one you were forced to be with wasn’t the one you wanted at all.

And every witch in that room wanted Sebastian Cavanaugh. Or Nick Cavendish.

As soon as we’d made it out of that stuffy venue, I’d been unable to look at him. I stomped off to the shower, daring him to look crossways toward the room as I did so. Once I finished, I flung myself into the oversized bed and squeezed my eyes shut.

All the time I’d cursed myself that I’d only packed my shorts and a tank top. What had I been thinking? I should have packed a long flannel gown and ugly knee socks.

“Sometimes when you breathe, it’s loud. Like you’re trying to drag all the air out of the room and into your lungs.” I sat up. “It’s like this.”

Then I emitted an unholy sound that sounded like something between someone harking a loogie and a cat coughing up a hairball.

He’d never made that sound as far as I knew. But I knew it would get under his skin enough that he would be hyper-aware of his breathing for the rest of the week.

Maybe for the rest of his life.

“That’s the most Gods’ awful, disgusting sound that I’ve ever heard, and I grew up on a farm.”

I noted that. Put it in a mental file cabinet for later. He'd grown up on a farm. I had sudden images of him shirtless and throwing hay bales over his shoulder. Knowing how old he was, he'd likely grown up on some antiquated farm and used a reaper and a hand plow.

“Good, then you know why it's so annoying.”

“It's definitely annoying when you make that sound. But I don't make that sound and I know what you're doing.”

“And what am I doing?”

“You're trying to get under my skin and make me think I make funny sounds when I breathe, so I'll always be aware of it. It's your way.”

Okay, fine. So the man knew me. I climbed over to the edge of the bed so I could see him better. As it was, he was just a disembodied voice in the room.

And as soon as I peered over the bed and down at the prone form on the floor, I cursed my stupidity.

Because I was looking directly down at a shirtless Sebastian Cavanaugh. The bottom half of him was covered with a sheet. A blood-red sheet that outlined every square inch of him.

And I do mean every square inch.

“You're not wearing a shirt,” I said. Stupidly. Gods, why didn't I just fall off the bed and land on him at this point? I felt just that stupid.

“Astute, Carmichael. Would you also like to note the temperature of the room as well as the date and time?”

Good. If I could stay mad at him, the thought of him naked beneath me wouldn't turn me on.

And I definitely shouldn't put the words “naked,” “beneath,” and “me” together when it came to Sebastian Cavanaugh.

“Don't you wear clothes to bed?”

“I'm not in bed. I'm on the floor.”

“I’m wearing clothes.”

He popped open one eye and looked up at me. He’d mussed his hair again. Like he had that night he was in my kitchen, practically climbing the walls in order to get to go to this thing with me.

“Is that the problem, Carmichael? You feel I have an unfair advantage over you because I’m shirtless? Then, by all means, remove your top and make it even.”

He adjusted his arm behind his head, looking up at me. I was absolutely not going to look at the way his bicep flexed when he did that.

He raised an eyebrow as if he was waiting for me to do such a ridiculous thing as take my shirt off in front of him.

“Hateful jerk.” I climbed back to the center of the bed and plopped down.

“Anyway, if anyone breathes loud, it’s you.”

I sat back up and, against my better judgment, climbed back toward the side of the bed, looking down at him.

“I don’t breathe loud. You breathe loud.”

“You also argue like a child. Dress like a child and argue like a child. How old are you anyway, Carmichael?”

Now, I was truly irritated. At first, the pecking at him had just been to keep that other fire at bay. The one that threatened to send me straight into a heat. And the last thing I needed was to give Sebastian Cavanaugh leverage over me by making slick for him.

But going this route with him was really making me irritated.

The irritation must have shown on my face because he smiled that damned smug smirk.

Climbing back onto the bed, I grabbed a pillow. Then, making my way back to the edge of the bed, I held the pillow above my head and slammed it down onto his smirking face.

He grabbed the pillow, wrenching it away. He nearly pulled me down with it and wouldn't that just be a sight? Then I really would be in a shitload of trouble. I could just imagine how *that* part of my body would react if it felt the outline of Sebastian's cock.

Which I could definitely see outlined under that sheet.

And it wasn't small by any stretch of the imagination.

"If you wanted to start a pillow fight with me, why didn't you just say so?"

I'd been so flummoxed, *once again*, by the outline of his cock that the pillow slamming me in the face took me by surprise. I let out an ugly "oomph" sound as I fell back with the force of the thing.

"Asshole!" I squealed. I half expected to remove the pillow from my face and see Sebastian standing over me with that smug smile on his face. And that broad bare chest.

And everything below it.

Correction, part of me hoped I'd see that.

While the other half of me feared what I'd do if I did see that.

But there was nothing but ceiling as I looked up.

"Now, Carmichael. Be a good little witch and go to sleep or daddy is going to be very angry with you."

Fucker.

I clenched my thighs together even as I gnashed my molars.

This was going to be the longest week of my life.

SIXTEEN

SEBASTIAN

It was the sound of someone in pain. In fear.

I wrestled my eyelids open, expecting to see the familiar sights of my bedroom back in Mystic Springs.

As my eyes adjusted to the solitary moonlight streaming through the window, I realized that the hard, unrelenting surface beneath me wasn't my comfortable mattress back home.

And the crude sheet atop me wasn't my familiar black satin sheets, either.

I was in this damned suite at this stupid conference.

But what had woken me? It had been the sound of someone struggling in fear and in pain. Had I been dreaming?

"No."

The sound was coming from above me.

Rainbow.

"You can't. No."

She was dreaming. Either that or she was talking to someone and seeing as I only sensed her and me in the room, I suspected she was dreaming.

I froze. Unsure what to do.

Then there was that sound again. The one that had pierced my dreams and pulled me from sleep. It was the sound of someone terrified and in pain.

“No! Please!”

I shot up, dragging the sheet with me so I didn't give her the scare of her life (and later have her accuse me of flashing my goods her way). One look at her tangled in her sheets, her fists curled and scrambling across the bed, had my heart feeling like someone had driven a shard of ice through it.

The witch was terrified. Whatever was happening in her dream, she was fighting it.

I crouched onto the bed, hovering over her, trying to be as gentle as possible. Wake her the wrong way and those fists might go flying.

Worse, she might direct some sort of magic my way if she didn't realize I wasn't trying to hurt her.

I placed my hand on her hip. Feeling that troubled magic brimming from her, I knew that whatever she was fighting in her sleep, this wasn't a run-of-the-mill nightmare. She felt in danger and it was bleeding out into the real world.

Gently, I shook her.

“Rainbow, Rainbow. Wake up.”

I whispered the words, trying to keep her calm and trying to keep me from getting belted.

“Rainbow, it's just a dream. You're safe. No one is here but me, and I'm not going to hurt you.”

“Don't let them take me,” she mumbled. The words slurred together so much that I almost didn't translate them.

Part of me almost wished I hadn't. Because the feeling that washed over me as I heard her say those words was something I couldn't work with right now.

Whatever this dream was, it was a memory or the fear of something someone had threatened her with.

And would probably explain why she'd wanted to come to this place.

“Rainbow. It's Sebastian. You're safe. No one's going to take you. And if they try, I won't let them. Okay?”

I was surprised at just how much I meant those words.

Her fists curled again. I thought she might turn and fling one my way. I would be fine. It wouldn't be the first time someone had swung at me. I could take it. But I suspected Rainbow could pack more of a punch than people were aware of.

I leaned over her, watching and ready. I'd take the punch if need be, but I'd need to calm her before she could unleash any magic. I didn't fancy being turned into a toad. Not that I'd ever heard of that actually happening, but witchcraft could get weird sometimes.

But then her eyes fluttered open. She stared ahead.

And then she sniffed. And just that sound made my heart clench. She was pushing back tears.

She turned slowly and regarded me, her eyes focusing on me in the dim light of the room.

“Sebastian?”

“You were having a nightmare,” I said, my voice still low. She was still in that strange place between dreams and waking.

And as desperately as I wanted to ask her what it was or who it was she was fighting in that dream, I knew that was going to have to wait.

“A nightmare,” she repeated, as if she couldn't quite fathom that whatever had just been happening hadn't been real. “Was I talking?”

I almost smiled. Of course she would be worried that she might give too much away when she was too gone to stop herself.

“You were. Nothing specific. Someone was trying to hurt you. You wanted them to stop.”

Just saying the words made me want to punch someone. Unfortunately, I didn't know who it was that I needed to punch.

And Rainbow closed her eyes tight as if just the realization that she'd been in that situation hurt.

“Who was it, Rainbow? Who was trying to hurt you?”

Give me a name so I could kill them. If anyone could put an end to them, it was me. I hadn't become the Fist of Mystic Springs just for bragging rights.

“Just someone in my dream,” she lied. A lie so obvious that it seemed painful for her to even speak. She curled up further into herself. I'd teased her earlier about acting and dressing like a child, but right now, she looked so small and scared that she definitely seemed younger and more vulnerable.

“Do you want me to stay up here?” I finally asked.

And for some reason, I wanted her to say yes. Even though I suspected the answer was going to be no.

“I don't think that's a good idea. When I get like this...”

She stopped, realizing she'd given away more than she'd intended.

She sighed, her body relaxing and then pulling in on itself again. “When I get like this, my magic can sometimes get wonky. I'd hate for you to be a victim of that.”

And though I'd worried about her reacting when I'd been over her, I tasted the lie in those words. I nearly called her out on it before I nodded and pushed off the bed.

Adjusting the sheet around me, I looked down at her.

“I'm right down here, Rainbow. If you get scared—“

“I won't.”

I almost smiled. “If you have another dream then, you can call for me. Okay?”

“Sure.”

Returning to my place on the floor, I listened as she adjusted herself on the bed. For a few minutes, she tossed and

turned, trying to get comfortable. Eventually, the sounds from above stopped, and I heard her breath, soft and rhythmic.

She might not tell me now who was in that dream with her, but one way or another, I was going to find out.

SEVENTEEN

RAINBOW

After the dream the night before, I was tempted to pack everything up and go back home. When I'd woken with Sebastian looking down at me, I'd nearly launched myself at him. I'd spent years fighting off those dreams alone. Many times, I'd woken up from one and wished there'd been someone there to comfort me. To hold me until I fell asleep again.

But asking him to do that? Of all people?

Bad idea. We'd probably get back to Mystic Springs, and he'd use it against me at some point. One wayward barb and it would all come out. Rainbow Carmichael had a bad dream and went to Sebastian Cavanaugh for comfort. I could imagine the gossip.

And that was the kind of gossip I wanted nothing to do with.

But he'd been sweet. Nothing about him at that moment had seemed like the man who'd given me hell since I'd first arrived in Mystic Springs. It would have been easy to have folded myself right into him and pretended he was my mate. Someone who could make me feel like everything was going to be okay.

Someone who could end anyone who tried to hurt me.

I hadn't had a person like that when I needed them. And something told me he would have been formidable if he'd been around that day when I'd finally given up and fled home.

"Are you sure you're up for this?"

I turned to Sebastian. He looked devastatingly handsome in the suit he was wearing. After last night's mating cotillion, I wasn't sure I was up for any more of the Traditionalists' antics today. But I had to be brave.

I wanted to find peace.

I wanted to find my mate.

And the only way I could ever do that was if I found the person who'd placed the curse on me. There was a good chance that person wasn't here.

But there was also a damn good chance he was. This was a haven for people like him. And he would be the one person sure to wear a glamour and it would be a damned good one.

After all, he was the one who'd taught me everything I knew.

"I'm going to be fine. How difficult can it be? It's brunch."

"IF YOU WANT to get her with child, what you need to do is let her ride you."

Forget finding who had put a curse on me. Forget any of it. What could happen right now was the earth could open up and swallow me whole. That would be fine. It would save me from this horrible conversation.

At least they'd directed it toward Sebastian. As far as these warlocks were concerned, the witches at the table were nothing more than window dressing.

Sebastian let out a perfunctory "hmm" to the warlock's instructions on how to get his mate — me — pregnant. I could tell he was doing his best not to look bored.

"Let me tell you how I got my Eleanor pregnant," the warlock on the other side of Sebastian announced. Cecil. He'd introduced himself as Cecil the True.

Only Traditionalist warlocks were silly enough to give themselves such ridiculous titles.

“First, I got her to the point that she was begging for it. Then I denied her for two days.”

I clenched my fingers at the edge of the table, wanting to launch myself over Sebastian and beat the man about the head and face. Looking over at his mate’s face, I could see that she was almost as uncomfortable with this conversation as I was. She was looking down at the table, chewing her food mechanically.

Leaving a witch in heat for two days was criminal. It was painful. I nearly cried at the thought of the witch being left in such a state, begging for her mate to give her relief, and him denying her the release.

“Oh, and how did you manage that without her coming at you?” Bradley, the warlock with all the answers, asked with a laugh. Beneath the table, I glimpsed Sebastian’s hand. He was clenching it and unclenching it atop his thigh.

He wanted to punch these warlocks as much as I did. I could see the slightest tick in his jaw.

But outwardly, he appeared nothing other than interested in what the men were saying.

Something about knowing that he could take all of them down made me feel a little better.

That was until Cecil continued.

“I chained her up. Double duty, mind you. Both physically and magically. By the time I took her, she was covered in her slick. Poor witch had cut herself on her bonds trying to free her hands.”

And the mother fucker laughed at this.

I was going to be sick. I looked away, staring at my plate. I must have been a mirror image of Cecil’s witch, looking down at my plate and chewing mechanically. Only I hadn’t eaten a bite. If I had, it would have come up.

Sebastian’s hand on my thigh made me jump.

“My darling, are you well?”

He whispered the words, but kept the ruse in place just in case anyone heard him.

I looked up at him and was taken aback by the concern in his expression.

Sebastian Cavanaugh might be a jerk. He might make me want to box his ears every other day when we were in Mystic Springs.

But I'd seen him go near berserker when he'd faced down traffickers in Mystic Springs. I didn't know what had moved him to become so adamant about protecting the witches of Mystic Springs from warlocks like these, but it had been his crusade to stop them.

And now he was pretending to be one of them.

For me.

I smiled. And even though I felt sick to my stomach, even though I felt like the world was shifting beneath me as I listened to the warlocks around me, that smile was genuine.

“I'm okay. Perhaps we can take a brief break?”

“Sounds like your witch needs a tune-up, good sir!” Bradley belted out, earning a chorus of laughs from around us.

I wanted to projectile vomit on each of them, but I managed to smile. Sebastian's hand on my back somehow tethered me to reality.

