



Haunted Eclipse

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Description: My name is Maisy Tripwater, and I recently moved home to Midnight Point, WA, a small island community in the Samish Bay, where I am starting my life over again after a devastating house fire destroys everything I own except my Maine Coon named Miss P.—and the clothes on my back.

I'm a witch, with a specialty in finding people. I use my powers to find life partners for my clients, through Married At First Bite, my fated-mates business. When Brenda Kline comes seeking her true partner after a disastrous first marriage, I go to work.

But as I delve deeper into why Brenda can't seem to find true love, I discover that the ghost of Brenda's first husband is doing everything he can to prevent his widow from discovering happiness, and he's getting more and more violent in his attempts to stop her from finding love again.

Now, I'm quickly becoming a target myself, and I'm going to need every trick in my arsenal to put the spirit to rest before he drags me to a grisly end, and then to match Brenda with the man she's destined to spend her life with.

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CHAPTER ONE

The streets of Midnight Point were bustling with shoppers by the time I arrived at my office. Men and women on their way to work, and shoppers out for the best early morning deals, skirted the icy patches on the sidewalks as they hurried along on their errands.

The sky was clear, a rare sight for a January day. Never mind that it was thirty-four degrees, and a light skiff of snow covered the streets. When the sun decided to peep through the clouds, people hoisted themselves off their asses and headed out and about.

Taking a deep breath, I filled my lungs with an icy blast of clean air. The chill was piercing, but it worked better than anything but caffeine to wake me up. I'd never give up my caffeine, but cold weather made for a nice, added boost.

"Cripes, it's busy," I said, edging out a car for the lone parking spot near my shop. The man gave me a frown, but he refrained from any nasty shouts and passed by as I eased into the space. I muttered a curse on whoever thought parallel parking was a good idea.

As I stepped out of my car, slinging my purse over my shoulder, I tried to avoid the icy spots on the sidewalk. I was wearing a pair of high heeled boots, and though they had chunky heels and nonskid soles, they were still problematic on slippery surfaces. I cautiously picked my way across the walkway over to The Mocha Express—the shop to the left of my own shop.

My best friend, Crystal Jagger, ran the coffee shop, and it was the place to go when you were downtown, if you wanted the best coffee drinks and pastries. Crystal didn't run an upscale joint, but she sold affordable, bingeable pastries, and the shop was always busy.

Edging my way through the crowd, I reached the end of the line. Crystal caught sight of me and, leaving the crowd to her barista Karina, she motioned for me to join her in the back. I slipped through the door, into the heart of the bakery. The aroma was so good I almost melted.

"Hey, I can't stay long, but I wanted to grab a latte and something to eat. I didn't have time for breakfast," I said.

She grinned. "Be right back. Stay here."

As Crystal vanished back into the front, I sat on the bench to the side of the door, looking at the kitchen. It was filled with pans of cookies and muffins, and to one side, a line of freshly baked bread awaited its packaging.

Crystal returned, latte and bag of goodies in hand. "Here," she said.

"Put it on my tab?" I asked. "And save me a loaf of your French bread?"

"Sure thing." She glanced out front again. "Karina needs help. I'd better get going. But I'll duck over to the shop on my morning break and bring you your bread and another latte, if you want."

I gave her a quick hug, then picked up my latte and bag of whatever it was she'd decided I needed for breakfast. "Thanks! Talk to you soon."

Within minutes, I was back out into the icy sunshine.

Married At First Bite, my new business, was snuggled between Crystal's shop, and a shop belonging to another friend of mine. Ever After, a bridal shop, was run by Kevin Sands, a puma shifter with an eye for style, offered the finest in bridal wear. At least, that's what Kevin claimed. Seriously though, he had a flair for matching a bride with her perfect dress, and he never pushed anything over a bride's budget.

The sign in my window read: matchmaking, readings & paranormal investigations.

Given that I was a matchmaker, it seemed to be an auspicious omen when the space next to Ever After opened up. I decided to take the leap and hope for the best. But I also knew that, in a small town, I'd have to do more than bring couples together. While most people were looking for love, not that many went to a matchmaker. So I decided to pool some of my other talents in with finding love for others, and I figured between the matchmaking, the readings, and investigations, I should be able to make a living.

As I unlocked the door and slipped inside, I took a deep breath. The scent of fresh paint was fading. I'd finished the renovations last week, and now, the mauve walls emanated a calming sense, and sage and ivory accents and trim followed through with an elegant feel.

I'd bought ivory colored furniture to enhance the look, and everything in the shop felt welcoming and open. At first, I'd been hesitant about opening my own matchmaking service, but my aunt had reminded me that people everywhere were looking for love, and Midnight Point was no exception. By combining both my matchmaking service with the option for psychic readings, my business would probably generate enough clientele, even within a small town. I was familiar enough with Midnight Point and her ways to surmise that, even if people weren't looking for love, they might well be looking for advice from an experienced witch.

I took a deep breath and hung my coat on the coat rack, then glanced in a mirror on

the wall—carefully placed so it didn’t face the door, because I had no desire to invite entities in through an unguarded portal—and made sure my makeup was good. Since I had first walked into this space a month ago, it had felt welcoming, though I didn’t sense any ghosts or spirits. I cleansed it once a week with sage and lemon water.

Before I opened the door to the public, I decided to cast a circle. First, I lit a stick of incense. A delightful blend of rose and hibiscus, it was barely enough to smell, but it added to the ambience. Then, I opened my tote bag and withdrew ageborune—one of the Norse runes for good luck—and hung it on the wall. It was shaped like an X. I had carved the rune on a round of apple wood. I turned my attention to the bookshelves and ran my fingers over them. A glance at my fingers told me they were dust free.

This is it. It’s show-time.

Squaring my shoulders, I walked over to the window and flipped on the sign that said, “Welcome. We’re open.”

Then, with another look out on the sidewalks, I took my place behind my desk.

I hope I haven’t made a huge mistake by returning to Midnight Point, I thought. But then again, it wasn’t like I had much of a choice.

Two months before, two days before Thanksgiving...

“Is everything gone?” I asked, staring at the smoldering ruins of what had been my house. Now it was a charred pile of wood, dust, and smoke. The scorched remains were crumbling, even as I watched. The beautiful house I’d shared with my late husband Dan was now a pile of ashes and charcoal. All the memories of life with him...gone. I was so shocked that I couldn’t even cry.

The fire marshal, who was standing beside me, nodded. “Most of it, I’m afraid.”

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“What happened?” I couldn’t imagine what had caught fire. I was always cautious with the gas range, and I mostly used battery operated candles, given Miss P.’s curiosity about anything that looked like fire. Thank gods, the firemen had rescued my cat. Even better, she wasn’t hurt. My twenty pound calico Maine Coon, Miss Prance-a-Lot, or Miss P. for short, was in my car, curled up asleep in the back seat.

But everything else...it was all gone.

“We aren’t entirely sure,” he said. “But we have some suspicions.”

“It’s been one hell of a day,” I said, shivering in the November evening. Thanksgiving was in two days, and I was supposed to head to Midnight Point tomorrow morning, to stay with my aunt and hang with my best friend and her family. It looked like I might be imposing for a bit longer than that.

“I think you’re holding up remarkably well,” the fire marshal said.

I shrugged. “Not only did I lose my house, but I was fired today...or as they called it,laid off. The kicker is, I was doing my job toowell. It’s been a total bust of a day.” Exhaustion and nerves were taking their toll. I was starting to babble.

“I’m so sorry, Ms. Tripwater. We think some idiot was playing with fireworks and launched one into a pile of dry leaves beneath your oak over there. Given it’s been dry for a few days, and the strong winds that have been whipping through, we’repretty sure a spark caught hold,” the fire marshal said. “We found the remains of wrappers on the property.”

The oak next to the remains of my house was charred, fire streaking a black, sooty line up its trunk. The tree was beautiful, hovering over my house, provide shade during the summer. Now, half the tree was gone, as well as my entire home.

Weak in the knees, I looked for someplace to sit down. A bench in my rose garden had survived, so I settled down on it. It was covered with ash from the heavy smoke that still billowed out of my house, but I didn't care. So what if the one outfit I had to my name was covered with ash and soot?

"Is there someone you need to call? Do you have anywhere to go?" The fire marshal followed me, a concerned look on his face.

I thought about it. I had a few friends in town, but since Dan had died, a lot of our friends had drifted off. They weren't part of the Otherkin community, given Dan was mostly human. He had a little witchblood in him, but it was diluted. He wasn't sure how far back his magical heritage had been, given his father had very little power, and beyond that, nobody knew. His family had been separated by circumstance and time.

Our friends weren't sure how to act around me, now that I was alone. In the past two years since Dan had died, I'd mostly stayed in touch with people from my home town. I could count on one hand the number of people I felt comfortable hanging out with in Seattle.

"I'll take Miss P. and check in at a hotel. I'm not sure what to do next." I was numb and exhausted.

"Maisy—that's correct, isn't it?" the fire marshal asked.

"Right. Maisy Tripwater." I scooted over, offering him a seat next to me, but he shook his head.

“We’ll be here for another couple of hours, making sure all the flames are fully extinguished. I suggest you and your cat go find a hotel. There’s nothing you can do here until tomorrow, and you really should try to get some rest,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, bleakly. “Thank you so much for saving her. Losing Miss P. would have been more than I could handle.” A sob caught in my throat and I let out a shaky sigh.

“I’m glad we could at least do that. She’s gorgeous,” the fire marshal said. “She may need a bath—there’s a little soot on her, but the medics checked her out and she doesn’t have any smoke damage. She’s breathing fine.”

“When will I know what started the fire? I need to call my insurance company,” I asked.

“We’ll know more tomorrow. We’ll follow through with a complete inspection and get you our official findings. You should be able to get in here tomorrow to start hunting for anything that you might be able to salvage, although I recommend caution. Not much will be left standing and you can expect to find a lot of metal shards, nails, broken glass in the debris. Meanwhile, there’s not much else for you to do here.”