“I believe you're right, Brandon,” Sebastian agreed, deliberately getting the man's name wrong. Sebastian never forgot a name. His getting this warlock's name confused was the ultimate slight. The warlock didn't realize it. “If you will excuse us, it seems I need to tend to my mate.”

He stood and offered me his hand. And I took it, ignoring how good it felt to do so.

EIGHTEEN

SEBASTIAN

“Here.”

I offered the cup of tea to Rainbow, who was still bristling from the exchange at the table.

Not that it had made me feel any better than it had her. The men had been disgusting. The way they had discussed Rainbow’s body and life as if it were up for discussion.

How one warlock had been so proud of himself for putting his mate in pain that way. And all the while he was saying it, I had to wonder if my sister, Penelope, had been put through the same indignities. It had taken every bit of willpower to keep from reaching over, putting my hands around the man’s neck, and squeezing until he stopped breathing. His mate would have likely been glad of it.

But I knew I couldn’t take on every warlock in the place. Couldn’t save every witch who had been force-bonded to someone who would treat her so disrespectfully.

It had been my fear of what would happen to Rainbow that had kept me from losing my cool. More than once, I’d seen a warlock direct his gaze to her. And while she was under a glamour, I knew that — glamour or no — any of these bastards would have wanted to trap her. She was vibrant, just like her name. Warlocks like those we’d just been with would have loved to have zapped the fire right out of her.

As it was, it seemed like the fire was dangerously close to spewing out of her skull.

She took the cup of tea from me, our fingers brushing. She looked up at me as she blew on the brew, and I looked away. Those full pink lips puckered like that? Not something I needed to see right now.

Especially when I needed to calm her down. And I couldn't do that with my cock at half-mast.

After she'd taken a sip or two, sighing as the liquid moved down her throat, I took the seat across from her. It was time to find out what was going on. If she wouldn't tell me, I'd put her over my shoulder and drag her back to Mystic Springs. This couldn't go on a moment longer if I didn't know what we were up against.

What she was running to or from.

She leveled a gaze at me.

“What is it?”

“Rainbow, I need you to tell me what's going on. And I need you to tell me everything. No teasing or jokes. I realize I invited myself on this little mission of yours, but now that we're here, I feel like it's my job to keep you safe.”

I stopped, waiting for her to protest. When none came, I continued.

“That dream last night.”

“Was just a dream.”

“Rainbow.”

She huffed. Setting her tea down on the table beside her, she closed her eyes. Her chest rose and fell. She breathed deeply.

“You're safe here, Rainbow. I'm not going to let anything happen to you.”

I felt safe giving her that reassurance. So far, I hadn't seen anyone here who I couldn't take on. But it would be better if it didn't come to that.

“And whatever you tell me, it's between you and me.”

She laughed. “Shouldn’t you want to tell everyone everything? After all, you think I’m nothing more than a — what was it — nosy gossip hag?”

“I called you that because I was angry. You know you were trying to get under my skin. But I also know you don’t gossip maliciously. If I didn’t know better, there’s a method to your madness.”

The way she furrowed her brow as I said that told me I was onto something.

“So, tell me what’s going on. Tell me why you wanted to come here. Tell me who it is you wanted to find and why.”

Again, she closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. Then she opened her eyes, brilliant blue and mesmerizing.

“Pain of death if you tell anyone any of this because, if you do, you’ll put my life in danger.”

The words went straight to my heart. “Rainbow, the whole reason I demanded to come on this trip with you was to keep you safe. I won’t tell anyone anything you don’t want to be told. Especially not anything that could put you at risk.”

She must have heard the sincerity in my words, because she nodded.

“First, let’s start with the basics. My real name isn’t Rainbow.”

That came as a shock to me. The name seemed to embody how colorful and lively she was.

“My real name is Anabelle Lavensford.”

“Lavensford,” I repeated, tasting the name in my mouth and feeling a chill run down my spine.

“Yes. I see you recognize the name.”

Yeah. I recognized the name. Recognized it as the surname of Markham Lavensford, a well-known proponent of the Traditionalist Movement.

“If your last name is Lavensford, does that make your father...?”

“Markham Lavensford.” She looked away from me as if the name shamed her. As if it hurt her to say.

Without considering what I was doing, I reached out, pulling her chin back, so she faced me.

“Whatever that look is, whatever the reason is that you’re looking away from me as you say his name, know that you don’t have to feel whatever it is you’re feeling.”

She let out a breath, watching me. Calculating. No doubt trying to figure out who the man was in front of her. We were so used to sniping at each other, at giving each other hell, that this had to be a strange situation for her. Hell, it was a strange situation for me.

But as I looked at her face, I knew I wanted to make her feel safe.

“My father had ideas about what his daughter’s life was supposed to be like,” she began, squaring her shoulders and fixing me with a stare. She saw the act of telling me this and not looking away as a challenge. I didn’t take it personally. I knew she needed to let this out.

And I needed to know what it was we were up against.

“I suppose you can imagine what those things were. My father had ideas about how relationships between witches and warlocks were supposed to work. Witches were to be controlled. Chosen by warlocks. And when they were chosen, they were to accept that choice. It was, after all, what was expected of them.”

I could just about finish this tale for her. But I didn’t. She needed to tell me. She didn’t need me editorializing.

“For years, he’d had a warlock picked out for me. A warlock by the name of Torin Rathmore. I didn’t know who he’d chosen for me until the moment of truth arrived.”

My fists clenched. Whoever it was, they didn’t deserve her.

“And naturally, I didn’t want him. Like most witches, I wanted to find my mate, even if that wasn’t what my family

wanted for me.

“But he didn’t see things that way. Neither of them did. As far as they were concerned, I’d been claimed. Like a prize heifer.”

She laughed, a bitter sound that I wasn’t used to hearing from her. It sounded nothing like the teasing, bubbly Rainbow I was used to, even if she usually only directed insults my way. This was the laugh of someone tired. Scarred.

“I actually had the ridiculous idea that I could go to my father and tell him I didn’t want this other warlock to be my mate. I believed he would see my side of things. That he would say, ‘Oh, of course, dear daughter. Whatever your heart’s desire is. Let me just call the whole thing off.’”

She shook her head. “Foolish, right?”

“Not at all. He was your father. A child should be able to go to their father and tell them anything. And not be judged for it.”

“Was that how your father was?”

“Mostly,” I answered, honestly. My father hadn’t had a say in what happened to my sister. He’d been just as distraught over it as I had. They had taken her against her will and ours. By the time we’d found her, she’d already been bonded. Already been a shell of herself.

“Lucky, I guess. Unfortunately, I wasn’t that lucky. He told me I’d either submit to the bond or there would be consequences.”

She stopped, squaring her shoulders once again and looking back up at me.

“So, I suffered the consequences. And then I ran.”

“What were the consequences?” I almost didn’t want to know. Was afraid to know what they had done to her. I’d heard of some things angry warlocks did to witches who didn’t submit to their whims. I’d stopped a few of those things.

At other times, I’d been made to watch.

The thought of Rainbow Carmichael in one of those situations turned my stomach. I clenched my hands at my sides to keep from reaching for her once again.

“He saw that the warlock I was to be bonded with could put a curse on me. That warlock cursed me to ensure that I would never find my mate. That my mate could be right in front of me and I wouldn’t be able to do anything about it because the curse ensures that the mating bond would never kick in.”

So, not just torture, though that would have been bad enough. But a lifetime of misery.

“That’s why I wanted to come here. The warlock who cursed me? He was a family friend. He’s the one who taught me everything I knew about glamours. He’s also the one my father tried to force-bond me with. When he found out I’d refused him, he took it as a personal slight. Instead of capturing me and forcing me into the bond, he, along with my father, decided to punish me.

“The curse dies with him, the warlock who was to be my mate.”

“Your plan is to find him and kill him?”

She shrugged. “I’ve been watching and waiting for years. I settled in Mystic Springs so I could keep an eye on everything that was going on. I knew with all the witch activity in the town, it wouldn’t be long before he showed up there. And I know he’s still alive because I can still feel that curse all over my skin.

“It’s the reason I keep tabs on everything that’s going on in town. It’s not because I just love the gossip. Though, sure, it can be fun. But it’s more that I’ve been waiting for an opportunity. There was some promising gossip about a month ago. Something that suggested that he would be here.”

“And the curse dies with him?”

“The curse dies with him.”

Killing a warlock could get a witch in a whole lot of trouble with not just the human authorities, but the witch

community as well.

But I could attest to the fact that, with the right magic, a witch or a warlock could cover their tracks.

“Is he here?”

“I don’t know.” She settled back in her chair, the tea forgotten. Likely the tea was now cold. “He’ll be under a glamour. He could be sitting right across from me and, if his glamour was strong enough, I couldn’t see through it. I just have to be patient and wait for him to let his guard down.”

“And not let all this shit that these warlocks are saying get to you.”

“Yeah, that too.”

She watched me for a second. The room had grown silent, but not uncomfortably so. We were both processing. Her, no doubt, the fact that she’d just revealed all this to me. And me processing what she’d been through and what we were up against.

“Rainbow?”

“Yeah?”

“We’re going to find him. And we’re going to free you of this curse.”

Because anyone who would do this to a witch — anyone who would do this to Rainbow Carmichael — deserved to die.

NINETEEN

RAINBOW

I can't believe it.

I revealed everything to Sebastian Cavanaugh.

Not only that, he said all the right things. Did all the right things.

And when he told me he'd find a way to break this curse, I believed him.

Sebastian was many things. Insufferable. A jerk at times. Smug. Annoying.

But I knew how he felt about witch-trafficking and force-bonding. I'd seen him take on groups of traffickers in Mystic Springs single-handedly. And after we'd dressed for dinner and he led me back into the fray, I had to admit something to myself:

He made me feel safe.

Right then, I felt less alone than I'd felt in years. As we walked into the ballroom, I looked up at him. Devastatingly handsome. Strong. A warlock who you wouldn't want to fuck with. All the people at the conference only saw the glamour. But I saw the man beneath.

And weirdly enough, I felt like they were missing out.

“What?”

He was looking down at me. I hadn't realized I'd been gazing up at him like some love-struck teenager.

Not that I was love-struck. Just in awe that I wasn't ready to kill him. That's all.

"Sorry, I was making sure your glamour was in place," I lied.

"Everything good?"

"Perfect."

I turned away from him, not willing to let him investigate my expression and trying not to look too hard at how I was feeling at that moment.

Inside the ballroom, all the warlocks and their complacent witches were assembled, just as they had been before. I looked over the crowd, doing my best to put my magical feelers out for the warlock I was looking for. I'd always told myself I'd know when I came within 100 feet of the man who I'd once trusted and then who'd betrayed my trust. I'd know because of the sickening feeling that always took over when I thought of him for more than a few seconds.

I'd given all the details I could to Sebastian before we'd left our suite. He knew of the man's name but had never met him before. A quick search on the witch web gave no image results, which wasn't surprising. I did my best never to look at the man, even in the stores of my memory, but I kept up with his movements as best as possible. I knew it was unlikely that any photos had surfaced online.

"You okay?" Sebastian whispered to me. I didn't miss the fact that he was holding onto me a little tighter than he had been before.

"I'm good. I'm ready to do this."

He gave me a curt nod and then led us to our seats.

This time, our table was filled with unfamiliar faces. There was a couple, older by the looks of it, though I could tell they were wearing a glamour. There was also an unpaired warlock.

The unpaired warlock made me nervous. I did my best to see if he was wearing any sort of glamour. I knew if it was

Torin Rathmore, I would likely not be able to tell, even with my stellar knowledge of glamours.

I could also tell that Sebastian was giving him a once-over.

And from the looks of it, the other warlock at the table was a little uneasy with an unpaired warlock in his midst. After all, his force-bonded witch might find this new warlock more intriguing than the one who had taken her against her will.

Though, that was hard to imagine by looking at the man. Even if he was beneath a glamour, he was fairly forgettable. Even the name he'd given us, Tate Lambert, was forgettable.

“So, what brings a warlock to an event like this all alone?” the other warlock asked. The warlock introduced himself as Ulrich Shade. He'd also failed to introduce the witch at his side by her name — something that wasn't lost on me.

“I'm looking to be paired,” he answered. He gave a side glance my way. Sebastian maneuvered his arm around my shoulders.

And I leaned into it. Because something about this wasn't sitting right.

“I figured this might be the best place to find a warlock in the business of helping to secure a witch for me.”

“Ah,” Ulrich said. “That's a good deal, then. I'm certain there's someone here who can assist you. What are you looking for in a mate? Perhaps I can help steer you in the right direction.”

“I think I'd like someone that might challenge me a bit.”

Ulrich laughed. “I'd caution you against that. This one,” he hooked a thumb toward his mate, “was feisty when I first got her, but I had to break her of that real quick.”

I couldn't look over at his mate. Couldn't stand to see that blank stare that was no doubt there. The one she had to wear to keep from killing the man in his sleep.

“I suspect that this warlock right here could tell me exactly where to find a mate that would suffice,” Tate said, looking up at Sebastian. I could feel Sebastian's body go rigid. I dared to

put my hand on his thigh, hoping it might caution him from letting his emotions get the better of him.

You didn't challenge Sebastian Cavanaugh and get away with it.

Well, unless you were me. But I suspected if I were a warlock, he wouldn't have let some things I'd done go unpunished so easily.

"Is that so?" Sebastian asked, reaching for his drink and taking a sip. His movements were controlled. Downright graceful. I didn't know if Tate was reading in his body language what I was, but if he were, he might very well have a death wish. Because the look he was giving Sebastian right now? It was downright challenging.

"Yes. Look at her," Tate began, gesturing toward me with a sweep of his hand. "She's downright exquisite."

"That she is," Sebastian said, his tone dry but dangerous. In another scenario, his words might have warmed me. Right now, the only thing I could see were red lights flashing everywhere.

"I bet she can take a knot for hours. Does she mewl for you when she goes into heat? Or does she cry like some witches do? Do you ever deny her just to see how hot and bothered you can get her?"

Sebastian's fingers were gripping his glass tightly. Tate's eyes slid down to Sebastian's fingers, noting the tension. He smiled.

Luckily, warlocks were territorial over their mates, even when they weren't fated. Sebastian getting angry over the man's words would be seen by anyone here as a natural response to the other warlock's challenge.

"My mate, my witch, my wife, here, is well taken care of and what I do with her when I knot her is my business only. If you are looking for a mate, then I suggest you find your own and not concern yourself with what I do with mine."

Something about Sebastian's words made heat pool in my belly. I was going to have to get that under control. There was

no way I wanted to go into heat for Sebastian, even if he was making me think a certain kind of way about him at the moment. When we got back to Mystic Springs, things would have to go back to the way they were, and if I went into heat for him?

That was going to make things really awkward back in Mystic Springs.

Finally, Tate backed down. I discreetly let out a breath. Daring to look over at the other witch at the table, I could see her complacent demeanor had changed to one of subdued interest.

Interest that had her eyes cutting over at Sebastian.

When she saw me watching her, she looked away.

And I pretended it didn't bother me to see another witch looking at Sebastian.

TWENTY

SEBASTIAN

“I swear, every one of these dinners or activities is more terrible than the last,” Rainbow said as we walked back to our suite.

She’d made no headway in finding anyone who she thought might be Rathmore. I could tell that we were both watching Tate after he had all but challenged me on my ability to take care of Rainbow.

Hilarious, given Rainbow and I’s actual relationship.

But ultimately, Rainbow didn’t feel as if Rathmore was hiding under a guise as Tate. For some reason, the bastard had felt like challenging me.

Next to me, Rainbow sighed.

“What?” I asked, looking over at her. Once again, she’d dressed in a fetching dress — this time a blue sundress — that showed off her shoulders and a bit of her calves. I tried not to notice how the moonlight caressed her pale skin. It was like the purest milk.

And I’d be lying if I said it didn’t make me thirsty.

“It’s just...all this effort, and it looks like it may be for nothing. It doesn’t appear as if he’s even here.”

I stopped, turning to her. She came up short, nearly falling backward as she stopped. I reached out, steadying her. And tried to ignore the way my hand sizzled just by touching her.

I could only imagine what it would be like if we...

Something I shouldn't imagine because that was definitely never going to happen.

“Even if he's not here, I promise you we'll find him. We'll find him and we'll end this curse. And you'll finally be able to find your mate.”

Something about the words felt sour in my mouth. I pressed on.

“Maybe it will make you a little more settled.”

She put her hand on her hip. I was jealous of that hand.

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

I laughed. Still Rainbow, through and through.

Though she wasn't Rainbow, was she? I'd thought I knew this woman pretty well, given how long we'd sparred. But it turns out that I didn't know her very well at all. I'd positioned her as someone flighty and nosy.

Turns out, she was a formidable witch. Stronger than any I could remember in recent memory. She'd forged a life of her own, hiding from those who would claim her, and doing her damndest to escape the prison they'd made for her.

“It means that maybe once you find your mate,” I tried not to choke on the words. Why they were so hard to say, I didn't know. “Maybe you'll be able to relax. Not look over your shoulder. Maybe you can just be.”

Her body relaxed. That blue sundress she was wearing hugged all of her curves. However she'd fixed our glamours, they were impenetrable to other warlocks and witches. But for me, it was impossible to see the glamour. All I saw was Rainbow.

And what I saw was much too fetching to do my health any sort of good.

I reached out for her, eager to get her back to the safety of our suite, when I heard footsteps behind us.

Instinctively, I pushed Rainbow behind me. I turned, watching a lone shadow approach us. I focused on the details

of the man. Tall, but not as tall as me. Slender, but perhaps deceptively so. If the way he walked like a prowling tiger was any indication, he had ideas on his mind.

I just wasn't sure what those ideas were.

However, when I could finally identify him through the mask of shadow, I suspected I knew.

"Tate." I tried not to growl the name. "What can I help you with?"

"You can help me by telling me what it is you're doing at a place like this?"

I reached back for Rainbow, my fingers encircling her wrist. It was my way of keeping tabs on her. Whatever this warlock was about, it had something to do with her.

"I don't follow."

"You're not mated to this witch. She's unbonded. I can feel it."

"Ridiculous," I said, my fingers tightening on Rainbow's wrist. If my grip was too tight, she gave me no indication it was. "This is my witch, and you'd do well to keep your distance from her."

"I challenge you for her."

Rainbow gasped behind me. Tate stepped closer, his dress shoes scratching along the rock path as he did so. I took in the lines of him. Sized him up in minutes.

He was slighter than me, but I'd been a fighter long enough to know that size could be deceptive. It isn't always the size of a dog in a fight, but the size of the fight in the dog.

Still, he was overconfident. The way he carried himself spoke more of luxury and money rather than strength and physical ability. My family had been well off, but they'd also been farmers. I'd been brought up from an early age to lift as much as my body could handle and work my fingers to the bone. It had forged me into a weapon, along with the magic I'd learned over the years.

That, plus years of fighting, had turned me into a fierce machine.

And I could see that this man would fall down in a fight easily. Unfortunately, if I were to accept his challenge, I'd have to switch up my style a tad. My fighting style was known. People came from all over to challenge me. Fighting him in my usual style might reveal our identities.

And that was something I couldn't risk. Not for my safety, but Rainbow's.

Even with a bit of dramatics, there was no doubt that I could take this man down. And once I did, not a damn warlock here would challenge my right to Rainbow. Which would keep her safe until we got back home and got out of these ridiculous glammers.

“Fine, Tate. You want a challenge, you have one. Where should this take place?”

Behind me, Rainbow was gripping my hand tightly, her tiny nails digging into the skin of my wrist. I gently squeezed her hand in return, letting her know that this was under control. No one was going to take her from me.

I was going to keep her safe.

“They have a clearing designated for this sort of thing. I'll make sure the coordinators know what's taking place. Once it's time for the challenge to take place, there's no doubt you'll be able to find it.”

I gave the man a curt nod and turned, pulling Rainbow to me and pushing us toward the suite.

TWENTY-ONE

RAINBOW

“What were you thinking?” I screeched once we were in the safety of our suite.

“I was thinking that if I don’t end that man, he’ll continue to make a nuisance of himself. Not putting him in his place means risking our covers.”

“And if he wins, then he has a right to—“

Sebastian stepped toward me, crowding me. He looked down at me. There was that fire in his eyes again. The one that made my heartbeat accelerate. That made me feel a little lightheaded.

“No one is going to do anything to you. I assure you of that. I assessed everything about the man. I know how to beat him and I’ll do it in a way that won’t clue anyone into the fact that it’s Sebastian Cavanaugh taking him down. No one is going to take you away.”

I had to remember to breathe. For a minute, it almost appeared as if he believed he was truly my mate. That he had to protect me.

That I was his.

And for a minute, I was tempted to allow the ruse to continue. To role-play as his mate. As someone who would look up at him and say...

“I trust you.”

I hadn’t actually meant to say the words, but they softened Sebastian’s features. His hand went up, almost as if he meant

to touch me, but then he brought it back down to his side again. Part of me mourned the fact that he hadn't followed through on whatever it was he'd almost done.

I wondered, for just a moment, if that blazing look of fire was the way he had looked down at Alana before he took her.

If so, I hated the woman. And I wasn't even sure why.

"Now, get ready. We have a fight to attend. Well, you do. I have a warlock's ass to beat."

WORD of the fight traveled across the site quickly. By the time we'd arrived at the clearing, witches and warlocks were packed in the area.

Someone had cleared a space of tightly parked dirt for Sebastian and Tate's fight. I got the feeling that this must happen from time to time. Everything was set up for this fight to occur long before Sebastian had ever been challenged.

"Stay right here where I can see you," Sebastian ordered as he pulled me to a seat near the edge of the clearing. I knew he did this kind of thing all the time, but I was still nervous as hell. I'd never seen the man fight. Not really. Maybe a bit of fisticuffs at the bar and taking down traffickers, but nothing like this.

But I'd heard tales of how he could easily take down any warlock. I knew other warlocks came from all over just to challenge him.

As soon as Sebastian felt I was near enough to him for comfort, he turned to face his opponent.

My eyes caught on someone watching me to my left. I turned, trying to discern their features, but the commotion surrounding the ring pulled my attention back to Sebastian.

To say I wasn't ready for what happened next is an understatement. First, he pulled off the jacket he'd been

wearing. The way he inched it off his frame, so fluidly, sent a shiver down my spine.

And then he began to unbutton his top.

I knew his glamour would hold through any disrobing. That was my excuse for not peering beneath his glamour and checking his progress. Instead, I focused on him peeling off that white dress shirt.

And revealing a toned, olive-skinned chest. I'd seen him in the dark the other night when I'd dared to look over the side of the bed. But then, we'd been in the shadows. Only the moonlight had highlighted all the planes of his body.

Now? His body was on full display. The firelight of the torches that surrounded the clearing seemed to lick at that olive skin. There was a light dusting of dark hair that trailed down to the waistband of his black dress pants.

And the whole thing was topped off with a fine sheen of sweat that nearly made my mouth water.

What the hell was I doing? I shouldn't be looking at Sebastian like this. We'd spent more time hating each other than anything. When we got back to Mystic Springs, we'd have to fall right back into that mode of two people who didn't get along.

Finding him attractive and, Gods forbid, going into a heat for him was off the menu.

He prowled into the center of the clearing. Like a sleek, deadly cat who was ready to destroy someone.

And that someone was Tate Lambert. And the reason Sebastian was destroying him was to keep me safe.

The thought sent another shot of need right to my core. No, no, no, body. You just get yourself under control. When you get back to Mystic Springs, you can go to the lodge and get yourself taken care of. There would be no going into heat here, of all places.

And for Sebastian, of all warlocks.

But my Gods, did he look delicious in the firelight. I took in the definition of his back as he rolled his shoulders. It was impossible not to imagine what the smooth skin of those broad shoulders would feel like as I held onto them as he...

Get yourself under control, Rainbow!

I clenched my fingers in the fabric of my sundress. Beneath that, I crossed my legs, intent on telling that other part of me what she could do with her wayward thoughts.

Because if I was thinking about Sebastian Cavanaugh like that? My brain didn't have any say in it. It was all primal. All...

Gods. Now he'd turned around so that he faced me and faced Tate, who'd just signaled he was ready to go. I paid little attention to Tate. As far as I was concerned, there was only one other person in this crude little circle, and that was Sebastian.

Sebastian spared a look in my direction, his eyes so dark that I swore I could see galaxies in the light reflected there. He gave me a brief nod. What that nod was supposed to say, I wasn't sure because I was quickly losing grasp of the situation.

Another warlock stepped into the clearing. I recognized him as the warlock who'd given Sebastian pointers on how to get me "good and knocked up." Sebastian paid him little mind, instead focusing on his opponent.

My heart sped up as I saw the look Sebastian was giving him. It was deadly. For some reason, Tate seemed to have no self-preservation because if he had, he would have been running away from that look. Because that look promised a swift death.

Instead, he stayed and waited for the proceedings to begin.

"Today, Tate Lambert has challenged Nick Cavendish for the claim of his mate. It's been a very long time since someone has challenged another warlock for his mate. This was something that warlocks used to do on the regular before our lifestyles were shunted to the annals of history."

A chorus of boos sounded throughout the crowd. I ignored them, instead focusing on Sebastian. He hadn't taken his eyes off Tate.

“But today, Tate has brought back this time-honored tradition. If Tate wins this fight, he will claim Nick's mate and she will be released from her bond to Nick. Then, she will become Tate's mate for the rest of time or until he forfeits the bond.”

I tried to ignore just how shitty the whole concept was. That a witch only belonged to her mate for as long as he needed or wanted her.

What I didn't miss was the look of disgust on Sebastian's face. And I didn't miss the way my stomach tumbled at the thought of him being the warlock who defended me.

For just a moment, I'd let myself pretend he was my mate because right now? I couldn't imagine a better one to have. He'd had my back ever since I'd been here. And for all the fireworks that had popped between us over the years, right now, I fully trusted him with my life.

“So, now that's out of the way! Begin! The fight will continue until one of the warlocks tapped out or until death.”

I swallowed. And I worried for Sebastian.

But one look at his face and I knew Sebastian wasn't the one I should be worried about.

The only one in danger here was Tate.

Tate delivered the first swing, and Sebastian took it. To everyone else, it looked as if Tate had the upper hand. But somehow, somehow, even though I'd never seen Sebastian fight, I knew he was taking it on purpose. He wanted the people around us to think that this wasn't going to be an easy fight for him.

But I knew that if he wanted to, Sebastian could take him out in seconds.

Instead, they danced. Sebastian swung and deliberately missed. Tate bounced on his heels, no doubt thinking that he

had an easy mark.

And believing that, before the night was over, he would take me to his suite, see that I went into heat, and rut me for his own.

I tried not to let that thought fester in my mind.

And when Sebastian finally let loose on the man, the thought completely fled my mind.

Because Sebastian stepped up. And he went complete berserker on Tate. What had been a play for so long was now a fight. And Sebastian wasn't giving him an inch.

As Sebastian's fist connected with Tate's jaw, a sickening crunch sounded through the clearing. I felt that telltale sign of trouble pooling in my belly.

And there was nothing I could do to stop it. Sebastian was wailing on the man. And so far, Tate hadn't called "uncle." The crowd was on their feet and I couldn't move.

Because if I moved, I knew exactly what would happen.

The slick that was pooling between my thighs would flow like water.

Watching Sebastian take on this warlock was sending me headlong into a heat. I couldn't take my eyes off of him, though. He was a virile, powerful warlock going to bat for me.

And my body was reacting in just the way a witch's would.

By the time Tate cried out for the fight to end, people around me were taking notice. The witch among them had gone into heat.

My cheeks were burning even as I was bracing my stomach with my arms. Embarrassment seeped through my veins. Not only because everyone around me knew what was happening to me. But because, as soon as they declared Sebastian the victor and he looked over at me, he would know what was happening to me as well.

I wanted to cry. To fold in on myself and pretend that none of this was happening.

“Looks like your antics have sent your witch straight into her heat!” A warlock guffawed behind me.

Tears welled in my eyes. I wanted Sebastian. My body did. But what in the hell could we do about this? He might be the warlock who had stood up for me, but he also hated me. I was the gossipy little hag who vexed him day in and day out.

While part of me knew he wouldn't humiliate me over this — after all, it wasn't like I could control it — I still didn't relish what might come next. We'd have to get me to a nearby lodge or...who knows?

Because he wasn't going to take on my heat. That meant hours, if not days, of seeing me through it. And there was no way that he would want to do that.

As he stalked toward me, I braced myself. He would play it cool until we could figure out what to do next. But I didn't want to stand. Didn't want everyone to see me with slick pooling at my feet.

As he neared me, he crouched and picked up his jacket. Coming to me without a word, he draped it over my shoulders, the long coat coming below my hips. Then he crouched down and scooped me up into his arms.

“Come on. We've got to get you out of here.”

“SHHH, it's okay. I'm going to take care of you.”

I could barely process what Sebastian was saying to me. He was going to take care of me? How?

“How else would a warlock take care of a witch in heat?”

Had I asked that first ridiculous question out loud?

“You're going to...”