“I’ll let you know where I’m staying.”

We exchanged contact info, then I headed back to my car. Miss P. was still asleep in the back seat. I breathed a sigh of relief. She was my best friend, of the four-legged variety. She was my world, actually. I’d adopted her a year ago, a year after I’d lost Dan. My heart caught in my throat when I thought about how devastated I’d be if she died.

I headed toward the nearest hotel. I managed to keep it together until I’d checked in

and was shown to my room. When I told the hotel what had happened, they found me a robe and a pair of slippers. I took a shower and ordered some tuna for Miss P. and a sandwich for me. After we ate and I stretched out on the bed, I finally let go and cried for an hour straight, with Miss P. snuggling against me.

Midnight Point, Washington, was a shadow town. With the feel of a small town, it offered a number of options comparable with those of a bigger city.

Shadow towns were small towns scattered throughout the country where magic ran rife, and the veils between the worlds were thin. There were a number in Western Washington: Moonshadow Bay, Terameth Lake, Whisper Hollow, and Crescent Falls.

A haven for artists and Otherkin of all kinds, Midnight Point was on an island directly off the coast of Port Townsend. The ferry, on its way from Port Townsend to Whidbey Island, stopped at the docks several times each day. A lot happened here, magically speaking. Some good. Some bad. Some downright dangerous and weird.

As I sat in my shop, waiting for my first client, I thought about my business. I knew that I'd get plenty of readings, and probably a few investigations, given the nature of the town. But I wondered how many love matches I'd manage to engineer. I started to tidy up my desk—which was already clean—when the door opened.

Crystal stood there, bag in one hand, coffee in the other. "I'm on my break. I thought you'd like more coffee," she said, handing me the bag as she put the coffee cup on the desk.

I peeked inside to find a maple bar and several chocolate chip cookies. "These smell incredible." I slid them out of the bag and placed them on a napkin.

"I thought you'd like them." She glanced around. "Any sign of life so far?"

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“No, but given I’ve been open all of an hour, I’m not surprised. I hope some spillover from Kevin’s shop comes my way. Bridesmaids wanting their own wedding, that sort of thing.” I laughed, biting into the maple bar. “So, here we are...again.”

“It’s like no time’s passed,” she said, though both of us knew that wasn’t true.

Crystal and I had been best buddies since we were seven years old and had first attended the Midnight Manor Academy, a magical academy that served kindergarten through grade twelve, along with continuing education classes for adults. By the end of school, we were still best buddies, but headed in different directions.

Crystal stayed in Midnight Point, while I left town and, after backpacking my way through Europe for a year, I settled down in Seattle where I took on a variety of jobs till I discovered my calling. I dedicated myself to my work until for seventeen years until I met Dan and married him, and then...lost him five years later.

During all that time, Crystal and I stayed in touch, visiting when I came home for the holidays. Once in a while, she came down to Seattle for the weekend.

“And yet, a lifetime happened in the past twenty-three years since I left. Including losing my husband, then my job, and my home,” I bit my tongue the moment the words came out of my mouth. It sounded bitchier than I ever intended it to.

“I’m sorry—I didn’t mean it that way.” She blushed. “What I meant is...”

“I know. I’m sorry,” I said. “You didn’t say anything wrong. I’m just hypersensitive lately. We go way back. You’re the oldest friend I have.” I shrugged. “It’s just been a

rough past few months. What can I say?”

“We may not be blood, but we’re sisters,” she said. “And my parents have always considered you family.” She paused. “How’s your aunt?”

My aunts—Astra and Sara—had lived in Midnight Point since they were young adults, the same as my parents. When my parents died in a plane crash on their way to the UK, they took me in and brought me up as their own. But Aunt Sara had died a few months before I turned eighteen, from a severe case of pneumonia. Since then, it had just been Aunt Astra and me.

All my other relatives lived on the east coast. They never paid much attention to us. They had disapproved of my father, Johann, because his father had been adopted and he couldn’t trace their magical lineage. Even though he was tested by the Aseer and she affirmed he was witchblood in heritage, my mother’s family punished their choice to get married by cutting her off. It was then that Astra and Sara had broken from the main family, as well. They supported my mother by moving out here with her.

“Astra’s doing well. She says to tell you hey and to get your ass over for dinner sometime soon.” When I moved back to Midnight Point, I moved in with my aunt while I waited for the insurance check to come through. The money was due any day now, and then I could look for a house of my own.

“I’d like that. She was always so much fun. As much as I love my folks, I used to envy you, living with your aunts. They made life seem so...vibrant.” Crystal stretched, then said, “I’d better get back to the shop. Good luck! With Kevin’s shop next door, you’re bound to pick up business.”

“I hope so. I know it sounds calculated, but hey, if people are looking for love and need help, then I’m here to help them.”

As Crystal left, I waved and went back to sorting out my desk, all the while wondering if this had been a good idea.

An hour later, the bells on the door rang and I jerked my head up, out of the book I'd been reading. A woman entered the shop and looked around.

"Hello, may I help you?" I stood, giving her a gracious smile. She had the look of a shifter, though I couldn't be sure.

"Hi...so...You're a matchmaker?" she asked, walking over to my desk. "You have a beautiful shop," she added.

"Thank you. I'm Maisy Tripwater, and yes, Married At First Bite is a matchmaking service. I also offer tarot readings and psychic investigations." I motioned for her to sit opposite my desk. I decided to forego shaking hands. She still looked nervous and I didn't want to scare her off by acting too eager.

She settled down in the mauve wing chair. "Thank you. I'm Brenda Kline." She slid her hand over the microfiber upholstery of the chair. "Nice," she said.

I returned to my seat. "How can I help you today, Brenda?"

She inhaled slowly, then finally leaned forward. "I'm lonely. I want to find someone, but I haven't had much luck on my own." She seemed almost embarrassed.

I nodded. "It's not easy to meet someone in today's fast paced world, especially with how busy we all are."

There was an art to matchmaking. I'd discovered I had a knack for matching people early on, but it took more than natural talent. Learning how to go about it without offending the client or making them feel inadequate was an art form that required

thought, diplomacy, and empathy.

“You can say that again,” Brenda said, relaxing enough to lean back.

“Have you ever been married?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yes, I was. I had a rough marriage. The asshole was an abusive jerk. I hate to admit it, but when he died, I jumped for joy. I’d tried to leave him several times but...I’m a bear shifter,” she added.

That was all she needed to say about that. Divorce within the bear shifter community could happen, but only after obtaining permission from the clan’s leaders. Men and women were considered equal, but they were expected to mate for life. It required a lot of persuasion and proof to establish a reason. People had been kicked out of their clans for divorcing without permission.

“Got it,” I said. “Okay, so you’re a widow. How long were you married?”

“Seven years,” she said. “I married him when I was twenty, and it’s been three years since he died. I’m thirty, now.” She paused, then added, “So, how does your service work? I’ve tried a couple dating apps without success.”

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“Well, first, I have a natural talent for finding matches for my clients. I use my magic, as well as other, more traditional, methods. I access the IMDB, Washington division. That would be the Independent Matchmaker’s Data Base. Potential candidates who sign up through there are subjected to rigorous background checks.”

“So, do I sign up for this database?”

“You can if you want, but you don’t have to. For one thing, the clients can’t access it. The database is an industry-only business. Matchmakers are the only ones who have access, and most of us begin our searches there. If you want me to add you, I can. Regardless, I’m going to have you fill out a comprehensive form for me to show me just what you’re looking for. Then, I get to work. I use both the database, and my own instincts to find you a match. While I can’t guarantee success, at my old job, I had a 90% success rate. In fact, that’s why they laid me off,” I said.

“Why on earth would they let you go with that high of a success rate?” Brenda asked.

I glanced up at her, suddenly realizing just how pretty she was. She had long brown hair streaked with honey-colored highlights. Her eyes were coffee-brown, and her features—refined. She wasn’t willowy, but sturdy and she looked strong. I had the feeling that I wouldn’t have a problem finding her a match.

“Because, I cut into their business. You see, a lot of matchmaking sites base their company off the weight loss or gambling methodology. You build up repeat clientele by never actually helping them reach success. You give them enough hope—help them lose a few pounds, or win a few dollars. Just enough to believe that this time, they might actually hit the jackpot, be it money or a partner. Only, you rig it so that it

seldom actually works. When I started making match after match and the couples made it to the altar, they let me go.” I shook my head. “I don’t like leading my clients on. If I can’t make a match, I’ll tell them.”

She pulled out her wallet. “How much?”

I grinned. Honesty worked wonders. “I charge a non-refundable fee of five hundred dollars, and that covers four matches. For each match after that, it’s another hundred dollars. If we find a mate for you and you make it to the altar, there’s a thousand dollar charge. But I never just randomly throw people together. I want to be sure they’ll be compatible.”

Brenda handed me her credit card. “I trust you,” she said. “Let’s do this.”

As I ran her card, then sat her down in front of a laptop to fill out the extensive form I’d developed, I thought that maybe this business would work. Maybe coming back to Midnight Point was the best decision I’d made in ages.

CHAPTER TWO

I closed up and headed back to my aunt’s house at five on the dot. As I turned onto Sequoia Drive, a light snow began to fall. When we got snow in the Pacific Northwest, it more often than not came in January and February, rather than December. Predictions called for a couple inches, with more due come the weekend. We were in a La Niña year and that made a difference.

I eased into the driveway. Astra’s car was there, and the lights were on in the snug one-story, four-bedroom rambler. The front door light was on, which was helpful. It was still dark come early evening and, with the cloud cover, it seemed even darker.

I crossed the strip of lawn to the porch and stopped under the light to look for my

keys. But Dahlia—Astra's dog—began to bark and my aunt opened the door, peeking out.

"I thought it might be you," she said. "Get back! Dahlia, go into the kitchen," she said, as Dahlia poked her head out. The Pomeranian was feisty, and she could be a holy terror when she wanted to. But she had learned right away that getting in a Maine Coon's face wasn't the best idea, especially when that Maine Coon outweighed her three times over. Dahlia gave me the once over and, apparently satisfied, retreated.

"You sure have her trained well," I said.

"I'd better," Astra said. "Untrained poms are nasty little creatures." She stood back as I opened the screen door and entered the foyer. I closed the door, shrugged out of my jacket, and then unzipped my boots and sat them on the shoe rack. I followed her into the kitchen and settled on one of the counter stools.

Miss P. came racing in, bounced up on the counter. She promptly gave my aunt a what are you going to do about it look.

Astra laughed. "I like her," she said, reaching out to scratch under Miss P.'s chin. "I've never had a cat before," she said.

"I haven't either. I wanted to, but..."

"I know, I know. Sara and I forbade it. We always had dogs. Cats seemed pretty high maintenance," Astra said. "I'm sorry, now. I think we missed a lot of fun. At least you had dogs to play with, but now...I'd change my mind if I could and tell you yes." She handed me a spoonful of the sauce she was working on.

I tasted it. Tomatoey, a little spice, a little wine, and sausage.

“Yum,” I said, licking my lips. “Spaghetti?”

“You like?” She looked pleased. My aunt loved to cook, and she was a genius with flavors. She was a kitchen witch, and it showed.

“I like, very much.” I pulled Miss P. over to me and rubbed my face in her fur. She smelled safe and warm, and the moment my skin touched her fur, I relaxed. “Thank gods I still have her,” I said. “I need to call the insurance company tomorrow and ask what the hold up on the check is. I should be getting it any day now.”

“You know you can stay here as long as you need to,” Astra said, putting the lid back on the sauce. “I like having you around. Dinner will be ready in about an hour. What are you doing tonight?”

“I know you don’t mind having me here, but I need to put down some roots again. I guess, if I had to have a house fire, it was the right time. With no job, I’d have had to sell the house anyway,” I said. “As far as tonight, I actually had a client sign with me today, so I’m going to look over her form and start the process. I have two tarot readings booked for tomorrow. Business will pick up as I become established, but I hate these interim times.”

I slid off the stool and gave her a kiss. At five-ten, Astra stood five inches taller than me, and she was one of those women who walked into the room and immediately commanded attention. She wasn’t what you’d call regal, but she had charisma, and she never feared to show anyone exactly who she was. At 78, she looked about twenty years younger. Given witches had a longer lifespan than humans, my aunt looked right about her age for our kind.

She was still active, and she loved the outdoors. Astra had a natural ability with food, the earth, and animals. She had tested with the Aseer, and the Aseer told her that her magic was aligned with the earth and with the home.

The Aseer, a class of witchblood who acted as both oracle and divinatory priestesses for the Court Magika, lived one to each shadow town. With a longevity beyond most witchblood, they were oracles—born for the job, like spirit shamans were.

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After her test, Astra started at the Starlight Academy when she was seven. On the shores of Lake Eerie, the academy was near her home—where my grandparents still lived.

“Do you ever think about going back to Pennsylvania?” I asked. “I don’t want you to,” I added quickly. “I’m just curious.”

Astra shook her head. “No. There’s really nothing there for me. Even though your grandparents are still alive, they’ve never accepted your mother’s match with Johann. And the fact that Sara and I took Marika’s side, well, it pretty much assured that we were cast out, as well.”

Astra and Sara had visited here when my mother married my father back in 1972. Marika had met Johann on a vacation when she visited Midnight Point, and they fell in love. A year later, she moved across the country to be with him. My aunts came for the wedding, and they never left. Their fourth sister, Cassandra, had declined to show up for the wedding. My grandfather also refused to attend, and wouldn’t let my grandmother attend either, and my mother wrote them off.

The schism was formed that existed to this day. My grandparents had sent formal birthday cards to me when I was young, and a ten-dollar bill. They ignored me the rest of the year, and I finally—at fourteen—wrote to them and said to keep their money. I didn’t need it or want it.

“No,” Astra said. It’s pretty there, but I have my home, and my friends, and you.” She shrugged. “What can I say? I’m not interested in moving backwards.”

Feeling reassured, and loved, I headed to the living room to look over Brenda's form.

A half hour later, I was staring at the screen, trying to figure out why I felt uneasy.

Brenda seemed nice enough. She'd been pleasant—I hadn't sensed anything odd about her. A bear shifter, she worked for the city government as a clerk in the city zoning office. Her hobbies were tame enough: gardening, hiking, journaling, and baking.

The thing that differentiated her from my usual clients was that she was a widow, and had specifically asked for a man who was "different" than the man she had been married to. Given he'd been an abuser, I understood why.

"So...she's looking for someone calm, laid back, and yet ambitious," I said, jotting down notes. She had checked the box for "possibly" when asked if she wanted children, but I had the feeling she was more to the 'no' side, than the 'yes.' I needed all this information to feed into the database.

"Dinner," Astra said, poking her head around the corner.

I set down my notes before joining her in the kitchen.

The spaghetti, garlic bread, and salad were on the table. I poured the wine, then settled at my plate. Dahlia was staring up at us, her big puppy dog eyes trying to convince us she was starving. Miss P. was sitting on the kitty condo in the corner.

Astra's kitchen was painted a cheerful yellow, with a modern stove that looked like it was from the early fifties. Avocado colored curtains and copper Jell-o molds hung on the walls. She loved retro design, and it was all through her house. A Formica table snuggled in the kitchen nook, and the seats were basically an old fashioned booth. We ate breakfast in the nook everyday. The dining room table was reserved for dinners,

parties, and dinner guests.

As Astra sliced the garlic bread, I served myself some spaghetti. As I relaxed, settling back, I had a sudden flashback.

July 18, 2019...

Dan and I were in a tiny Italian restaurant we had found, sitting in a booth. It was our first anniversary, and we were determined to celebrate, even though we'd had a major disappointment the day before.

"I'm sorry," Dan said. He reached out to take my hand. "I thought sure we'd be able to get the loan."

I gazed into his eyes. "As long as I have you, everything's okay."

Dan was gorgeous—at least in my eyes. He wasn't particularly tall, and he worked out but wasn't all muscley. He had long red hair, which curled down to his shoulders, and his beard was well-trimmed. We'd married late, at least in society's eyes. I was thirty-five when I met him in 2017, and he'd been nearly thirty-eight.

We met at a Halloween Party, and I couldn't stop thinking about him. He had made me laugh, with his A Christmas Story pink-bunny costume. The next day, we met again, both invited to a friend's Samhain Ritual. He had a lot of magical energy, and I gravitated to him. He walked me home, and from that moment, we were inseparable.

Neither one of us had been married—and we'd both been in some dicey relationships. But rather than take it slow, we fell madly, passionately in love. Two months later, Dan proposed. We married the next year, on July 18, 2018. We scrimped and saved, and a year later, we made an offer on a house we loved. The bank turned us down the day before our anniversary because we didn't have a big enough downpayment.

Dan brought my hand to his lips and kissed it. “I love you. I can’t believe how lucky I am?—”

“I’m the lucky one!” I laughed, ducking my head. “We’re both lucky.”

“Yes, we are. And I have a gift for you.” He pulled out an envelope and held it up. “My parents sent us an anniversary gift.”

“What is it?” I asked, frowning. Sheldon and Connie Weaver were wonderful people. They accepted me in a way that made me feel like I truly had family beyond my aunts. They’d never once complained when I kept my maiden name rather than took Dan’s.

“I’m not sure,” he said.

“Open it!” I didn’t expect much—Sheldon and Connie weren’t all that wealthy, but they were frugal and saved money where they could. But I didn’t expect them to spend their money on us.

Dan opened the envelope and pulled out a card. A check fell out of it. He glanced at it and gasped. “Oh my gods, I...” He looked up at me. “They sent us twenty-thousand dollars. What on earth?”

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I caught my breath. “What?What do they say?”

He opened the card.

Children, we know how much you want that house, and we know how hard you’ve been working. Please accept our check for a downpayment. That should secure you the loan you need. Enjoy your new home! And if, on chance, it’s been sold, find another and use this to help out.”

I gasped. “Really? For our house?” I paused. “Can we accept this? It’s up to you.”

Dan stared at the check for a moment, then nodded. “We can. They never do anything like this without thinking it over. If they gave us this for a downpayment, they really wanted us to have it.”

I jumped up and ran around the table, leaning down to kiss him. He pulled me onto his lap and stroked my face with his hand.

“I think...we can afford the lobster ravioli if we want it. Tomorrow morning we’ll take this to the bank and ask them to reconsider the loan.”

“I’m trying not to get my hopes up,” I said. “But...I love that house.” I hugged him again, then slowly went back to my side of the table.

The next day, we went to the bank, secured the loan, and put down the money on the house. And we’d been incredibly happy there, until July 18, 2023, when on our fifth anniversary, Dan was hit by a drunk driver and died instantly.

“What are you thinking about?” Astra asked. She handed me the salad.

I absently shook my head. “No thanks, I don’t feel like veggies tonight. The bread, though, please.” I paused for a moment, then added, “I was thinking about Dan, and when we bought our first house. We bought it the week of our first anniversary, thanks to his parents. And then, on our fifth anniversary, I lost him.”

She sighed, then reached out and brushed my hand. “I’m sorry, my child.”

I stared at my plate. “I miss him so much, Auntie. I don’t talk about it much, but I miss him. I never thought I’d find love, and then I did—it came out of the blue, struck like a lightning bolt...blah blah blah, all those clichés. Then, as quickly as it appeared, life snatched it away from me.” I blinked, willing the tears back. It had been two years now, but still, some memories hit harder than others.

Astra set the piece of garlic bread on her plate, then, elbows on the table, she folded her hands together and rested her chin on them, watching me. “I know you do, love. I wish I could take the pain away, but only time can do that.”