I couldn't say the words. I was still in his arms. He pushed through the door of the suite, closing it behind us by kicking it back into its frame with his foot. He was holding me against his bare chest. A chest that was still slick with the exertions of taking on another warlock in my honor.

Something that had sent me straight into an embarrassing heat.

Because I wanted him. And there was that stupid voice in the back of my head. The voice I'd been ignoring since we'd got here — if I hadn't been ignoring it for longer than that — that told me this was exactly what I'd been wanting. Since that day he'd stood in my kitchen, pacing back and forth like a caged tiger, demanding to see me safely through this stupid ordeal.

He sat me down on the bed. I whimpered as he pulled away from me, something that would no doubt embarrass me later. He crouched before me.

“Rainbow—“

“Anabelle,” I corrected him. If we were going to have the conversation we were soon to have, I wanted him to use my real name. No. I didn't give my real name to every warlock who'd rutted me through a heat at the lodge, but that had been different. Those warlocks were providing a service.

This warlock had gone to bat for me. I still didn't fully understand why. Yes, underneath that smugness and swagger, there was a good man, but that didn't explain why he had gone to such lengths to keep me safe.

“Anabelle,” he repeated, the name rolling off his tongue. Just his voice ghosting over that name did something to me. I stifled a moan before I really embarrassed myself. More than I already had. “You're in heat.”

“No shit,” I said, trying to sound forceful and in control of the situation, but the words came out more like a whine. A whine made worse as I grasped my stomach and whimpered.

He was being careful not to touch me. Not yet.

“Anabelle, I need to know that you're okay with my taking care of you.”

I dared to look up into his dark eyes. They were full of desire. My heat wasn't lost on him either. He was affected as well. Maybe I could convince myself that, if I let him rut me, he would be doing both of us a favor.

“What are you afraid of?” he asked.

“You’ve always hated me.”

“I’ve never hated you, Anabelle. You’ve annoyed me, but I’ve never hated you. If I hated you, I wouldn’t have come here with you. What happens in the next hours doesn’t have to mean anything beyond the fact that you’re a witch in trouble and I’m helping you. Now, tell me. Are you okay with me being the one to see you through this?”

Okay? The truth was, I didn’t want anyone else but him.

But I couldn’t tell him that.

So, I just nodded.

“Say the words, Anabelle. Tell me it’s me you want to take care of you.”

“I want you, Sebastian.”

He stood, towering over me. I looked up at him. All of that tall, powerful warlock. And, for a few hours, he was all mine. I wouldn’t be as enticing to him as Alana or any of his previous partners. But right then, it didn’t matter because he was looking down at me as if I was the only thing in the world that mattered.

With a flick of his wrist, he unfastened the button of his pants. In one quick movement, his pants pooled at his feet. He stepped out of them, my eyes staying on that large bulge that teased me through the cotton of his boxer briefs.

This time, I reached forward, hooking my fingers into the waistband of his boxers. I looked up at him before I moved an inch, asking for his permission silently.

“Go on, Carmichael. See what awaits you.”

I almost laughed at his smug words, but when I pulled the fabric downward, any desire to laugh was stolen from me.

The man was endowed. The tip of his cock glistened with precum. My mouth watered at the thought of that inside me, locking inside me in that primal dance that warlocks and witches had done since the dawn of time.

Giving him one last look upward, I bent forward, delivering a swift kiss to his cock. Then I licked the precum from the tip, delighting in the hiss that came from above.

“Anabelle,” he warned. I knew what he was saying. In a few short moments, I would be lost to the heat. Unable to do anything other than beg for him to knot me. But right now, I was going to get well acquainted with what was about to be inside me.

More slick flooded my cunt, making my body ready for him. Under normal circumstances, I’d be begging him to flood my womb. To make me his witch. To fill me with his seed. But Rathmore had ensured I’d never conceive until the spell was broken.

I told myself that it was a good thing. That this pairing between Sebastian and I was temporary. That no good could come from making a child with someone who I wouldn’t be mated with in the long run.

But something about the prospect of my belly growing bigger with his child made me yearn for the possibility. My stomach ached at the thought of not having that opportunity.

It was something I’d never felt before with any other warlock. And it defied logic that I would want it with Sebastian.

I went to encircle the head of Sebastian’s cock with my lips, but he pushed me away. I moaned, wanting to taste him.

“Not yet, little witch. Right now, I’m going to take care of you.”

He reached down, fisting the fabric of my sundress in his hands and pulling it upward. Pulling it over my head, he tossed it aside, looking down at me. For a minute, even through the haze of my heat, I felt too exposed. Too unlike the other witches I knew he’d had before me. I thought of the gorgeous Alana and how she must look naked beneath his gaze with those full breasts and tight little body. All that dark, gleaming black hair that he could really twist around his fist.

I had none of that.

I didn't realize that I was folding my arms against my body, covering my breasts, which were still covered by my bra, until I felt him pull them away from my body.

"Why are you hiding from me, Anabelle?" he asked, once again crouching down to my level.

I didn't want to admit to my insecurities. He already had enough leverage on me to last for a few lifetimes. Admitting that I was comparing myself to his last partner wasn't something I wanted to reveal.

"Just nervous," I lied. Something in his gaze told me he knew I was lying, but he didn't press the issue.

Instead, he slipped his fingers into the cups of my strapless bra and pulled the garment downward, exposing my hardened nipples to his gaze.

And as inadequate as I felt at that moment, I wanted nothing more than for him to take them into his mouth and suckle me with those full, pink lips.

"There's nothing to be nervous about, Anabelle. You're exquisite."

It didn't taste like a lie, but the rock-hard state of his cock told me he might not be in the most critical mood. Once again, I assured myself that was fine. Pressing lightly on my shoulders, he pushed me onto my back.

Then he prowled across the bed, hovering above me.

He looked down at me as if he were cataloging all the bits and pieces of me. He bent forward, his lips connecting with my collarbone, bypassing my lips altogether. I tried not to let the disappointment of not knowing his kiss overwhelm me.

Luckily, as he nipped and suckled down my shoulders, coming ever closer to my nipples, I forgot all about the missed kiss.

And when his lips finally touched my peaked nipples, I cried out, my hands coming up and my fingers tangling into his dark locks. I arched beneath him as he suckled me. More slick was pooling between my legs. Before long, the bed

would be soaked. I cried out, bucking my hips against him. Whimpering. Moaning.

He pulled away from my breast, looking up at me, those long lashes brushing his cheeks.

“I’ve got you, Anabelle.” His hand slid down my side, my skin quivering in his wake. He hooked his fingers into my panties and yanked them, ripping them easily from my body.

Then his hand pushed my thighs apart, and I hissed as his fingers met with my wet, slick-covered pussy.

“Oh, Anabelle. Gods, you’re dripping. Fuck.”

He pushed away from me, making me whimper. Then he situated himself between my legs, pushing my thighs apart wider and hooking his powerful arms beneath them.

“I’m right where I need to be,” he growled. I barely had time to contemplate what he meant by that before he was feasting on me, diving into my cunt with his expert tongue. I arched into him, bathing him in my slick as he ate me out.

As his tongue flicked across my clit, licking up my lips and then fucking me with his tongue, I cried out. I fucked his face with my body, bucking against him, eager to have all of him inside me. When he inserted two fingers and met each caress of his tongue with a thrust of his fingers, I fell headlong into that first delicious release.

He sucked and licked, making me cry out again and again. I came on his tongue, drenching him.

“Please,” I begged, that still small part of me just barely there, letting me know I should be embarrassed to beg Sebastian for anything. “I need your knot. Please, Sebastian.”

He pulled back, prowling over me and covering my body with his. I knew that, before this night was over, he’d be taking me in every position imaginable. This heat, another small voice in the back of my mind said, had been long overdue.

Sebastian settled between my legs.

“Your pussy tastes divine, Anabelle. Let me show you.”

And then, finally, he leaned forward, his mouth meeting mine, his tongue dancing inside my mouth. Tasting my slick on his tongue was the most erotic sensation I'd ever experienced in my life. I had the strange thought that I wanted him to wear the taste of me for the rest of his life.

The thought was pushed aside as I felt his cock pushing inside me. I moaned into his mouth as he slowly pushed deeper.

He pulled away from our kiss, looking down at me. "Take all of me, Anabelle. Let me make you feel good."

"Sebastian, oh Gods, fuck." Before long, I'd likely not even be speaking English. I'd had plenty of heats, but none had felt like this. Nothing had ever made me feel like I might explode if I didn't have this one warlock's knot lock inside me.

"That's my good little witch," Sebastian soothed as he pushed further inside me. My pussy stretched around him, the damned thing behaving as if it had been made for him and him only. "Take all of me. I'm going to make damn sure you know who this pussy belongs to."

I couldn't focus on what he was saying. Couldn't make any of it make sense of it, because how could my pussy be his? How could any of me be his? I wasn't his mate. I wasn't anyone's.

Then he began to move inside me and any attempt to make sense of anything left me. Gods, he felt so good.

He brought me closer to him, his lips at my neck as he thrust inside me, his slick body so close to mine. I'd never felt safer. His strokes grew deeper, hitting all those delicious bits of me that made me feel like I was leaving orbit, never to return. His balls slapped against my ass as his thrusts grew harder, faster.

"Your pussy feels so damned good, Anabelle. Like it was made for me." His voice in my ear was the hottest sound I'd ever heard. No barbs. No insults. Just him telling me how good I felt grasping his cock.

“Sebastian, don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

“Why would I stop, little witch, when you feel so Godsdamned good? Oh, fuck.”

He stroked harder and faster. Our bodies slapped in time, the oversized bed’s springs squeaking beneath us. It made a gorgeous and filthy symphony that paired with our moans and groans and thrusts. As I came apart beneath him, my body still begging for his knot, he held me tighter, thrusting harder.

“I’m going to make you all mine tonight,” he growled in my ear. “Going to fucking ruin you. Because tonight, you’re mine. Every bit of you. Tell me. Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” I said, wondering if I just meant for tonight or longer than that. Because right now, I couldn’t imagine anyone else ever feeling this good inside me.

And then, we came together. My pussy latched onto him as his knot swelled inside me. That old magic that made our bodies perfect for one another. I wanted to scream, beg him to fill me up with his seed, for all the good it would do.

Sebastian groaned as his knot locked inside me, holding us together so closely that we were truly one. I keened and mewled, loving the feel of him claiming me in the way only a warlock could.

In the way that I now knew that only he could.

My heats before this one had been enjoyable, but they’d never felt like this. They’d never felt like there was no end to me and no beginning to the one I was with. It felt like Sebastian and I had become one soul. That I belonged to him and he belonged to me.

Once he was fully locked inside me, he stared down at me. His eyes were so dark and full of satisfaction that I gasped even as my release overtook me. Slick flooded my pussy as he came inside me, a soft, satisfied moan escaping his lips.

Tears filled my eyes as I came again as he continued to fill me up. His forehead rested against mine as we held onto each other, both inside and out.

“Talk to me, Anabelle,” he said, his voice rough with desire and the exertion of what we’d just done. What we were doing.

I couldn’t tell him what I was feeling, even if I wasn’t nearly gone from my heat and how he felt inside me. Couldn’t tell him how I resented that barrier between us that was keeping him from truly claiming me. From truly filling me up with every bit of himself.

I shook my head. “Not now, Sebastian,” I managed, hanging on by a thread. “Not now.”

And then I arched into him again, my body feeling so full of him. My pussy quaked around his cock, his knot refusing to let go.

For now, I was his, and he was mine.

We’d deal with the consequences later.

TWENTY-TWO

SEBASTIAN

I should have been exhausted. Shouldn't have been able to move. It was afternoon. Whatever was happening beyond the confines of our suite was out of my hands. There was no way I was leaving this little witch until she demanded I do so.

Rainbow — Anabelle, a name I'd have to forget when we returned home — had been in heat for hours. And I'd met her every demand. Tasted the sweet essence of her. Knotted her, rutted her.

And it had taken every bit of my energy. Because there was something about her. Something that used me up. Something that made me never want to stop touching her.

And I couldn't. Even now, as she lay exhausted beside me, her back to me, I had my arm draped over her waist. I wanted to pull her to me just so I could feel her body against mine. But there was still that wall between us. And something more than whatever curse had been put upon her.

She was scared. What, I wasn't sure of.

And the truth was, I was scared, too.

Because someday, I was going to remove this curse from her. And then she would go on to find her mate.

Then there would be no more Rainbow Carmichael in my life to tease and fight with. It was only now, as she lay naked beside me, that I realized just how much I enjoyed seeing her walk through the door of my office above the ice cream shoppe. How all those petty arguments and fights had been a replacement for...what? This?

I didn't know, but I wasn't ready to let it go.

Even if I knew I had to, eventually.

As my arm rested over her abdomen, I laid my hand against her stomach. For the first time that I could remember, I'd wanted to really claim a witch. Wanted to push inside her, feel my knot swell, and know that eventually, she'd swell with my child. I could just imagine the arguments we'd get into as I watched her waddle through my house with that belly full of the child we'd made.

And then, when the day was over, how I'd drive into her again, knowing she was mine.

But she wasn't. We would go back to Mystic Springs and we would have to return to the way things had been. Because keeping on with this ruse when we knew it would all come to an end would be too painful. There was a reason I had an understanding with each of my partners. I knew they weren't my mates. Could they present for me later?

Sure.

But I'd been around a long time, and my mate had never presented herself. The likelihood that something had happened to her was more of a possibility than the idea that I just hadn't met her yet. It would do no good to get attached to a witch, only to see her present for another warlock later.

And that would be exactly what would happen with Rainbow. Anabelle. And I wouldn't deny her the joy of finding her mate simply because I wanted to keep her for myself.

"I know you're awake."

Her voice sounded tired, groggy. The voice of a witch who had been more than taken care of by her warlock.

By me.

"I'm surprised you are," I said, resisting the urge to pull her to me. She turned to face me, the sheet dipping below her breasts. She pulled the sheet back up over her. Reaching up, I pulled it back down. She looked at me with a frown.

“I’ve seen it all. Tasted it all. There’s no point in hiding from me now, Carmichael.”

It felt weird to call her that now, but it was a good way of keeping things in check.

I brushed my thumb across her nipple and was rewarded when it peaked beneath my touch. It at least felt good to know that I could easily get her going. I should have known all those fights were just a prelude to this.

She sighed as I touched her. Too much of that and she’d go right back into a heat. It was tempting, but there was something about her expression that was troubled.

“Why did you want to come here with me?”

Oh, that. Good question. And not one that I was ready to answer with the utmost honesty.

“I don’t believe it was all just because you were afraid I’d get myself in trouble,” she said. I knew Rainbow was a savvy witch, but that one statement told me she wasn’t as in tune with reality as I thought she was.

Because it had been the thought of her at the mercy of all these bastard warlocks that had nearly driven me to madness.

Still, she didn’t need to know that. Not one more thing to make things weird between us when we got back home.

I sighed. As much as I didn’t want to tell her the truth, I also wasn’t crazy about delving into my past. But it was what I needed to do in order to keep things on an even keel between us.

As much as they could be, at any rate.

“My sister was force-bonded when she was just fifteen.”

Rainbow reached out, her palm resting on my cheek. I was tempted to lean right into that touch. To let her comfort me. Instead, I continued.

“Some warlock who lived close to our village had seen her at market. And he had decided right then and there that he was to have her.

“My father was unlike yours,” I said, regretting the words when I saw the look of pain coast over her face. This time, it was I who reached out, brushing my knuckles against her cheek. She sighed. The sound was nearly enough to make my cock rise to attention once again, so I pulled my hand back.

“He didn’t want Penelope to be mated so soon.” Even back then, fifteen was young for a witch. Witches and warlocks lived centuries beyond humans. It was a given that, typically, by the time a witch was mated, she’d lived at least a couple of decades, if not more.

“And he wanted her to find her mate. She’d romanticized the idea, like most witches, ever since she’d been a little girl. Some handsome warlock, her fated mate, would find her and she would present for him right there. And he’d take her away to his castle or wherever and they’d have dozens of little witch and warlock babies.”

Rainbow smiled at that and she didn’t have to tell me she’d once had those same fantasies, only to have them destroyed by some conniving bastard.

“But the warlock who’d decided she belonged to him, he wasn’t going to take no for an answer. After my father refused his offer of a force bond, he went to some fellow warlocks in town and they abducted her from her home. Right under our noses.”

They’d overpowered us with their magic. Magicked us so we’d slept through the whole thing. Even now, though I’d never heard it, I could hear how she must have screamed out for us to help her. My heart ached at the thought of it.

And Rainbow must have sensed that because she once again reached out for me, this time taking my hand in hers and bringing it to her chest. She held onto me, refusing to let me go until I finished.

“We tracked her down, but by that time, it was too late. She was a shell of herself. Worse than these witches you see here at this conference. Eventually, she chained a stone to her ankle and sank herself in the nearby river.”

“Sebastian, I don’t know what to say.”

I knew she wouldn’t bother with apologies. And I was glad. Apologies did nothing but remind me of the pity that some people had looked upon me and my father with after they’d found out what she’d done.

“Ever since then, I promised myself that I would do everything in my power to stop other witches from being taken like her. Seeing these witches here...”

“I’m sorry that I’ve brought you here, Sebastian. I didn’t know and—“

“No. Don’t be sorry. There was no way I would ever let you go here and put yourself in danger alone. If I’d found out that one of them had taken you...”

I stopped, knowing I was dangerously close to revealing how much her welfare meant to me.

How much she meant to me.

“We’re going to find the person who did this to you. One way or another. Whether it’s this week or ten years from now. I promise you, we’ll find him.”

Even if it killed me.

TWENTY-THREE

RAINBOW

I saw him in my dream. That face that had stuck out in the crowd.

There was something unfocused about him. I was certain he was wearing a glamour.

And in my dreams, I could see beneath that glamour.

And see who he really was.

Torin Rathmore.

The heat had taken hold of me so hard and fast that I didn't have time to really contemplate what I'd been seeing. But now, in the safety of my dream state, I examined him. Saw how he watched me.

Saw how he was realizing who he was looking at.

It was him.

I jerked awake. The sun had gone out of the sky again. After Sebastian had told me about his sister, our bodies had come together once again. I rode him, rough and fast, his knot finally securing me in place. We'd held onto each other like that for over an hour before his knot released me. After that, I'd lain atop him, falling asleep.

I wasn't sure how I'd finally wound up on my side with him at my back. I looked over my shoulder.

Sebastian was asleep. In sleep, he looked impossibly young. His long, dark lashes fluttered against his cheeks as his

eyes moved back and forth, following whatever dream he was currently having. I wondered what he was dreaming about.

Or who.

But at least he was under because it would allow me to do what I needed to do next.

I slowly slid out of bed, looking over at the sleeping warlock. His chest still moved up and down rhythmically.

I only needed to do one thing. And I needed to do it now. After what Sebastian had done for me, first fighting for me and then seeing through a heat, I didn't want to tax him any further. Especially after what he'd told me about his sister. I'd known that there was some other reason — other than just my safety — for his adamant that he needed to come with me. Now, after he'd revealed his past to me, it was going to be impossible for me to see him the same way ever again.

Not that I would have been able to once I'd felt how amazing his knot had felt inside me.

The only thing I needed to do was go out and confirm that the man I'd seen at the fight was Rathmore. Over the years, I'd perfected my spells for seeing beneath the most robust glamours.

I dipped into every concealment spell in my arsenal. I'd become more than adept at cloaking myself. It had allowed me to remain safe in a world that preyed on witches like me.

That had preyed on witches like me.

Taking one last look at Sebastian's sleeping form, I snuck out of our suite. My heart twisted as I closed the door behind me. I'd have to get over how attached I'd become to Sebastian by the time I got back to Mystic Springs.

For now, I needed to be aware of where I was headed. I moved within the darkness of the tree line, using both magic and shadow to conceal me.

My heightened state of being amplified every snap of a twig or hoot of an owl. And that's when I heard it. Voices. All male. All warlocks.

“It’s ridiculous how they expect us to kowtow to their silly ways of life. This is how we were meant to be. Claim our witches, claim our lives!”

A chorus of male voices rose in agreement.

So, it was preaching to the choir time at this ridiculous gathering. Good. While I wouldn’t rely on the fact that they were already so deep in their element that they’d likely not notice someone snooping, it made it a little easier. Still, I doubled my defenses as I crept closer.

I only needed a good look at him. He’d taught me everything that I’d known and that gave me the advantage of seeing the limits of his knowledge and his magic. I’d perfected glamours and perfected seeing beneath other witches’ and warlocks’ glamours.

They were ensconced in a meeting hall near the center of the property. Not a witch was in sight. Naturally. It would have been difficult for most witches to keep down supper with all this dick measuring.

I inched closer to the building. The lighting was low outside. That worked in my favor. None of the warlocks were focusing on the darkened area around the building, making it easier for me to spy on them without them noticing my presence.

I did an inventory of the room. There were at least twenty warlocks inside. I scanned their faces.

There. Against the back wall, looking bored. He was deep in thought, not really looking at anyone else in the room.

But luckily not looking at anyone else beyond the room, either.

And as I focused on him, careful not to alert him to my presence, I got that same feeling I used to get when he was around. Then, he’d been a trusted friend of the family. Like an uncle or an older neighbor who you depended on in times of trouble.

Then he’d shown his true colors. After that, every time he came close, my anxiety ramped up. I felt instant danger.

Just like I was feeling now.

His glamour was tight. It was difficult to see through. I couldn't get a clear picture of him, but I knew it was him. It *felt* like him.

That was all the confirmation I needed. Now to make it back to the room and...

A hand clamped over my mouth as one encircled my waist. I struggled against my unseen captor, trying to maintain quiet so as not to tip off the other warlocks in the distance, even as I struggled.

Then that scent came over me. Early spring. Dew. Pleasure. Sebastian.

I stopped struggling. He released me, allowing me to turn to face him.

Even in the darkness, I could see the danger on his face. He was dressed in a pair of slacks that looked as if he'd hastily thrown them on. A white dress shirt completed the haphazard ensemble, buttons undone and tails flopping around his waist.

Had it not been for the fact that I wanted to punch him, I would have found him devastatingly handsome.

"Come," he whispered, drawing me close to him. "We're about to have a discussion."

TWENTY-FOUR

SEBASTIAN

I hadn't been aware that I could be so damned angry and so damned afraid all at once.

When they'd taken Penelope that night all those years ago, I'd been angry. Angry because I'd been unable to do anything to prevent it and angry because I'd known what she was in for.

Now, I had no idea what was going on. Which was likely the reason it wasn't just fear slinking up my spine, but anger coursing through my veins as well. The anger was currently superseding the fear.

I'd known the minute she'd walked out the door. Somehow, I'd remained asleep until she'd left. I suspected she'd used some sort of magic to ensure I didn't wake up. We'd be discussing that later, too.

But at the heart of that anger was fear. Fear that she was about to get herself into trouble that I might not be able to get her out of.

Or at least, not get her out of it without causing a bloody mess.

I followed her scent, praying that if any other warlocks happened upon the same path, they wouldn't be able to scent her as well as I could. She'd been careful, but not so careful that I couldn't find her. Which made me wonder if anyone else had trailed her.

She was standing outside a community building likely meant for smaller gatherings. She was focused on someone inside the building. Inside, a group of warlocks were busy one-

upping each other on Traditionalist politics. She had no idea I was behind her.

Which made me even angrier.

I slipped up behind her, careful to mask my sounds as well as hers with a quick concealment spell. As my arm wrapped around her waist and my other came over her mouth, she struggled at first.

I was oddly pleased to see she stopped struggling when she realized it was me who had her pinned. Knowing she was secure with me, I turned her to face me.

Wrapping my arm around her, I pulled her to me.

“Come. We’re about to have a discussion.”

I pulled her away from the building, just beyond the voices of those inside. I looked down at the little witch.

As she stood before me, bristling with anger and excitement — over something she’d discovered, no doubt — the fear was gone.

And only anger remained in its place.

“What the hell were you thinking, Carmichael?”

It was easier to use her last name right now. Easier to keep that anger right at the forefront. That way, I wouldn’t focus on what might have happened. What might have happened had those warlocks inside the building realized that there was an unmated witch right in their midst?

I didn’t let her answer. Instead, I picked her up, throwing her over my shoulder. And I didn’t stop until I had her through the door of our suite. I thrust the door closed behind me, relishing the bang as it slammed into its frame.

I sat her on her feet and then crossed my arms, waiting for an explanation.

“He’s here, Sebastian. Rathmore. He’s right there in that building.”

“And you went where he was and put yourself in his crosshairs? Alone. What would you have done if they’d

noticed you? Taken you? If I hadn't woken up and realized what stupid thing you'd done?"

"I did what I came to do! Find Rathmore!"

"And then what? Stomp in and demand he release you from your curse? I hate to break it to you, but that's not how this is going to work."

"Don't play big bad warlock with me, Cavanaugh. I had no intention of letting him know I was there. I just needed to verify it was him."

I had questions. Lots of them. Like how she had realized in the middle of the night that this glamoured warlock was the one who had cursed her. That would come later, though.

"Why didn't you wake me?"

She was still angry, but something about my question seemed to mollify her. She sighed deeply. I was having a hard time not pulling her to me and shaking some sense into her.

And then rutting her all over again so she'd scream like she had last night.

"You've done so much already. I mean, you've had to take care of me during my heat. You probably hated doing that."

At that, I felt my ire rise.

"What in the name of the Gods gave you the impression that I hated rutting you, Carmichael? And what the hell do you think I came here for? I came here to keep you safe and you go waltzing off right into the mouth of danger?"

That anger was rising in me again.

And that wasn't the only thing that was rising. Her chest was heaving. Her lips were parted as she tried to prepare her next sit down.

And on top of all that, her need for me was growing as well. I could sense it, scent it.

"Asshole," she whispered, her breath growing quicker.

I smirked. “Serves you right, Carmichael. Now you’ve got me fired up. And now you’re ready to go, as well. This deserves a little punishment.”

“Don’t you even think about it,” she said, but the way her voice hitched, the way her breath quickened, told me she was thinking about it, too.

“Oh, yes.”

She watched me as I stalked toward her, each step making my cock harder. My knot was begging to dive right into this little witch. But first...

“On your knees, Carmichael.”

I stood right over her. Her nostrils flared even as her eyes grew darker and her pupils expanded.

“Now.”

My voice was barely above a growl. Her breath staggered at my command.

“What if I don’t?” she asked. She was playing games now.

“If you don’t, you’ll deny the thing we both damn well know you want.”

This time, it was her that growled. “Jerk.”

“On. Your. Knees.”

She watched me for a moment, then turned, climbing onto the bed. Between the time she’d decided to sneak out of the room and closed the door behind her, she’d donned a ridiculous little pair of shorts and a t-shirt. She had to have been freezing out there earlier.

Just as well, because I was definitely about to warm her up.

“Do what I said, Carmichael. On your knees. You need to learn a lesson.”

Even if I knew she wanted that lesson. If I really wanted to teach her a lesson, I’d deny her this. I could tell by the scent of her slick that she was enjoying this.

She positioned herself on her knees, presenting that sweet little rump for me. Climbing onto the bed behind her, I hooked my fingers into the waistband of her shorts and panties, pulling both garments down in one pull. Her sweet little pale ass glistened for me in the dark. The wetness between her thighs told me she was more than ready for me. I'd tend to that later. As hard as my cock was for her — as much as my knot was pleading for her sweet witch pussy — this was what we both wanted right now.

I rubbed my palm over the soft skin of her ass, relishing the way she sighed at the contact. She pushed back into my touch, and I smirked.

“Don't look so eager, little witch. You might make me think you actually want this.”

Of course, we both knew that she did. But I knew there was no way in hell that she'd admit to it. Not yet anyway.

Pulling my hand back, I delivered a quick spat to her ass. The way her ass cheeks bounced back with my smack made my cock throb that much harder.

I rubbed the reddened flesh and then delivered another smack.

This time, she let out a moan. Greedy little witch.

“Sebastian,” she moaned, pushing her ass further up in the air. Who knew that little Rainbow Carmichael enjoyed a bit of punishment?

Delivering another smack, she moaned again. Slick dripped between her thighs. Reaching down and between her legs, I tested her dripping cunt. She whimpered at my touch. Much more of that and I wouldn't be able to stop from driving into her fast and hard.

I pulled my hand back and slapped her ass again.

“Please,” she cried. “Please, Sebastian. I need you.”

Flicking open the fly of my pants, I released my cock and positioned myself behind her. In one quick push, I impaled her on my cock.

“Tell me you won’t put yourself in danger like that again, Anabelle,” I said, holding onto her hips and driving in and out of her quickly, fiercely. I was determined to get all my thrusts in before my knot swelled inside her and held onto her for dear life.

“Tell me you belong to me, if only for the next few days. I’m your mate right now. No one else. I don’t give a fuck who has tried to claim you.”

“I’m yours, Sebastian,” she mewled, pushing back onto my cock. Her pussy was grasping for my knot. But I wasn’t ready yet. I wanted to fuck her into oblivion. Let her know she was mine.