“I don’t know if I want the pain to go away,” I said. “That sounds like I’m a masochist, but if the pain fades, will my memories?”

“Oh, Maisy, no. Never. The memories will become easier. They’ll feel more comforting, and less painful. You’ll be able to smile when you remember him, which is what memories are made for. They give us comfort. You’ll remember that, no matter what, somebody loved you enough to live his life with you, and that love will never die, just because he did.”

That was one thing about Astra—no matter what, she had the gift to make people feel better. Whether it was someone who had accidentally mowed their prize roses under, or whether it was the pain of losing a loved one, she had the nurturing touch, and it

showed—with people, with animals, and with plants.

I rested my head on her shoulder, and she wrapped her arm around my shoulders.

“Thanks, Auntie. You are so good to me. When you and Sara took me in, I knew that—even without my parents—I’d be okay, because you were there to take care of me.”

“Ssh, my dear. Now, eat your dinner. You have work to do with that new shop of yours, and you want to be well-rested.” She kissed me on the cheek, then went back to her side of the booth.

By bedtime, Miss P. had teased Dahlia into a frenzy, and Astra scowled as she affixed the leash to Dahlia’s collar. “You big ball of fluff, you realize that Dahlia doesn’t turn off on command,” she said, frowning at Miss P..

Miss P. lifted one paw and leisurely licked it, giving my aunt a stare that said, “What do you want me to do about it?”

Astra sputtered, then laughed. “Yeah, that’s about right. Cats,” she muttered, but she scritched Miss P. under the chin before heading out for a chilly bathroom break for the dog.

I whistled to Miss P.. “Come on, fleabag. Let’s go to bed.”

Miss P. hopped off the back of the sofa and followed me to my bedroom. I undressed and slipped into my chemise—a comfortable, black jersey knit. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and stopped. At five-five, I was curvy, although I called it ‘extra padding.’ I weighed one hundred and sixty pounds and wore a size twelve. I was comfortable with myself, and while I might not be athletic, I could hike and swim without a problem. I didn’t run because it hurt my shins, and I lifted weights on a

semi-regular basis, but I wasn't a gym-bunny. I didn't feel any need to lose weight or change the way I ate. Dan had always thought I was beautiful. I could wear a gunnysack and he would have said, "You're beautiful, babe."

I sighed, slipping on my robe over my nightshirt. It was chilly, and Astra's house was always a little on the cool side for me. As I crossed to my bed and slid under the comforter, I turned on the TV, then turned to my night table, where I kept a bottle of water, a couple books, my phone, and pictures of Miss P. and Dan.

"Oh, sweetie," I said, picking up the picture of Dan. I ran my fingers over the glass. "Why haven't you come to visit me? I miss you," I said, my voice catching a little. "I wish you could be here. I lost everything—our pictures, my wedding dress, the first rose you gave me. Did you know I pressed it in a book and then kept it in my jewelry box? Now, the only thing I have left is my wedding ring."

I looked at my hand, where the diamond and sapphire ring sparkled. "I'm so glad I wore it to work that day."

And yet, it sat on my finger, a grim reminder that the love that had sustained me had vanished. I felt awkward when people asked me if I was married. I still felt married to Dan, and yet...I wasn't. And whenever I told anybody that I was widowed, it always turned into this awkward talking point where I'd end up saying, "No, no...it's all right." I sat the picture on my lap and slowly reached for my ring, easing it off.

The moment I held it in my hand, I felt vulnerable and exposed. Shivering, I slid it back on my finger and kissed Dan's picture. "I wish you could talk to me. I can talk to other spirits, so why haven't you come back to let me know you're okay?"

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But, as always, there was only silence.

I set the picture back on the nightstand and, sliding out of my robe, I settled back to watch Allison DuBois use her psychic powers to solve mysteries for the district attorney. And, as I did every single time, I wondered why the hell she didn't ward herself and her family.

CHAPTER THREE

I woke up to Miss P. kneading my stomach. All twenty pounds of her. It was her way of saying, "Wake up! I'm hungry!" I let out an 'oof' and eased her off of me. She curled up in the crook of my arm and I rubbed her belly.

"What shall we do today?" I asked, yawning.

"Mrrrr..." Miss P. purred, pawing my hand so I'd rub behind her ears.

I finally pushed myself up against my headboard and picked up my phone, checking my messages. I'd finally changed my relationship status on TouchLine—the social networking site that I had signed up for years ago. I had a few friends there, one or two from my time with Dan, but most were people I'd met online.

"Hey, Miss P....what do you think? Should I start a page for my business?"

I sighed. Ten new messages. Two were legit—from net-friends who wanted to know how I was doing now that I was back in Midnight Point. The other were from cheesy men with really bad pickup lines. Most were probably scammers, and the ones that

weren't were pathetic. I deleted and blocked those, then answered Connie and Jocko.

After I finished, I closed the app, then slid out from under the covers and padded to the shower. Miss P. let out a miffed snort, then jumped off the bed and sashayed out the door. We'd installed a cat door on my bedroom door so I could close it at night, but Miss P. could still come and go.

I opened my phone and linked it to my Wavez speaker, then hit my morning wake-up playlist, starting with the Scorpions wailing out The Zoo. I'd developed a lot of my taste in music from my aunts. Astra never minded when I blasted my music, unless she had a migraine, and that wasn't all that often, luckily.

When Astra had renovated her house a few years back, she had updated all the bathrooms and turned the guest room into a second en suite. Hence, I had a gorgeous full-size walk in shower with shower seat, rainforest shower head, and jets spraying from both back and front.

I slipped off my robe and sleep shirt, then turned on the water and waited for it to heat up. Auntie had upgraded the bathrooms, and she also installed radiant floor heating. So now the floors were lovely and warm. Both Miss P. and Dahlia loved sprawling on them.

As I lathered up, the smell of Vanilla Woodland filled the room. I loved vanilla scents, and spicy, woody scents, and the combo was the best. I washed my hair, which hung down to my shoulder blades. It was caramel brown with gold highlights. I'd started highlighting it after Dan died. It felt like body armor—like the tattoo that covered my left upper arm.

The dark red rose with green leaves that covered my upper arm was a tribute to Dan, though nobody but Crystal and my aunt knew that. I wouldn't have to explain it if I ever decided to date again, because I could say that I loved roses. But it kept Dan

close to me every day. I had another tattoo—a pair of wedding bands, interlocked, on my left inner wrist, honoring my powers as a matchmaker, and on the right inner wrist, a pentacle, symbolizing the magic that flowed through my veins.

After I rinsed off, I stood in front of my mirror. By now, White Zombie was playing *More Human Than Human*. As I stared at my clothes, I realized I was bored. I was bored with my clothes, with the sedate cocoon I'd woven around me over the past couple of years. I wasn't sure what I wanted—I wasn't even sure how I felt about my feelings.

With a sigh, I shook off my thoughts and pulled out a green sweater dress, a pair of gold sparkly leggings, and my knee high black boots. They were low-heeled, so I could walk on snow and ice, but I hadn't worn them in a long time. As I dressed, I decided that I'd talk to Astra later. She was always a good sounding board.

As I applied my makeup, I decided to start breaking out of my rut and I went for color instead of neutrals. I sat back, staring at the green and gold eye shadow. It worked, even though I wasn't used to it. I applied a thicker coat of liner, then mascara. Instead of using a neutral pink for my lips, I found an old bronze lipstick and tried that.

“Well, you wash up pretty good,” I said. Then, deciding to leave it at that, I headed downstairs.

Astra was drinking coffee in the kitchen, glaring at the screen of her laptop. “Fucking assholes. The HSL is at it again.”

My aunts had both been activists, involved in politics and social causes, and Astra still was. They'd brought me up to value the beautiful diversity of the world, and that belief had never left me. I peeked over her shoulder. Sure enough, the Human Supremacy League was once again trying to sponsor a bill to roll back rights for

vampires.

“First the vamps, then the shifters and witches...but once they get to the Fae, it will be fuck around and find out,” Astra said. “This bill won’t get anywhere, but we have to be vigilant. It’s so easy for corruption to slide into power, and they usually do so through the ignorance of a subset of the population.” She shut the laptop with a disgusted snort. “Anyway, how are you doing this morning?” She did a double-take. “Wow, you look great.”

“You think so?” I glanced down at my outfit. “I just...wanted to try something different.”

“Well, it works.” She stood. “What do you want for breakfast?”

“I’m not that hungry, so just something light,” I said. “I’m thinking of signing up for a gym membership,” I said.

Astra narrowed her eyes. “What’s going on, love?”

I shrugged. “I’m restless. I woke up this morning feeling like I was a shadow. I thought it might be nice to get out of my rut.”

She nodded, looking like she wanted to say something, but then she moved over to the counter. “Latte or mocha?”

“Iced caramel latte, quad shot.” I hopped up to sit on the counter next to her. “I think for breakfast...some peanut butter on toast and a banana.”

“Sounds good,” she said. “I already ate. I woke up early and couldn’t get back to sleep.” As she popped a couple slices of bread in the toaster, I flipped on the espresso machine.

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“I’ll make my latte,” I said, sliding off the counter. I tamped coffee into the portafilter, then pulled two shots. Wash...rinse...repeat...I added a shot of caramel coffee syrup to my travel mug, then filled it with ice and milk. As I slipped the top on, Astra handed me the peanut butter toast.

I carried both toast and latte over to the table, where I settled in the booth. A bowl of fruit was in the center and I selected a banana—one that was slightly green. I didn’t like them when they were overly ripe.

“I have two readings today, and I’ll start on a plan for my matchmaking client,” I said. “I doubt that I’ll have a problem finding the right person for her. She’s an easy match.”

Astra returned to the table, carrying a latte for herself. “Every time you mention her, I get an odd feeling, Maisy.” She stirred the steaming drink, frowning.

“Really? What about?” I trusted Astra’s feelings. She was always on point.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “But I think you should be cautious with this. I have no clue what’s going on, but I get alarm bells. If I can pinpoint it, I will.”