I slammed in and out of her, over and over, our bodies slapping and smacking. I slapped her ass as I drove into her. Her fingers reaching forward, twisting in the sheets before her, clamoring for purchase. She was moaning, mewling, begging for my knot.

Finally, the warlock inside could take it no more. I needed to claim her, needed to lock inside her and fill her with my seed. Gods, how I wanted to make her swell with my child.

I bit my lip, lest I let that wish slip out. An admission that might not only hurt things between us later, but would open up old wounds that she was now trying to heal.

I slammed into her one last time as my knot swelled, locking me inside her.

“Sebastian. Feels so good. Don’t let go.”

“I won’t, Anabelle. I’ve got you.”

And if I had my way, I’d never let her go.

TWENTY-FIVE

RAINBOW

I'd been in the most extravagant beds. When I was still with my family, we'd had the best of everything. The best houses, beds, you name it. We had it.

But nothing could beat the comfort of being atop Sebastian Cavanaugh. With his broad chest beneath me, I could have lain there forever.

It was a strange feeling. Only days ago, I'd thought he would have been the last warlock on earth who I would want inside me.

Now, I couldn't imagine anyone else.

His hand was resting atop the crown of my head, caressing my hair. It was as intimate as anything we'd done yet.

"Tell me what you want, Anabelle," he commanded, his voice making his chest rumble beneath me. "If you could have anything right now, what would it be?"

I knew I couldn't answer that one truthfully. Because if I was honest, right at that moment, I had nearly everything I wanted.

That was something I definitely didn't think he wanted to hear, though.

And it would do me no good to tell him, anyway. Once I broke the curse...

"I want to find my mate," I said, honestly. Well, almost honestly. Because there was a part B to that answer.

I wanted to find my mate. And I wanted that mate to be the man beneath me.

“I want to feel not so alone,” I continued, putting those thoughts away so I couldn’t find them again. Not anytime soon, anyway. “I want someone to be there to catch me when I fall. To laugh with. To tell me everything is going to be okay when I get scared. To protect me and let me protect them.”

It hurt to say all that. It had always hurt to think about those things that I didn’t think I could ever have.

But it hurt even more now because, as I said them, I could picture Sebastian in all those scenarios.

Again, it was a jagged pill to swallow. He’d made a menace of himself when it came to me in Mystic Springs. During the time we’d known each other, we’d spent most of that time at each other’s throats.

But it had been he who had refused to let me come here alone. It had been him I’d finally revealed all to — something I hadn’t even done with Harper.

It had been him that had gone to bat for me, battling another warlock.

And it had been he who had seen me through one of the most violent heats in my life. A heat that had been all for him.

“You want to find your mate,” Sebastian said, his fingers still gliding across my crown.

I pulled my chin up, propping myself onto his chest so I could look up at him.

Sebastian was a gorgeous specimen of warlock. As he looked down at me, his eyes almost obscured by those long, dark lashes, he took my breath away.

“Why haven’t you found a mate?” I asked him, eager to change the subject, but also curious. Over the years, I’d become used to hearing about Sebastian Cavanaugh’s exploits. And I’d seen each of the witches who had temporarily claimed a space in his life. How damned beautiful they were, each of them brimming with magic and desire.

I'd always felt a little lost in their presence. Now, I envied them. Even though I'd had Sebastian, I had to wonder if he didn't find me lacking when compared to them.

"Not sure there's a real reason, but I admit to enjoying being a free warlock."

He sighed, looking up at the ceiling.

"Always sort of figured that, as long as I've been around, whoever she was, she must have perished at some point. They say that it's our biological imperative to mate to ensure the species and, as such, we're drawn to our mates somehow. But she never was drawn to me or me to her, which makes me think that maybe something happened to her a long time ago."

I shrugged. "Maybe it hasn't happened yet. Maybe something's holding her up. Maybe she was taken like your sister and is trying to find a way out of that."

Beneath me, Sebastian tensed.

"Sorry," I said, realizing how careless my words had been considering what had happened to his sister. "I didn't mean to —"

"You did nothing wrong, Anabelle." He looked back down at me and resumed his attention to my hair. Every time he said my name like that, I almost wished I hadn't told him my real name. Because now, I'd want him to always use it. It sounded so right coming from him.

"Do you prefer for me to use your real name or the one you gave yourself?"

Again, I shrugged. "Wanna know something weird?"

"If it's coming from you, I'd expect nothing less than weird."

"I like it when you call me 'Carmichael.' You're the only one who does that and, now, well, I kind of like it."

Even that felt like more than I was ready to admit.

"Perhaps if I'd known that, I might have tried to get you in my bed earlier."

He stiffened. Right. He hadn't actually meant that.

"I mean—"

"It's okay, Sebastian," I laughed, not really feeling amused at the moment. Of course it was laughable. All those witches who were after the title of Sebastian Cavanaugh's latest fling and he would want me?

Definitely laughable.

"I know what you meant."

Or at least I had a damned good idea.

I SLEPT.

And for the first time in years, I didn't dream at all.

I didn't always have nightmares. Sometimes, the dreams weren't so much nightmares as they were reminders that nothing was right and likely wouldn't ever be right again. Dreams that had me waking up feeling despondent when I realized that, barring some miracle, I might never find my mate. Might never become a mother. Might remain alone and in hiding for the rest of my long life.

So that blissful sleep with nothing but darkness was worth its weight in gold.

And likely why the disturbance in the room didn't register on my radar sooner.

Immediately, I realized that the hands on my shoulders weren't those of Sebastian. Sebastian who was fully asleep. Not waking up. Not noticing that there were others in the room with us.

"You sure he'll stay under?" an unfamiliar male voice asked at my back as strange hands wrenched me from my comfortable perch atop Sebastian.

"What the—"

A hand clamped over my mouth as I was pulled away from Sebastian.

Who, despite all the commotion in the room, wasn't waking up. I looked around, trying to figure out who had me in their grasp. The room was dark. During the night, Sebastian must have extinguished the bedside lamp.

And still, his eyes weren't open. Had they hurt him?

"What did you do to him?" I screamed, pulling away from whoever had me at my back.

"He'll wake up later," a gruff voice said behind me. "Long after we've finished what we need to do."

I continued to struggle against my captors. Their hands twisted around my wrists, causing them to ache more as I pulled against their hold.

"Don't resist me, Anabelle. You had to know this day would come eventually."

That voice. To my left. I wrenched my head in the direction of the voice and even through the haze of nighttime, I could see it was him.

The glamour was gone. Of course he wouldn't want me to miss the expression of smugness on his face when he finally had me in his grasp.

"I've got to say that it was brave of you to come here when you knew I could be here. What were you hoping to do?"

I was hoping to kill him. And someday I would, no matter what happened on the road to that becoming a reality.

"Doesn't matter. I've found you and now I can finally complete the bonding ritual. Your father refused to let me do it before, ensuring that you were punished instead. But now there's nothing to stop me."

"What did you do to him?" I spat, jerking my head in Sebastian's direction. His chest was still rising and falling, but he showed no signs of being aware that someone was here.

That someone was taking me. The very thing he had come here to prevent. I cursed myself for getting him into this mess.

As well as myself.

“Like my colleague told you, he’s fine. He’s just sleeping a deep sleep. Probably dreaming of someone he’d rather be with other than you.”

“If you’re so convinced of that, then why do you want me?”

“Because you have always belonged to me. I groomed you to be my mate. And then you rejected me. For what? For some foolish notion of a fated pairing full of manufactured romance? Still a ridiculous, silly little witch.”

He turned and gave a nod to the men who were holding me. “Bring her.”

He walked out of the suite, the men behind me pushing me along.

“Sebastian! Sebastian, wake up!”

I knew it was futile. He couldn’t hear me. Even so, I struggled. Screamed until my voice was rough with pain.

Finally, I struggled no longer. If I was going to survive whatever was about to happen to me, I’d need to hold on to whatever bit of strength I could muster.

“IT STINKS LIKE YOU IN HERE,” I said as the men threw me into another suite, locking the door behind them. I relaxed my arms as they tied me to a column in the center of the room. I had no idea what they were about to try, but I had ideas.

“You should get used to it, my dear. You’ll one day know that scent as the scent of your mate. And while you will one day come to hate it, there will be those first few glorious years when you can’t get enough of it. The joys of forcing you to be my mate.”

I nearly retched. I knew what a force-bond did to a witch. How, for either weeks, months, or years, it overrode her own

sense of self-preservation. Replaced it with a need for a mate she didn't want and who wasn't her destined mate.

The idea that I would ever feel that way over Rathmore was enough to make me lose everything I'd eaten for the last month.

“But first, I'm going to give you the one thing that you always wanted. I'm going to remove that curse.”

All this time, this was what I wanted.

But I knew why he was removing it. And this wasn't what I wanted when I wanted the curse removed. My dream had been to end this bastard and then live my life in freedom.

This, however, was going to be even worse pain and misery than being denied finding my mate. He would release me and then force me to bond with him.

This was the real nightmare.

And Sebastian couldn't hear me if I screamed. I was truly on my own. I saw this whole rotten plan of mine falling apart. What had I been thinking? Had I actually thought I could come here on my own, sniff him out, and kill him myself?

I'd become so desperate, so lonely, that I'd been willing to try anything.

At least Sebastian would wake up later and be okay.

But I knew he'd blame himself for this. Somehow, someday, I would find my freedom and I would tell him that none of this was his fault.

The rotten plan was all my fault.

The curse itself? That was all Rathmore's doing.

He raised his hands, extending them toward me. I felt the singe of his magic blast against me. I turned my head against it, feeling the magic grate over my skin. He began to chant under his breath. To this day, I could remember the words that he'd recited to put the curse on me.

Slowly, I felt the old curse, something I'd lived with for so long, melt away.

For a moment, the relief was overwhelming. It was as if I'd been carrying a weight on my back and someone had finally relieved me of the strain.

I sighed, looking up at the sky, feeling — if only for a few moments — something different in its place.

Relief. Release.

“Enjoy your freedom for a moment, witch, because—“

I cried out. Something was happening. My body arched against my will as if someone had tied a string around my waist and was tugging me forward. My stomach cramped. Need, heavy and consuming, flooded my body.

“What the hell is happening?” Rathmore asked one of the fools beside him. I looked skyward, gasping in pain. Through the haze that was surrounding me like a thick fog, I could still see Rathmore looking back to the warlocks who'd taken me. As if they had the answers to his question.

“It looks like she's found her mate,” the warlock, a tall, brawny man who wore a beard that hung down to his waist, coming to a point right above his belt.

“Her mate must be here,” the other warlock answered. He wasn't as brawny as the bearded warlock. Instead, he was tall and spindly. And, if the bruises that were going to pop up on my wrist were any indication, deceptively strong.

“Is it you?” Tall and spindly asked Rathmore. Rathmore cursed.

“No, it isn't me, fool. Do I look overcome?”

I could barely comprehend what they were saying. Not when my body was crying out for someone who definitely wasn't in the room with me.

“Well, if it ain't you, it's someone else here. She wouldn't be presenting if he wasn't close enough to present for,” the bearded warlock said. “Her mate has to be somewhere on the premises.”

My mate. Tears spilled down my cheeks.

“Well, do something! Stop it! Reverse it!”

Had I not been in so much need, I might have laughed at Rathmore’s distress. He clearly hadn’t come prepared for this. He’d simply thought he would release the curse and he would be free to bond me to him.

My immediately presenting for another warlock was complicating his plans.

It seemed I wasn’t the only one who hadn’t thought their plan all the way through.

“I don’t know how to stop a real presentation,” the brawny warlock said. “I figured if anyone had that magic, you would.”

“Well, fool, I don’t! Go find someone! Find someone to remove it!”

“No,” I moaned, struggling against my bonds. I had to find him. Had to find my mate.

“Oh, yes. You may have won a moment’s reprieve from being my mate, but soon you’ll be crying for me.”

TWENTY-SIX

SEBASTIAN

“Anabelle!”

I jolted upright. She was gone.

There was a feeling in the pit of my stomach that I was missing something that should be there. And now, that something missing was crying out for me.

It was Rainbow. She was in danger. She was hurting. She was calling out for me. And I could feel it all.

I barely remembered to drag on my pants. The sun was just beginning to punch through the horizon, painting the world in a strange, eerie light.

I didn't have to search for her scent this time. Didn't have to wonder where she went.

Because, somehow, she was pulling me to her.

And in my mind, I could hear her crying out for me. Not by name, but wordlessly begging for me to help her.

Whoever was doing this to her? They would pay. But first, I had to get to her. Had to see her.

I ran fast and hard, my feet pounding against the earthen floor of the forest. It was as if she was pulling me along the path, bringing me to her.

It was a strange magic that...

No. That would be impossible. That would only be possible if—

My thoughts centered on the sound of her distress. There was a suite up ahead, not unlike the one we'd been staying in. She was in there. In pain. Afraid.

And pleading with me to rescue her.

The door shattered within the frame as I burst through it. She was the first thing I saw. They'd tied her to a wooden column in the center of the room. Her cheeks were red from crying. But the look on her face as she saw me.

It was everything.

And that was when I knew.

"Anabelle," I whispered.

My mate. The other half of my soul. It had always been her.

Movement at my left caught my eye. I turned, the alpha in me on full alert. They'd taken my mate away from me. Hurt her. Made her afraid. And now?

May the Gods have mercy on their souls.

I slammed the man onto his back, covering his body with my own. In seconds, our blood mingled, mine from my bloodied knuckles and his with the pummeling I was giving him.

They'd unleashed me. And every one of these warlocks was about to find out what it was like when Sebastian Cavanaugh went full berserker. Every fight, every punch, every kick, and every beating I'd taken had led to this moment. The moment when I finally unleashed that full fury.

Another warlock stepped up behind me. He hooked an arm around my neck, pulling me backward. Grasping his forearm, I bent forward, bringing him over my head and landing the burly warlock on his back with a crushing thud. The floor beneath him shook as he landed. He looked up at me with a groan before I flung my foot into his side. He cried out, curling in on himself, as I turned to face the man who was now standing in the doorway.

Recognition registered on his face. When the mating bond had taken hold, it must have stripped our glamours, exposing us.

“So, it is you,” he said. He looked between me and Rainbow, who was struggling on the floor. It took everything in my body not to go to her, to soothe her.

But this warlock, and I knew exactly who he was now, the one who had hurt her — the one who would try to take her away from me — kept me from tending to Rainbow.

To my mate.

“I’ve heard of you. Heard of how well you fight.”