I bit into the toast, then wiped my lips with a napkin. “What are you up to, today?”

“I’m getting ready for a little trip. I’ll be gone for a few days, so you’ll have the house all to yourself.” She winked at me. “I’d say no wild parties, but unfortunately, I don’t think it’s necessary.”

I sighed. “I wish I had a reason to throw a wild party. Anyway, where are you going?”

“Moonshadow Bay. A friend there needs some help. She threw her back out and it’s going to take a few days for it to heal. You remember Teran Karns?”

Moonshadow Bay, like Midnight Point, was a shadow town. All shadow towns were connected to the Court Magika. The Court Magika was the supreme council of witchblood, and they answered only to the queen of witchblood.

“Right—January’s aunt.” I’d met January Jaxson in Seattle, before she dumped her abusive ex and moved back to Moonshadow Bay. We kept in touch, infrequently, but it had been several years since we actually got together.

“Right. The high priestess of the Dark Moon Society asked me to conduct a little business while I’m there.”

Astra belonged to the Dark Moon Society—Midnight Point’s local branch of the Order of the Moon. She was one of the high priestess’s lieutenants. All high priestesses answered directly to Queen Heliesa, who lived in Easa Cailleach. Easa Cailleach existed in Between Veille—a dimension between the veils.

“Is something up with the Covenant of Chaos?” I asked.

The Covenant of Chaos was a group of chaos magicians dedicated to bringing back the Elder gods of Chaos, and creating as much havoc as they could. They were greedy, going after the almighty dollar, and they didn’t care who they are to in the process, or how much mayhem they wreaked. The only thing that matter to them was disrupting the system, and gaining as much power for themselves as they could.

“Maybe. There are indications that they’re rising again. But mostly, I’m going to help

out Teran.” She paused, then added, “Do you want to come with me?”

“I’d like to see January again,” I said. “But I can’t really leave my new business, and I have clients coming in tomorrow. So, tell her hi for me, and give her my new number, would you?” I glanced at my watch. “I’d better get moving. Time to get the day started.” As I picked up my purse and latte, Astra kissed me on the cheek. “When are you leaving?”

“This evening. I’ll take the 5:30 ferry over to Whidbey Island, then drive up Highway 20, over the bridge to I-5, and from there, it’s a hop and a skip north to Moonshadow Bay. I’ll take Dahlia with me. Keep an eye on the house.” She whistled to Dahlia, who came bouncing into the room. “You little dust mop. Want to go for a ride? I need to pick up some things before I go.”

Dahlia wiggled her butt. I laughed and, after stopping to pet Miss P. for a moment, I slipped on my jacket, then exited the kitchen door, heading to the side driveway.

The snow was melting, and it had warmed up to thirty-seven degrees. It was supposed to be back in the forties by next week, but between then and now we had a big snowstorm coming in. As I approached Clearwater Street—the main drag—a light sleet began to fall. The snow had melted just enough to create a few dirty piles of slush near the curbs. Pedestrian traffic was light today, given the weather, and there were plenty of open spots along the sidewalk. I was able to park directly in front of my shop, and as I stepped out of my car, into a river of slush near the gutter, I was grateful for my waterproof boots.

As I juggled my purse and coffee, trying to unlock my front door, a voice to my left caught my attention. I glanced up and saw Kevin.

“Yo, woman, need some help?” he asked. Kevin was tall, with feathery brown hair. He was built like an ice skater—long and lean, and had the grace to go along with the

look. He aspired to be Randy, from *Say Yes to the Dress*, but his manners weren't affected, and he managed to radiate both empathy and yet a wry wit that had a little bit of a bite to it.

"Yeah, can you hold my latte?" I handed him the travel mug, and then turned back to unlock the door. I pushed it open and he followed me inside. "Slow morning?"

"Slow morning, yes. We have three appointments this afternoon." He sat down in the chair opposite my desk. "So, how goes the new business? I'm hoping to gain some customers from your clients, you know."

I laughed. "Well, vice versa, as well. So far, I've got one client to start researching on—she's looking for a husband. And I have two readings coming in today. I'm really looking forward to getting back to work." I must have shown something on my face, because Kevin cleared his throat.

"You've really been through the wringer, haven't you?"

I nodded. "Yeah. First I was fired, then that same day I lost my house. I'm just grateful that Miss P. survived. But I lost almost everything from my life with Dan. I even lost our marriage certificate. I'm so grateful that I was still wearing my wedding ring." I held out my hand, staring at the rings. "I know I should take it off sometime...but I can't."

"You're not ready to," Kevin said. "You'll know when it's time."

I sat back, touching my ring. Sighing, I said, "You're right. I can't force myself to do something I'm not ready to. Not yet. It feels as though...if I take off my rings, I'm saying goodbye for real. I'm letting him fade into the past."

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“You won’t be, you know that. But if that’s how you feel, then let it be. Don’t worry about it. Someday, you’ll realize it’s time. It might be tomorrow...or in ten years.”

On thing I had to give Kevin was that he understood emotion. Maybe it was from him being a wedding dress consultant, maybe it was his nature. Whatever the reason, Kevin had an innate sense of being trustworthy.

“Yes...I suppose I will. Anyway, until that time, wearing it comforts me.” I hung up my jacket, but I didn’t turn on the open sign yet. I wanted to do some research first. “Let’s change the subject. I’ll give you a plug when I find my clients a match, because I almost always find them a match.”

Kevin stood, stretching. “I’d better get back to my shop. My first consult will be here in about twenty minutes. She wants somethingdifferent, so I brought in a few gowns that are outside the box. We’ll see just howdifferent’she’s looking for.” He laughed. “Half the time, when they want something different, they go traditional. And sometimes I think I’ve gotLittle Miss Average and she goes for goth, or super-sexy. Either way, I like to be prepared.”

I snickered. “Always get the sale, huh?”

Kevin started to laugh, then stopped. “You know, on the surface, yes. But I lovelove...and I want my brides to go away feeling happy and good about themselves. I want them to truly see themselves as a bride.” He waved, then headed out the door.

After he left, I made sure my crystal ball and tarot cards were ready, placing them on

a table against one wall. I lit a stick of incense, a light rose scent, suitable for both my matchmaking clients as well as for my readings.

When everything was ready, I had another hour before my reading, so I settled down at the crystal ball. Before I even touched the database, I wanted to find out what my guides had to say about Brenda's match.

Taking a deep breath, I lowered myself into a trance and brought Brenda to mind.

“Lady Aphrodite, I summon you,

Fill my rites with morning dew.

Open the path and let me see

The path to love, so mote it be.

Bring to me the match for Brenda Kline,

Open the door to love divine.”

As I cleared my mind, a rose colored mist began to form in the crystal. I leaned in, watching carefully. As the mist coiled and blossomed forth, I found myself standing inside the ball. I was in a garden, dusted with snow. Rose bushes stood barren, waiting for the spring. I looked around and saw a small cottage that looked like it belonged in the English countryside.

The yard was tidy. Whoever lived here, loved their home. And then I saw her—through the window. Brenda was standing by the sink, staring out at me with a dreamy look on her face. She looked happy, and I saw a ring on her finger.

The next moment, the shadow of a tall man walked into the picture. He was surrounded by a glowing aura—a nimbus of blue and purple, all sparkling and beautiful. My breath slowed, and I could hear Brenda’s heartbeat as he walked through the door. She turned as the mystery man wrapped his arms around her waist. As he leaned in for a kiss, I felt a wave of magic flow through, icy cold and clear as the night sky.

A star witch, I thought. He’s a star witch.

As the tendrils of their energy entwined, I could feel love holding them close. As the mist began to fill the scene again, I snapped out of trance, and sat back.

So, Brenda’s match was a star witch.

That narrowed the field down a great deal. I knew what kind of man I was looking for. Now, I just had to figure out where he was. As I sprayed sage water around, clearing the energy from my scrying so it wouldn’t interfere with my clients, my heart swelled. Every time I made a match, I renewed my belief in love. And when I was on the chase, hunting down my mystery match, I felt alive in ways I seldom otherwise ever felt.

CHAPTER FOUR

My first reading of the day was a woman named Charity Lane. She bustled in, flushed and two minutes late, and I immediately knew who I was dealing with. Or, I thought I did.

“I’m so sorry—first I couldn’t find parking and then I didn’t have my city parking pass for the meter, but I remembered I put it in the side pocket—” she paused for a brief second to take a breath, then continued. “Then I found it and managed to finally get the meter to work but as I started to cross the street, I almost missed spotting a

bicyclist who?—”

If I didn't stop her, she'd never finish.

“Well, I'm so glad you're here. Why don't we get started so you get your full reading.” I suspected she was going to be a problem. She was a gobbler—she'd eat up as much time and energy that I was willing to give her.

She froze. Apparently she wasn't used to being interrupted. I took advantage of the silence.

“Let me take your coat while you make yourself comfortable. Would you like some coffee or tea? I also have sparkling water, if you'd prefer.” Even as I spoke, I took her coat from her as she set her purse on the table.

She settled in the chair and, looking a little confused, said, “Oh, coffee, please. Cream and one sugar, if you have it.”

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Thinking that the last thing she needed was caffeine, I poured her a cup of coffee and added a splash of creamer and a pack of sugar. I set the china cup and saucer down on her side of the table, then took my place opposite of her.

“So, Charity, what can I help you with today?” I picked up the cards, holding them as I waited. I expected something typical—was her husband cheating on her, would she get the job she’d applied for, something run of the mill. But she surprised me.

“I’m not sure how to put this...” She paused, taking a sip of the coffee. “This is good.” After another sigh, she said, “My mother was recently diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. She has a few months before...I want to know if there’s anything I can do to help before...then? I’m not talking medically—unless a miracle happens, I know I’m going to lose her.”

Her eyes misted over. “I want her to be happy. I want to make the next few months the best she’s ever had. I’ve asked her about it. I ask her what she wants, but she just tells me that everything’s fine. That she’s ready and prepared. “

I froze. No wonder she seemed so spacey. Feeling that I’d been uncharitable, I opened myself up. Her grief washed over me, a tangible wave. Charity was hurting, and at that moment, I knew that she was the one who needed a cushion, not her mother.

“Give me a moment,” I said, closing my eyes as I dove deeper into the mist that formed in my mind. My magic was emotion-based, and I connected easily with all the outer realms—the spirit realm, the astral and etheric, and realms even further out. “I’ll need you to sit still, and keep silent. This may take a few minutes, so please be

patient.”

“May I drink my coffee, or will that interfere?” She settled back in her chair.

“You can drink your coffee,” I said.

First, I brought up my wards. Then, I opened myself to Charity’s aura.

The pinks and golds that rippled through it signified love and caring—this woman really did care about others. There was a hint of green...she was connected to earth energy, even though she didn’t know it. She was human, so I suspected she liked to garden, rather than working with any form of magic.

In an outer band, I sensed the presence of death. That had to be her mother, because her aura was strong and healthy. There was another band of energy that seemed oddly misplaced...it was gray—the gray of the past. But, as I sat with the feeling a little longer, I began to see figures. They silently watched us, reminding me of old photographs—the ones done when photography was new. Old and grainy, in shades of gray, black, and white.

Who are you? I asked.

One of the figures let out a long sigh, like wind rustling through a dry corn field.

We watch and we wait.

I wasn’t sure who was answering, but the figures were becoming clearer. As they came into focus, one of them stepped forward. She wore an old fashioned simple button down shirt, with a thin ribbon beneath the collar, tied in a bow. Her skirt was mid-shin length, and a straw hat sat atop an elaborate chignon. She must have been in her mid-thirties, and she reminded me of school teacher from the early 1900s.

Are you Charity's guardian spirits?

We are her ancestors. We are here to help her and her mother, as her mother transitions.

They were waiting for Charity's mother. They had come to help her through the Veil. Sometimes, when someone had a strong connection to their family lineage, the ancestors watched over them.

Do you know if there's anything her mother needs from her, before you escort her through the Veil?

The spirit paused, then nodded. We do. There is an old rift between them, that they have chosen to ignore. It must be mended for Eva to return to us and not linger on this plane. We cannot tell you what it is—this is something they must remember, and attend to.

With that, the spirit backed away. She and the others began to vanish from my sight, and the mist withdrew. I opened my eyes.

“Your mother's name is Eva, isn't it?”

She blinked, watching me as she held her coffee. “Yes, it is. How did you know?” The energy of the shop seemed to have calmed her down.

I handed her the cards. “Focus on your mother and—silently—ask what you need to know about her for the time she has left. Then shuffle five times, and cut once,” I said. Each time I used the cards, they told me how many times to have the querant shuffle them.

Charity held the cards for a moment, then shuffled and cut them, then handed them

back to me. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. “I’ve never had my cards read before,” she said. “I’m curious as to how they work.”

I began to lay out a circle of eight cards, with one in the center. As I scanned them, they mirrored what the spirit had told me. I wasn’t sure how much Charity was prepared to hear, but the cards showed a surprising amount of psychic ability in her. The Magician, the High Priestess... And center, the Death card, which signified a transition. It usually meant life transitions, but in this case, it referred to her mother.

After a few moments, I said, “The cards help direct my psychic abilities. Think of it like focusing—there’s all this energy, and I’ll get general impressions. The cards lead me in how to interpret what I see and feel.”

She pulled out a notebook and a pen. “I’d like to take notes, if you don’t mind?”

“Of course,” I said. I took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly. “All right. What I see here tells me that you know there’s something that isn’t finished. That’s why you came here, correct? Something needs to happen before your mother leaves this plane.”

“Right. I knew it.”

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As I examined the rest of the cards, I immediately saw that the problem surrounded a man. That much was obvious, and the cards told me they'd had an argument over him.

“Was there a man in your past—your mother’s past—who caused turmoil between you? Someone who brought about an argument, or a dispute?” I glanced at the Prince of Wands. “He might be a fire sign, or have a fiery personality. Someone who was arrogant, or overly self-assured?”

“Oh my gods, yes.” Charity straightened, her voice agitated. “There was Trevor. My mother was dating a man when I was fourteen. He was an asshole, and I hated him. We fought about him constantly, until he finally left. My mother blamed me, said that I was the reason he left. But we let that go some time ago.”

A bell rang in my brain. Yep, this was the rift her ancestor had told me about. And they might think they'd left the argument in the past, but it was still there.

“You and your mother haven’t resolved the issue. This will cause problems for her when she crosses over. You need to talk to her about him, and be clear. In fact,” I said, narrowing in on an impression that solidified the more I focused on it, “you might accidentally keep her bound to this plane by your resentment over him. She doesn’t know how badly he hurt you—” I froze as I caught a glimpse of something I didn’t want to see.

A man, creeping into a young teen’s bedroom, late at night...

She met my gaze, and the pain in her eyes told me I was right.

“You never told her, did you?”

Charity sat very still, but her expression crumpled. “No, I didn’t,” she whispered. “I thought she wouldn’t believe me.”

“You need to talk to her. You need to tell her what he did to you. If you don’t, the anger and fear attached to his abuse will reach out and draw her back.”

“I don’t want to hurt her, not now—” Charity started to say.

“You’ll hurt her more by not telling her what happened. She needs to know, so you don’t silently bind her to this realm. And think of this: once she makes her transition, she’ll know what happened. She’ll be able to see it.” I tried to think of a way to explain how it worked. “If you don’t take care of this, that anger will fester deep inside, and you’ll attach it to her, instead of him. Blame the man who did it.”

“But she should have protected me,” Charity blurted out. She gasped, bringing her hand to her mouth. “I didn’t mean that—she was so busy, trying to keep us alive after my father left.”

There—the rest of it came out. “You’re afraid she’ll think it was your fault.”

Charity leaned back in her chair. “I guess I am afraid that she’d blame me, even after all these years. I’m thirty-seven now. It’s been twenty-three years, but I still remember every detail of that night. You know, it was just a few days after that incident that my mother broke up with Trevor.”

Everything was falling into place. Eva had seen Trevor watching Charity, but the desperate hope that she was imagining things kept her from acting. And then, something had shifted and she knew her fears were founded. But instead of talking to Charity, Eva had kicked Trevor out and went on with life as though nothing had

happened.

“This is what you need to do: you need to tell your mother what happened, but try to remember she was in a vulnerable state and that she never wanted to see you hurt.” I loved it when readings fell into place, the combination of magic and the tarot solidifying the situation.

“And that will set her free when she’s ready?” Charity asked.

I nodded.

“It’s not as easy as booking a trip, though, or taking her to her favorite national park.” Charity sighed. “I guess we do need to talk about it. I thought I’d left my anger behind, but I never really dealt with what he did to me. And I guess I do still blame her.”

“Sometimes the freaks of the world are really good at hiding their perversity. She might not have known when she met him.”

“Did she ever figure it out? Does she already know what he did to me?” The look in Charity’s eyes told me I was treading in dangerous waters. One wrong word and it could make things worse for both of them.

“Perhaps, but not on a conscious level. I think she may have suspected, but she probably thought you would tell her if anything did happen. Miscommunication, at worst, Charity. But this will free her, because of that part of her that has always wondered. Sometimes, knowing the truth releases a burden. And knowing the truth now will allow her to move on.”

I sat back, staring at the cards. “Your mother is stronger than you think. She’s resilient. She wants to wrap up all the loose ends she can before she leaves, and this is

one of the last.” I paused, then added, “Your ancestors are waiting for her, Charity. They’ll take care of her when she passes. It’s not the end, you know. She’ll still live on, just in a different form.”

Charity sat very still for a moment, then tears welled in her eyes. She swallowed hard. “I’m so afraid.”

“You don’t want to lose her. Of course, you’re afraid. But she’ll watch over you. And your ancestors are watching over you.” I described the woman I’d seen. “Do you recognize her?”

Charity worried her lip, then nodded. “We had an old photograph hanging on the wall when I was young. I think I have it in storage. It sounds like my great-great-great grandmother, Ronita. She looked a lot like the woman you described, and she was a librarian before she got married.”

Again, the bells rang in my head. “Yes, that’s who she is. So take comfort in knowing that she’s always there, standing watch. And she’ll help your mother when it’s time.”

“I guess I have my work to do, then. I’m just...”

“Don’t wait too long,” I added. “Your mother may not have as much time as you think.”

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Charity finished her coffee. “All right, I’ll talk to her tonight. Thank you. This has been hard, but it helps, though I may not be thrilled over the answer. It would be so much easier if she wanted to see some landmark or something on her bucket list.”

“Bucket lists might be what we want, but they aren’t always what we need.” I leaned across the table and rested my hand on Charity’s. “You’ll be okay, Charity. Everything will be okay.”

She thanked me again, and then handed me her credit card. I ran it and then handed it back to her. “Feel free to call if you need my services again. And...good luck to you, and I hope your mother...I hope she passes gently.”

After Charity left, much calmer than when she entered, I sprayed the shop with sage water to clear the energy and then shuffled the cards to set them for my next client. All the while, I had the feeling I would be seeing Charity again, though I wasn’t sure why.

By the time my next client arrived, I had started researching star witches. I needed to know more about them. I had begun to enter info into the database, but soon realized that finding the right match for Brenda was going to be difficult. For one thing, they were the rarest form of witch—or rather, they had one of the rarest magical connections with the elemental forces.

There were a few in the database, but my gut told me that they wouldn’t pan out. I decided to check them out anyway, but I needed more to go on.

At my old job, we had a long list of candidates waiting to be matched up. But my old

boss had not encouraged success.