“You’re about to do more than just hear of it,” I said. Rushing toward him, he raised his hand, delivering a surge of magic in my direction. I fell back, but quickly righted myself. I stepped forward, surging toward Rainbow, but I met resistance before I could get to her. He had erected a magical barrier between me and Rainbow, imprisoning me in the corner of the suite.

“Not right now. We’ve found someone to remove the bond. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we’ve got work to do. Enjoy your stay here.”

Rainbow screamed, reaching out for me as the monster untied her, lifting her onto his shoulder and moving away from me. I pushed against the invisible barrier between us, screaming after her as she called out for me.

“Fuck!” I had to get out of here. Had to stop them.

Had to rescue my mate.

TWENTY-SEVEN

RAINBOW

Sebastian.

It had always been him. My body was begging for him. I could still see him pounding against the invisible barrier that Rathmore had erected between the two of us.

My voice was gone. My body was tired. I needed my mate. I was in pain with the need I had for him. He'd soothed me through my heats before, but this was nothing like those. This was the pull between two witchkind beings that had to be sated or else. My body was pleading with me to complete the bond, even as I was barred from being close to him.

Rathmore had tied me to a wooden lamppost near the clearing where Sebastian had just fought another warlock to secure our fake bond. Rathmore stood to my left, watching the edge of the clearing, waiting for someone. Finally, someone approached, his form parting the shadows before him as he stepped into the firelight of the clearing.

"Can you remove the bond?" Rathmore asked the warlock as he approached us. The man looked down at me and then back at Rathmore. He'd been the warlock who'd earlier in the week given Sebastian unwanted advice on how to ensure I was pregnant by next year.

Now, he stood looking between Rathmore and me.

"I have to say this is unorthodox, even for us. Is this the same one who arrived with the one named Cavendish?"

Rathmore nodded. The glamour must have dissipated when I'd presented. Great.

The other warlock sighed. “She’s mated to the one she arrived with. While I am all for claiming the bride of your choice, typically a witch is only claimed after a duel between the warlocks has been settled. And this witch has already been claimed through a duel just days ago.”

Silently, I begged any of the Gods who might be listening to let this man’s words sink in. But I knew Rathmore was too far gone with his designs on me to listen.

“Nonsense,” Rathmore said. “What you don’t realize is that she was taken from me years ago. Long before the other warlock was ever in the picture. Now, I reclaim what was rightfully mine all along.”

The other warlock nodded, but didn’t seem as convinced as he pretended to be. Still, he wasn’t going to rock the boat any more than he’d already done by speaking up.

“It’s not a simple spell,” the warlock said. “I’m afraid it will take some time and, given that she’s in heat already and her body is calling out for her mate, it will make the spell even more difficult.”

“I don’t care what it takes. Just get to it and get it done so she can be mated to me.”

I shook my head, begging to be heard by men who’d never heard a witch’s voice before. I knew it was in vain.

I struggled against my bonds. The way they’d tied me to the stake reminded me too much of a witch burning. They’d muffled me with a cloth gag, but I still did my best to let my protests be known. Even if the only thing I could do was mumble, I’d take what I had.

My body felt so tired. So in need of my mate, of Sebastian, that I almost didn’t feel it.

Almost didn’t feel that tug low in my belly.

He was here. I lifted my head, intent on searching the area for him. Then, thinking that I didn’t want to alert anyone to his presence, I closed my eyes tightly to keep myself from searching him out.

But he was here. He was close.

And he was angry. I could feel his anger coursing through my veins. It energized me. Gave me power. Gave me hope.

The first indication that something was happening was the sound of someone's cry coming out sharp and short, cut off quickly. I opened my eyes, watching as Rathmore turned toward the sound. He must have had lookouts stationed around the clearing, for all the good it did him.

And there he was. My mate. Looking like the angel of death, ready to exact vengeance on anyone who stood between him and me. My body reacted, slick pooling once again between my thighs.

He was dressed only in a pair of his black dress slacks that had definitely seen better days. In the time I'd known Sebastian, I'd usually seen him looking as if he could have given James Bond a run for his money.

But right now? This man looked just as devastating. He was fierce and ready to do damage. A beautiful monster set out to set fire to whoever stood in his way.

My heart leapt at the sight of him even as that strange, churning sensation in my abdomen grew stronger. His eyes found me. He gave me a quick nod before turning his attention to the men around him.

Rathmore raised his hands before him.

I held my breath. It was almost unheard of for a warlock to kill another with magic, but I knew it was possible. I nearly cried out to stop him, but with the gag in my mouth, I knew it would be in vain.

But what I should never have done was underestimate my mate.

I'd always known that Sebastian was a brawler. But I should have also known that, with as much experience as he had as a warlock, he would have been more than skilled in the art of magic. He raised his arms, easily blocking the curse, sending it flying back to Rathmore.

Rathmore staggered back. It hadn't been a killing blow, but as Sebastian rushed toward him, none of Rathmore's other warlocks risked standing in his way. The look was clear on his face: they had hurt his mate. Taken her. And now someone was going to pay the price. Only the most foolhardy warlock would have stood in his way.

Luckily, the only foolhardy warlock present was Rathmore.

Sebastian rushed him, pummeling him to the ground. I heard the air go out of Rathmore's lungs. He cried out, but it was no use. Sebastian's fists were rearranging his features. My mate had been unleashed.

I lost count of the blows. I couldn't discern when it was exactly that Rathmore had stopped fighting back. Had the curse not already been lifted, it would have disappeared at that moment because Rathmore was no more.

Finally, with his opponent down, Sebastian pulled back, standing up, coming to full height. He looked down at his work. He was covered in blood and scratches. His hair was a mess. His pants were torn in several places. This was a warlock who had been through a battle.

And all for me.

He had never looked so gorgeous as he did at that moment.

And he was all mine.

My body reacted to the thought. I cried out involuntarily. Sebastian's eyes flew up to mine and then he was rushing toward me. I wasn't sure how he so swiftly undid the ropes that held me, but they were gone.

And then I was in his arms, being taken away from the final nightmare of Rathmore.

TWENTY-EIGHT

SEBASTIAN

Rainbow was holding onto me so tightly, she was nearly choking the life out of me.

But I didn't care, because I had her in my arms. Her stronghold on me assured me she was there. That she wasn't going anywhere.

I also knew I had to get her somewhere safe quickly. She'd not only gone into heat, but now that she had presented for me, I had to take her, and soon. Her body was crying out for mine and my body was responding in kind.

She buried her face in my neck. There had been no going back to the suite. No going back for our belongings. I wanted her as far away from those monsters as I could take her.

I placed her as gently into the car as I could. When I pulled away from her to go to the driver's side, she reached out for me, whimpering. I wanted nothing more than to pull her to me, but we needed to get out of here.

"Soon, love. I promise. But I have to get you away from here."

And I needed to get away from here as well. While I was certain that no witch council would hold it against me that I had taken Torin Rathmore's life to protect my mate, it would still be a mess to clean up. It was better to get Rainbow away from them until I could call someone to see to it.

Never mind that I was positive that the Traditionalists here didn't want it on their records either.

Right now, the only thing on my mind was getting Rainbow somewhere that I could complete our bond. Her heat was growing stronger, more difficult to control. She was bent forward, her arms braced against her abdomen. I could feel her pain and need.

I had to find somewhere we could stay uninterrupted for the next twelve or so hours. Somewhere we could be as loud as we needed to be. And driving all the way back to Mystic Springs was out of the question for now.

“Where are you taking us?” she managed, leaning her head against the passenger side window. I wanted to reach over and touch her, but I knew doing so would only make her fever worse. Just being in the car with me — this close — and being unable to take my knot was causing her enough pain.

“Somewhere we’ll be safe for the next day or so. It won’t be long.”

At least I hoped it wouldn’t.

REFUGE CAME in the form of a farmhouse about five miles away. I reached out with my senses, scanning for any presence in the house. It had been inhabited recently, but the occupants were gone. There were also no pets and there wasn’t an alarm system.

For what we needed, it would suit us fine.

I parked in front of the house. I had to look a sight. Shirtless. Bloodied. My pants in tatters.

But Rainbow was even worse. I growled as I saw the bruises on her arms where the warlocks had manhandled her. I knew I hadn’t left them for dead, but seeing how they had hurt her, I wished I had.

I rushed toward her side of the car, flinging open the door and pulling out my mate. She immediately collapsed in my arms, holding onto me as if her life depended on it.

And perhaps it did.

“Sebastian,” she breathed as I walked us toward the vacant house. On the way there, she’d barely said a few words. Her heat had nearly made her incoherent.

“We’re almost there, love. Almost there.”

I kicked open the door. Before we left, I’d repair any damage. I would leave it better than we’d found it.

But right now, I only had one thought on my mind, and that was tending to my mate.

SOON, I would bathe her, take care of her, and tend to everything they had done to her.

But right now, I had to be inside her. Knot her. Now that we were so close to completing our bond, she was writhing, desperate for me. Sometimes, a witch and a warlock could delay completing their bond. But it was obvious, Rainbow and I needed to complete our bond now. We’d been made to wait too long. Our bodies could take no more of the ruse.

I stripped her of her clothes, noting each place where they’d torn as a result of her being manhandled by those bastards. She whimpered as I pulled off her shorts and panties. She was slick with need.

“Shhh, little witch. Almost there.”

And we were. My cock was rock hard. Finally, I’d found my mate and soon I’d make damn sure she carried my child. Maybe tonight.

But right now, I needed to soothe her.

I ripped off what remained of my tattered pants, my cock standing at attention. I moved over Rainbow, relishing in the sight of her lush little body. A body that was mine.

She was crying as she reached for me.

“I wanted it to be you,” she said, pulling me to her. “I still can’t believe it, but somehow, I always wanted it to be you.”

And strangely, I knew exactly what she meant.

As I pushed my cock past her entrance, slipping inside her, I moaned. My mate. My life. Right here in my arms.

“More, Sebastian,” she begged, thrusting up to take more of me inside her. “Make me yours.”

I growled. “I don’t have to make you mine. You are mine. You’ve always been mine.”

I began to thrust in and out of her, her wet cunt tightening around me, squeezing the life out of me. She was so ready for me, so ready for my knot, that I hissed as her pussy choked my cock. Her witch body was begging for my knot to swell inside her and fill her up. Begging me to make all those little witch and warlock babies that we both thought would never exist.

“You feel so fucking good, Anabelle. Your pussy was made for my cock. Now I know why it felt so right being inside you.”

“Please, Sebastian.”

I couldn’t deny her any longer. I pushed home, my knot swelling inside her and locking us both together. She cried out, coming almost instantly around my knot. Her slick bathed us both.

“You’re mine now,” I said, looking down at her as she came unglued. Her mouth opened and closed as one release bled into another one. Whoever owned this house, I was going to have to buy them a new set of sheets. “No one is ever going to take you away from me again. And when your belly swells with our firstborn, everyone in Mystic Springs will know you’re mine.”

My words had their own effect on Rainbow. She came violently on my cock again. I could hold back no longer, spilling my seed inside her, silently pleading for it to find its home in her womb. Thoughts of her round and ripe with my child made me come again inside her. She bucked up against me as I shallowly pumped in and out of her, as far as my knot would let me.

Her fingernails dug into my back as she held on, crying out my name, begging me to give her everything I had.

“Now, Sebastian.”

The magic of our bond took hold, bonding us permanently. I cried out her name, as she did mine. That feeling, of finally being inside my mate, wrapped itself around me. Emotions I suspected I'd never felt before claimed me. I was breathless as I was locked inside her, staring down at her beautiful face.

“I'm yours, Rainbow...Anabelle. Now and always.”

Tears streaked her face as she looked up at me, the realization finally breaking through the haze of her heat.

“I've finally found you,” she said, her voice cracking.

“You've finally found me,” I said back, reaching up and brushing a lock of that gorgeous red hair from her forehead. “We've found each other.”

TWENTY-NINE

RAINBOW

I woke up with a strong arm wrapped around my waist. For a moment, I couldn't figure out where I was. The room was strange. Filled with furniture, art, and knickknacks that meant nothing to me. As I shifted under the arm around me, it all came tumbling back.

The curse was gone.

I'd found my mate.

Sebastian.

The arm around me tugged me closer. I snuggled into his hold.

The man that I'd fought with for years was my mate. All this time, he'd been right under my nose. The warlock who had infuriated me since the day we'd met.

"Finally, she awakens."

I turned, loving the way his voice was so deep and sexy when it was thick with sleep. He was smiling, looking way more smug than he had any right to.

"Oh, can it, Cavanaugh."

"Will not. Let me have this one, Carmichael. All this time, my mate has been right here. In this infuriating little witch who enjoyed nothing more than driving me crazy."

"Wasn't a long trip."

"Oooh, she has jokes," he said, feigning hurt. But as he did, he reached out, brushing his knuckles against my cheek.

There was still that bit of me that couldn't let go of the insecurities. Even after the mating bond had permanently taken hold. Even after I'd watched him go full alpha berserker for me and kill the man who had haunted me for years.

“What is it, Carmichael? Though, I suspect I'll be calling you something else soon enough, won't I?”

My stomach fluttered at the thought.

“What if I want to keep my last name?” My very fake last name.

But I did enjoy the way it sounded coming out of his mouth.

“You can, but don't change the subject. What's on your mind?”

I bit my lip. “Are you disappointed?”

His brow furrowed. “With what?”

“That I'm the one fate has chosen for you. That I'm the one who's your mate.”

He growled. “I have half a mind to spank you for even suggesting such a thing.”

And I had half a mind to let him because damn.

“Yeah. That's what I thought. Wouldn't be a punishment if you enjoyed it. But that's not the point. Why on earth would you think I would be disappointed?”

I shrugged, not wanting to voice all my insecurities.

But he was my mate and, eventually, he would become familiar with all those little parts of me I'd worked so hard to keep hidden.

“All those witches that, you know, have been with you. They're so gorgeous. It, I don't know, seems like a bit of a step down to be mated to me.”

Flipping me onto my back, he covered my body with his.

“You're my mate, but you're an idiot.”

“Hey!”

“I see nothing is going to change how often we get into arguments, so I suppose we can start with how ridiculously wrong you are about this.”

His hand slid down the curves of my waist, my hip, my thigh, and then back up again.

“You’ve always made me crazy, Rainbow. But there has never been any time that I haven’t found you completely intoxicating. You’re beautiful. Sure, I may have had partners before you — just as you have had before me — but they’ve never compared to you. Even before you presented for me.”

I whimpered as I arched my body against his. I wondered how long it would take before I didn’t want his hands all over me all the time.