“We want them to keep coming back,” he said. “You don’t make money off of success. At least, not too much success. Give them enough hope. Like gambling. Let the player win a few times, but not big—not the jackpot. They’ll lay their money down every time after that.”

But I almost always made successful matches. My boss had specifically told the others to keep quiet about my success rate, because he knew I hated deliberately mismatching couples.

Eventually, though, some of my colleagues grew irritated and finally my boss let me go. He didn’t exactly say why during my exit interview. He used the excuse that they were overstaffed and that he had to lay off someone. And, regardless of the fact that I was a senior member of the staff, I was the one escorted to the door.

Now, I stared at the database. “Well, I suppose I can try her out with a couple of these guys,” I said to myself. “But I know that none of them are it. So, where am I supposed to find the right star witch? I should have thought of this before I opened my doors.”

I didn’t have any big database for myself, nor had I accumulated listings to start with. But regardless of the difficulty, I knew he was out there and I was determined to find him.

I glanced at the clock. My next reading was due in half an hour. But before she arrived, a light bulb went off. Midnight Point had several social clubs. And one of them happened to be sponsored by the Dark Moon Society. At least, it had been in existence when I lived here as a teenager.

I put in a call to Crystal. “Hey, Crystal? Do you remember the name of that social club when we attended when we were kids? Well, teenagers? The one we went to

when we turned eighteen and thought we were so sophisticated?”

She thought for a moment. “Oh, you mean the Midnight Hour Social Club?”

“Yes, that’s the one. I was wondering, is it still up and running?”

“I think so. I haven’t gone in ages, but it was still active a few years ago. Why?”

“Oh, I plan to—” I paused as the door opened. “I have to go. My next client is here. I’ll talk to you later, but if you could get any information about where and when they meet, I’d appreciate it.”

“Sure thing,” she said. “Have fun.”

“I hope so,” I said. “My last reading wasn’t exactly a bowl of cherries.” As I hung up and turned to greet my client, I wondered how much the Midnight Hour Social Club had changed. Hopefully, it would still be the soirée that I remembered.

CHAPTER FIVE

The second reading went far easier. My client — Emily Markwood — wanted advice on a new job she had accepted. Luckily, it was pretty run-of-the-mill stuff. She had a good chance of success if she did her work, follow directions, and didn’t try to change things for a while. Given she was an Aquarius, and it was second nature of her to try and fix things that may not even be broken, I gave her chances about seventy-five percent. It wasn’t that she couldn’t do the work, but I spied a rebellious streak in her. She was an individualist through and through. But she seemed content with the reading, paid me with no problem, and said she would come again.

I sighed, deciding it was time to tackle the insurance company again. As I put in a call to them, I prepared myself for another run-around. I finally got hold of a

customer service rep.

“Hi, I’m calling to see if there’s any progress on my check. My house burned down.”
I gave her my case number and waited.

Ten minutes later, she said, “I’m sorry for the wait. It looks like the claim’s been approved and the check will be sent out with the next batch, at the end of the month.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “They said that last month.”

“It looks like there was a glitch. But it’s in process right now, and you should receive it shortly after the beginning of February.”

I took down her employee number and the call number, in case there was another glitch, and thanked her. After that, I plastered a sign on the door that I’d be back in half an hour, and headed next door to the Mocha Express, after locking the door. Midnight Point might be a small town, but I was used to high crime rates in Seattle, and didn’t want to take any chances.

The Mocha Express was busy as usual. In fact, there was a line out the door. Four people were standing outside, at the back of the line. For a town the size of Midnight Point, that was an impressive queue. I glanced across the street at the Rialto theater. Midnight Point was still small enough of a town for going to the movies to be an event, and they were advertising a new musical that was coming out. I’d heard that it was good, and thought about asking Crystal if she wanted to go.

After juggling my way through the door, I slid inside and looked around to see if there were any tables available. There weren’t, but Crystal saw me.

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“Hey, come into the back,” she said, motioning for me to follow her.

I wove around the line of customers and through the curtains leading into the break room.

“Wow, it’s really jumping out there,” I said.

“It’s cold. People want mochas and hot cocoa, not to mention hot coffee. Apparently, this weekend we’re supposed to have a big snow event, before the weather clears up and gets back tonormal next week. So you might want to stock up on eggs and bread.”

“Oh, a French toast alert?” A meteorologist out of the Seattle area often called weather eventsFrench toast events, because people always stocked up on eggs and bread and milk, all ingredients to make French toast, a luxury usually requiring a snowy morning stuck at home.

“Apparently so. We’re due for five to seven inches of snow this time. So we may actually get snowed in. At least we don’t have the hills that Seattle does, but with the wind that comes in off of the strait, you know it’s going to be icy.” She motioned for me to sit down at the table. “Do you want some coffee?”

“What kind of question is that? Of course,” I said with a laugh. “I could use a double shot mocha, if you don’t mind.” I reached for my purse but she waved me away.

“On the house. I’ll be right back.” As she headed back through the curtains, my phone sounded. I opened it up to find a text from Brenda.

i had the oddest dream,she texted.you were in it, and together we were being chased by some sort of invisible monster. it was so real, and we were running through the woods at night. we were afraid for our lives. i'm not quite sure why i decided i needed to tell you, but it felt so real that i'm going to trust my instinct.

I stared at the text. That was odd. Not sure how to respond, I finally texted back that I would call her in a while, when I was free.

Crystal returned with my mocha, a hot cocoa for herself, and a bag of cranberry oatmeal cookies. "If I remember right, you like these, right?"

"Oh, I love those. And you make the best ones." I took a sip of the mocha, and leaned back in my chair. "My morning reading — my first reading — was incredibly sad."

"What happened?" Crystal asked.

"Oh, someone losing their mother, and trying to put tie up loose ends. Just...a lot of heartache in so many ways. It left me in a odd mood. I feel so bad for my client, and yet... Sometimes things just work out the way they do. At least my second reading was pretty generic. Anyway, did you find out anything about the Midnight Hour Social Club?"

"Yes, actually. They're still meeting, every Saturday evening at seven PM in the community center. Anyone over eighteen is welcome." She bit into a cookie. Then, after she swallowed, asked, "So, are you going to go?"

"You mean this Saturday? I thought it was supposed to snow."

"It is, but you know how forecasts can be off around here. Maybe you should think about trying it out." The grin on her face told me she thought I was going for myself.

“Slow down! You know I’m not ready to date again,” I said. “However, it occurred to me that I might be able to find some potential clients there. I did some preliminary work on my client Brenda this morning, and it seems that I’m looking for a star witch. However, there aren’t many in the database and so...I need leads.”

“Didn’t you tell me she was a bear shifter?” Crystal asked.

“Yes, and I know it doesn’t sound like a likely pairing, but that’s what I saw. And I’m almost always right.” I paused, then added, “Do you know of any star witches around?”

Crystal thought for a moment, then shook her head. “They’re pretty rare, even around here.” She worried her lip, then hesitantly added, “I think there’s a family of star witches over in Whisper Hollow. In fact, the mother belongs to the Crescent Moon Society. I think she runs it.”

I blinked, surprised. “Really?”

“Yeah, and if I remember correctly, her name is Starlight. I’m not sure about her last name. I’ll have to look it up.”

“Isn’t there a spirit shaman over in Whisper Hollow?”

“Yeah, Kerris Fellwater. I’ve met her a couple times. She’s spooky as hell, but nice enough.”

Spirit shamans weren’t exactly the most friendly of people, and there weren’t many of them around. They weren’t witchblood, but an entirely different branch of magic. Liaisons between the living and the dead, they were steeped in necromancy. Even those witchblood who dealt with the dead and the Veil didn’t have the intimate connections that spirit shamans did.

“If you could find out Starlight’s last name, that would be helpful. I may have to make a trip over there. Meanwhile, I got a text from Brenda while you were making our coffee. She had a nightmare about her and me. I’ll call her back about it later.”

“Where’s your aunt?” Crystal asked. “I usually see her at least once a day, but she hasn’t been in yet. Is she okay?”

“She drove over to Moonshadow Bay. Her friend, Teran, needed some help. Astra will be there for a few days and she took Dahlia with her. So Miss P. and I are on our own. Why don’t you come over tonight for dinner?”

“Sounds like fun to me,” Crystal said. She glanced at the clock. “Okay, I’d better get back to work and make sure nothing’s ready to explode out front. Although Karina’s such a good worker that I don’t have to worry. What time do you want me for dinner?”

“Seven o’clock?”

“See you then.” She pushed back her chair and stood up.

As I headed back to the shop, I thought about the possibility of making a trip to Whisper Hollow. The hair stood up on the back of my arm. It wasn’t exactly the most charming place to visit.

Once I returned to my store, I called Brenda back. “So, tell me more about this dream.”

“We were out near a forest, and it was very dark. I’m not sure where we were. The woods were dense—the same type of woods we have around here, only they seemed go on and on. Little globes of light were floating through the trees, bouncing through the air. They reminded me of fireflies, only they were much larger. About the size of golf balls.

“There was snow on the ground, a lot of it, and we were trying to make our way back to a trail that we knew would lead us out of the forest. But we got lost. Everything got a little mixed up at that point. Suddenly, we were running, slogging through the snow trying to get away from some creature that was chasing us. Whatever it was, it was big and scary and smelled fetid. Then, you screamed for me to duck and I did. The next moment, I woke up in a cold sweat. Does that make any sense to you?” Her voice sounded shaky. I didn’t blame her, nightmares were rough.

“Do you have any idea of where we were?”

“I don’t know, but it wasn’t Midnight Point, and it wasn’t on the island. I think we were somewhere in the Olympics.” She sighed, then added, “I feel better for having told you.”

The Olympic National Forest ran across the whole Olympic peninsula. The towns bordering it—Port Townsend, Port Gamble, Port Angeles, Whisper Hollow, Forks, Aberdeen-Hoquiam, and Ocean Shores—encircled three sides of the national forest.