“Has it ever occurred to you that the reason we fought for so long was because we weren’t fighting each other, but fighting the thing that kept us apart?”

I studied his face, considering.

“I don’t even remember why we started fighting in the first place,” I admitted, trying to reach back into memory and pull that incident out. I came up with nothing.

“We were at the Fall Market downtown. You’d just moved to Mystic Springs. I’d already been told about you because, like you, I kept tabs on everyone coming and going into the town.”

My mind ventured back to those first days in town. Mystic Springs hadn’t been the first town I’d settled in once I’d left home. There’d been another town before Mystic Springs. It had been clear soon after that moving to a witchless town was going to be even more difficult than hiding in a town full of witches and warlocks.

“I’d been in the middle of a discussion about buying some random property with Jack Beaumont, and you walked up with none other than Belinda Sparrow.”

His expression went wistful. Even as he told the story, I remembered all of it. We’d been introduced to our mates, and the curse had kept us from recognizing it. I remembered the

next part. I could only assume it had been the curse that caused me to be so antagonistic right from the start.

“I said, ‘So this is the Mystic Springs bruiser,’” I recalled, blushing at how I’d poked the bear right from the very beginning.

“That’s right,” he said, smiling down at me. That smile, directed at me, sent all those butterflies in my belly alight. “‘I thought you’d be taller,’ you said.”

“And you told me it was good that I had such bright red hair since, otherwise, my short ass might get lost in a crowd.”

He laughed.

I reached up and smacked him. “Hey, you don’t know how much that one hit home. I’ve always been sensitive about my hair color.”

He looked surprised. “Why? It’s gorgeous. You think I wasn’t thinking about wrapping these locks around my fist even as I said that?”

Slick gathered between my thighs. Sebastian sighed, a long, wistful sound that told me we wouldn’t be talking much longer about the past.

“Someone’s greedy.”

I arched up into him, causing him to gasp. I could feel the length of his cock against my thigh, hard and ready to go.

“Feels like I’m not the only one.”

He pushed my thighs apart and settled between them. The tip of his cock brushed against my clit. I whimpered.

“Shhh, Anabelle. You’re mine now and I promise I’ll spend the rest of my life taking care of you.”

And with that, he pushed inside me.

THIRTY

SEBASTIAN

“It feels weird to be back here,” Rainbow said as I pulled the car into the long drive to her house. I wasn’t sure where we’d settle now that we were mated. It didn’t matter. Soon, she’d likely be pregnant, wanting some place to be comfortable and nest. Wherever she wanted to do that, that’s where I’d be.

“For once, the gossip will be centered on you, little witch. How do you feel about that?”

I turned to her as I put the car into park. She was biting her lip in that way she did that made me think of all the things we’d done only hours before.

“I’m fine with it,” she said, turning to me. “The gossip was always just a way to keep tabs on what was going on. To find a way out of my situation. To look for him.”

She shivered, all those memories — ones that I was only beginning to learn about — playing on her features. I reached over, brushing my knuckles against her cheek.

“He’s gone and you’re safe. You’re mine now. And if anyone ever tries to hurt you, they’ll meet the same fate as he did. Now, stay there. I’m coming around to your side.”

I was out of the car before she could protest, coming to her side, and springing the door open. She squeaked as I bent forward, pulling her into my arms and carrying her up the steps to her front door.

“What are you doing?”

“Carrying my mate over the threshold. I know it’s a very human thing to do, but I wanted to.”

She sighed, holding tighter to me. “I guess I’ll allow it. After all, it’s not like it’s a chore to be in your arms.”

There was some fumbling for keys and dealing with wards, but soon we were in the house.

Now, the house looked different to me. Before, it had all been a mystery. I’d always wondered what the story was with Rainbow Carmichael. What little time I’d spent in her house, I’d always tried to make sense of her.

But now it made sense. A place that was as much of a home as she could make it. The lack of photos now made sense, not that I had many in my home, either.

I walked toward the stairs that I assumed led to the bedroom. Having Rainbow in my arms only intensified my need for her. I was so determined to get her upstairs and naked that I didn’t hear the bounding of footsteps up the front step.

“How did it go? Did you—“

I turned, Rainbow still in my arms, looking at Harper Winters, who now stood at the threshold of the house, mouth open, staring at Rainbow and me.

“Hi, Harper,” Rainbow said. She almost sounded giggly.

For a second, Harper stood, looking back and forth between my face and Rainbow’s. I raised an eyebrow at her.

“Holy shit,” Harper said finally, the sound coming out in a rush of air. “HOLY SHIT! RAINBOW! WHAT THE FUCK! I’VE GOT TO TELL GABRIEL!”

The whole thing came out as one long squeal-scream. I’d gotten to know Harper somewhat since she’d married Gabriel and I hadn’t seen her this animated in all that time. She was practically bouncing on her heels.

“I’ve got to tell Gabriel,” she mouthed, still not moving.

I stepped forward.

“You do that, Harper. Now, if you’ll excuse us, I’ve got to get my mate upstairs and christen this house properly.”

Using my foot, I pushed the door shut. Through the upper window of the heavy wooden door, I saw Harper’s head turn before I heard footsteps pounding quickly back down the steps.

In my arms, Rainbow sighed.

“What, love?”

“Harper Winters just got her hands on the juiciest gossip in Mystic Springs in years.”

THIRTY-ONE

RAINBOW

I was a bundle of nerves.

“It’ll be fine,” Harper insisted as we stood before Belinda Sparrow’s front door. “Remember when I attended my first of these after I’d presented for Gabriel?”

I did. He’d been sharing heats with Candy before Harper and he met. Harper had been nervous about being in a room with her, too. But Candy was Candy. For her, heats were as mechanical as getting her nails done or having her plumbing fixed.

No pun intended.

Alana was different. I knew Sebastian had always made it clear to his previous partners that nothing was going to come of their arrangement. He’d never expected to find his mate because I’d been hidden so well. He never expected the complication of all of his prior conquests sharing a town with his mate.

And because the gossip mill was so well-oiled in Mystic Springs, I knew that she’d already heard from others about my presenting for Sebastian. Not to mention that Sebastian had gone to her personally to deliver the news. He’d told me it had gone well, but I doubted she would have thrown a fit before Sebastian.

As soon as we stepped into Belinda’s oversized parlor, my senses heightened.

Everyone, including Alana, looked up at me as I entered the room. Belinda had an ostentatious style of decor that

mimicked 80s regency style. It was a style she didn't seem keen on giving up anytime soon. She'd held onto it long enough that it had nearly come back in style again.

“So, that's what it looks like to be mated and rutted by Sebastian Cavanaugh,” Belinda said. Her droll voice reminded me of Lucille Bluth from *Arrested Development*. She flicked her hand my way.

“Take a good look, witches. This is what the nail in the coffin looks like for any of the rest of you getting a chance to take that warlock on. Maybe his mate will at least give us more details about his knot. Candy was stingy with the details and...”

She stopped, looking over at Alana.

Alana sighed. “Oh, for the love of the Gods, can we not make this awkward? Yes, I was being rutted by Sebastian before he found his mate, but I wasn't in love with him. Am I a little jealous? Sure, but Rainbow,”

She turned to face me.

“I'm happy for you. You deserve happiness. As does Sebastian. Now, can we just get on with this farce of a book club? I hear there's something juicy going on with Anna at the lodge...”

I breathed a sigh of relief, taking a seat next to Harper. She looked over at me and gave me a wink. At least some things would never change.

THIRTY-TWO

SEBASTIAN

“Holy fuck. You look more besotted than I did when I first bonded with Harper. Should we expect happy news soon?”

I did my best to school my features. I didn’t want to look like a love-sick fool. After all, mate or no, I still had a reputation to uphold in Mystic Springs.

“Oh, good Gods, Sebastian,” Gabriel said, leaning back against his chair. Around us, the usual human patrons of Shep’s Bar and Grill seemed to be unaware they were in the midst of two of the most powerful warlocks in Mystic Springs. Which was fine by me. “You can stop with the posturing. It makes you look like you’re constipated.”

I sighed. “Fine. But you realize I can’t go around looking like a lovelorn fool like you did for so many...”

I stopped, looking him over. “Shit. You still look like a lovelorn fool.”

He smiled. “She’s pregnant again.”

“I know,” I said, feeling something that almost felt like jealousy. Which was ridiculous. Rainbow and I hadn’t been mated for a month yet. “You’ve only told me at least a hundred times since you found out.”

“Oh, Sebastian. I can’t wait until Rainbow is nine months pregnant and on the verge of giving birth for the first time. I’m going to look forward to seeing you completely lose your composure.”

I wanted to tell him I would be completely calm. Not just because of the desire to hold on to my cool exterior. It was also because I wouldn't want to trouble Rainbow with my own insecurities when she was in such a state.

But even just the thought of her being so pregnant sent me into a whirlwind of emotions. Pride. Love. Worry.

Gabriel's hand on my shoulder nearly made me jump. "It'll be fine, Cavanaugh. She'll be fine. But you might want to let go of keeping up appearances, at least with me. You'll need someone to sound off on when it gets to that point."

I thought back to when Harper had her first. I remembered Gabriel being calm, but there had been an edge of tension around him all the time. He couldn't quite get comfortable in his own skin.

"Fine," I said, straightening. "I'm terrified. All of this is new. I've finally found her — when she was right under my nose all this time — and I'm terrified of losing her. She's..."

I wasn't sure what to say next. Big Bad Sebastian Cavanaugh had found his mate, and he didn't know what to do about it.

"She's everything you ever wanted and even a few things you didn't realize you wanted," Gabriel said. He took his hand from my shoulder and reached for the bottle on the table before him. "Because she's yours and you're hers. And that right there is what's going to make it okay. You've gone through the hardest part already. You almost lost her and, just like I did when I almost lost Harper, you fought for her and protected her. That's what we do."

He lifted his bottle in salute to me and then took a swig.

"I was convinced that my mate had died years ago," I said, watching as his throat bobbed with the drink. "But the minute I found out she was about to put herself in danger, it's like it all kicked in. I just didn't know why."

"Been there, done that," Gabriel said. He looked over my shoulder. No doubt, he saw the ghost of a time when he'd thought Harper was nothing more than a regular human who

couldn't possibly be his mate. "You'll get used to it, but she'll always be the center of your world. And it's not such a bad thing because you'll be the center of hers, too."

Finally, I reached for my draft and took a drink. I grimaced.

"Human beer still tastes like piss."

Gabriel smiled, taking another sip. "Now, here's the next question. What are you going to do about that shop you stole out from under her?"

I smiled. "Oh, that's completely taken care of."

EPILOGUE

SEBASTIAN

I'd been waiting on her to ask about it. After three months, I'd given up.

Once we'd returned to Mystic Springs, she'd been embroiled in being the subject of gossip instead of the curator of said gossip.

There'd also been the issue of us still being in limbo over where we would spend most of our time now that we were a mated pair. I knew she didn't want to leave the Craftsman next to Harper. So, we'd been going back and forth from one house to the next.

Carl had immediately taken to Rainbow, something I hadn't quite expected. From the minute she'd walked into the house, he'd become besotted with her. My needs became secondary to him. That was fine with me because I enjoyed seeing the look on Rainbow's face whenever he surprised her by doing something that made her life easier.

It was as if she'd forgotten the shop with everything else going on.

And I felt a little put out by that. Because I'd worked hard on this surprise. I'd wanted to wait on her to bring it up so that I could then spring it on her. When she failed to do so, I took matters into my own hands.

Now, as we stood before the doors of the little shop, I worried that I'd taken something away from her. Maybe she wanted to step in and make all the necessary adjustments to the building. If she did, I'd tell her she could change all of it.

But as she looked up at the building, I knew she hadn't forgotten. The building had been glamoured so that it was completely unappealing to humans. However, witches and warlocks would see a promising, enticing glamour shop. A shop dedicated to bringing all their fantasies to life.

And as I looked at her expression of pleasure and awe, I realized. She'd simply been waiting. She turned to me, excitement coming off of her in waves.

"I wasn't going to say anything," she said, reaching for my hand.

I scoffed, taking her small hand in mine and squeezing. "Naturally, I would sit here waiting for you to bring it up when you were doing the same."

She squeezed my hand back. "Couldn't make it easy on you, Cavanaugh."

She'd once told me she loved it when I called her by her adopted last name. I was coming to the realization I loved it when she did the same because it reminded me of how far we'd come.

"Shall we?" I opened the door and led her in.

She looked around, pulling away from me so she could step into the center of the shop and take it all in. She spun.

"Sebastian," she breathed. I could feel so many emotions coming off of her that I wasn't sure exactly what she was feeling. Her emotions were everywhere.

"You can change anything," I said. "I just wanted to get you started."

I'd taken some notes from things I'd heard her say in passing. She'd imagined a dais in the corner where she could do fittings. Swaths of magical fabric now hung from spools on one side of the wall. The counter, which had once served as a lunch counter when the building had been a drugstore, would now seat witches and warlocks as they waited for their appointments. I could already see them gossiping between each other, something that no doubt would delight Rainbow.

Behind the counter, there was a self-serve coffee and snack station.

“I can’t imagine it being any more perfect,” Rainbow said, coming to a stop in her constant spinning and walking toward me. “It’s perfect, just like you are.”

I laughed. “Are you feeling well, Carmichael? I’m many things, but perfect isn’t one of them.”

“Well,” she began, stepping up to me and threading her fingers beneath the lapels of my jacket. “Now that you mention it, I have been feeling a little different lately.”

She looked up at me, biting her lip. And there was no doubt what this feeling was.

She was nervous.

And now, so was I.

“What’s wrong, Rainbow?” I imagined all sorts of scenarios. We’d been ridiculously happy over the last three months. It was easy to imagine many things putting a damper on that happiness.

She sighed. “Really? You’re going to go with the gloom and doom scenario and not the obvious?”

“What’s the obvious?”

“Sebastian, you’re an idiot. I love you, but you’re an idiot. I’m pregnant.”

Two words, and just like that, I was in a haze. I’d been waiting for the day I found out, but now that it was here...

“You’re pregnant,” I repeated the words, loving the way they sounded. My mate was pregnant.

I pulled her closer to me, wanting to take her all over again right there in the middle of the shop.

She laughed. “Not here. We can christen the shop later. So, what do you think?”

“I think that my vexing little witch is going to have to get used to being treated like a goddess for the next few months.”

“More so than usual?”

“Get ready, Carmichael. I’m about to rock your world.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Belle Kent writes hot, naughty romance - the kind she enjoys reading. She likes reading, writing, and the occasional alien invasion. Keep an eye out for upcoming releases by joining her [mailing list](#) or keeping tabs on her via social media.