While Forks didn’t have sparkly vampires, unless they were wearing sequins, it and all of the other towns had soaked up the ancient magic of the massive old-growth trees. The peninsula was filled with ghosts and creatures from other dimensions and ages unknown. A dark, feral energy permeated the entire area, and it kept out anyone who didn’t belong there.

“Let me think on it for a while,” I said. “Try not to worry. I’ll let you know if I come up with any insights. Meanwhile, I’m making some headway on your case. While I haven’t found the right person yet, I know what kind of man to look for. So try to focus on that. You know, positive things. And if you have any more dreams like that, let me know.”

“Before you go,” she said, “you also do readings and psychic investigations, correct?”

“Yes, I do. Why? Do you know someone who needs my help?”

Brenda paused, then said, “I actually might need more help than just finding a man. Last night, I could have sworn that was somebody in the house with me. I woke up feeling like someone was watching me, so I got up and looked around. The house was empty, but the feeling wouldn’t go away. After that, I took a sleeping aid and finally went back to sleep but then I had that dream. I don’t know if the incidents are connected, but I feel uneasy today.”

I frowned. It could be psychological. Now that she was actually looking for a new partner, she might be afraid, given her late husband was abusive.

“Keep an eye on things. Let me know if it continues. Maybe it’s the weather? I know that weather can affect a lot of things, including our moods.”

As we said goodbye, I realized that my entire mood had changed. I felt pensive, and as I glanced outside, it started to snow again. I walked over to the window. The sky shimmered with that silvery tint that accompanies snowstorms, and I had a feeling that the French toast warning was going to be an actual French toast emergency.

I spent the afternoon doing some research. Starlight Williams was actually a star witch, from an old family of star witches. She was married, with two children, but when I did some more research, I discovered that several other members of her family lived with her in Whisper Hollow, including two brothers and several cousins. They were part of the socially elite of the town, and I jotted down the names of everyone I could find.

I decided to close up early and go shopping before everybody flocked to the stores to stock up for the weekend. As I drove into the Canberry Market’s parking lot, I almost slid into another car, the slush was so slippery. Tonight would drop below freezing, and turn this entire lot into a skating rink by morning.

I parked as close as I could to the market, cautiously making my way up to the sidewalk which was covered by the awning. They had salted the walkway, so it was easier going. The falling snow was light and feathery, but it was already sticking.

The market was bustling as I grabbed my cart and headed for the dairy aisle. I filled my cart with eggs and milk, and several varieties of exotic cheeses that I wanted to try, as well as cheddar and mozzarella.

As I turned the corner to the meat aisle, I saw Stuart Waterline. He was looking over the steaks. Stuart had been my high school sweetheart, and he was the sheriff of Midnight Point. He looked almost the same as I remembered him—tall and wide-shouldered, with dark brown hair and hazel eyes.

“Stuart? Is that you?” I push my cart over to the beef section.

Stuart looked up from the steaks, his eyes widening when he saw me.

“Maisy? You have to be kidding me! I didn’t know you were back in town.” He set down the ribeye he had been examining, and held out his hands. I gave them a quick squeeze before letting go.

“I moved back a couple months ago.” I glanced at the meat. “So, any good specials?”

“I’m not even sure I knew where you’ve been all these years. I heard you got married, but that was about it. It’s been so many years!” A glint in his eyes told me he was glad to see me.

“I was living in Seattle,” I said. “And don’t talk about so many years. I’m not that old!”

I grinned, realizing I was truly glad to see him. He had always been polite, as well as a lot of fun. In fact, he had been my first. I lost my virginity to Stuart Waterline in the back of his Ford Mustang.

“You know you’ll always be eighteen to me, at least in my memory. What brings you back to Midnight Point? Are you here visiting your aunt?”

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I shook my head. “No. Or rather, I’m living with her. As I said, I just moved back. So, you’re the sheriff? Congratulations! You always wanted to be a police officer.”

“Well, I made it, so it seems.” He glanced at me, then shifted his eyes away. “So, did your husband move back with you?”

I hesitated. It was always awkward whenever I had to tell someone I was a widow. There was always that moment when I could see pity in their eyes, and then they would stumble over their words, trying to rectify a gaffe they didn’t know they were making. At times, I had just taken to saying that I wasn’t married, rather than try and explain. But Stuart knew I had married, and I wasn’t about to lie and say I was divorced. I decided to just rip off the bandage.

“Actually, Dan died a couple years ago. I’m a widow. I lost my job a couple months ago, the same day I came home to find my house going up in flames. Rather than try and start over again in Seattle, I decided to come back home. I don’t know whether I was running away, but for good or ill, here I am, back in Midnight Point.” I picked up one of the New York strips and placed it in my cart, along with a package of ground beef, and a pot roast.

Stuart froze. “I’m so sorry to hear that. It sounds like you’ve had a rough time of it.”

I nodded. “Yes, well...I’m here now. I opened a new business—a matchmaking business—this week. In fact, I just opened my doors yesterday. I’m staying with Astra until I can find a house. I’m in the market, by the way. So if you hear of any houses with good bones, preferably single story—though I’ll take a two-story if I have to—that seems reasonably priced, please let me know?”

“Of course,” he said. “Why don’t you give me your number?”

We exchanged numbers, and then he blushed again, stumbling over his words. “I suppose I better get home.... Paula is waiting for me. I don’t want to keep her waiting.”

I glanced at his left hand, but saw no ring. “You’re married?” In my many years in the matchmaking business, I had learned a lot of men didn’t wear their wedding rings.

“No, actually I’m not. I’ve been seeing Paula for about seven months now.” He shuffled a little, then took hold of the handle on his cart. “I suppose I’d better get on with my shopping.”

I could tell that he wanted to stick around and talk some more, but I didn’t want to give his girlfriend a reason to worry.

“I need to get my ass on the move, as well. I have company coming for dinner tonight. It was good to see you, Stuart. I’d like to have coffee later on, and have a proper catch up.”

“I’d like that,” he said, looking relieved. “Drop by the department any time you want. Feel free to text me and we’ll schedule a coffee chat.”

I turned with my cart and moved on to produce, thinking about Stuart. We had a wonderful time together, but I was witchblood and he belonged to a wolf shifter pack, and that alone was reason enough for us to break up. Though we’d both been sad, it had been an amicable breakup, although few breakups were ever easy.

I finished shopping and carried my bags to the car, ignoring the world of snowflakes that surrounded me. Seeing Stuart again had brought back a slew of feelings, though not romantic ones. When I was nineteen, I couldn’t wait to get out of the town. I

wanted adventure, I wanted to visit places other than my sleepy, little, magical town in Western Washington.

But now? When I thought about being back in Midnight Point, I felt safe and comforted, as though I'd found a soft mattress after sleeping on the ground too long.

What a difference twenty-five years could make.

CHAPTER SIX

As I unlocked the door, Miss P. greeted me, twining around my feet. It occurred to me that she had gotten so used to Dahlia, that when we found our own house, she might be lonely. I had occasionally considered adopting another cat, but back in Seattle I had been out of the house so much until Dan died, that I didn't think it was fair to have a pet. But once he died, I started spending a lot more time at home.

Miss P. had magically appeared in my life, showing up as a tiny stray, only a few months old, who would have died if I hadn't rescued her. The vet said she was pure Maine Coon, so she must have escaped from some breeder. I had put up fliers, just in case, but there had been no answer, and so she became part of my life and home. Now, even though I had my own business here, I could make my own hours and that made a big difference.

I set the groceries on the counter and began putting them away after I hung up my coat and took off my boots. Miss P. jumped on the counter and sat there, watching me.

"How would you feel about having a little brother or sister?" I asked.

Miss P. let out a purr and languidly batted my hand as I reached out to rub her tummy.

I had decided on macaroni and cheese with crab for dinner, and had splurged on a Dungeness crab that was precooked and cleaned. As I cracked the shell and separated out the meat, Miss P. gave me the side eye that told me she wanted a bite.

“Oh no, not this. I didn’t pay twenty bucks to feed this to you, you little thugette. Tell you what, you can have shrimp flavored kitty food for dinner.”

I set the crabmeat aside and then thought about cooking down the shells for a stock, but decided it was too much trouble, and one crab shell wasn’t enough to make a proper broth, anyway. I glanced at the clock.

Five-thirty. It was too early to start cooking the actual dinner. I refrigerated the crabmeat container, grabbed a diet root beer and a bag of Fritos, and headed for the living room.

Astra’s house was comfortable, but it felt empty without her. She was the heart and soul of this home, and I realized how quickly I had fallen back into the family routine with her. As I curled up on the sofa, Miss P. joined me and I turned on the TV.

“What shall we watch?” I asked. My aunt subscribed to every streaming service you could think of and they were all tied to her television. Not only did we have hundreds of shows at our fingertips, we could also record live broadcasts.

Miss P. purred.

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“You say you want to see the new episode of Promise At The Altar? I can go for that.” I selected the newest episode and we settled back to watch the couples who had barely met decide whether they wanted to sign up for life at an extremely staged wedding. It was schlock TV, but I liked it.

An hour later, my head filled with the latest drama of the six couples, five of whom had decided to go through with the experiment, I headed into the kitchen to start dinner.

As I put the water on to boil for the noodles, and began to grate cheese, my thoughts returned to Brenda.

Nobody was more surprised than me that she was meant to be with a star witch. Shifters and witches did hook up together, but when you were dealing with the more conservative shifter types, it wasn't nearly as frequent of an occurrence as some people might think.

Bear shifters tended to be among the most conservative, along with wolf shifters. Although, I thought, some of the wolf shifter packs were starting to move into the modern age. As the world grew smaller and people from all walks of life interacted more, it was bound to happen.

The water was boiling at a brisk rate, so I poured the elbow noodles into it, added a splash of oil and a spoon of salt, and put the lid on, turning the heat down enough so it wouldn't boil over. I loved my pots. The lids were made of glass and metal, and the nonstick pots had lips on them. The lids fit down into the pan securely, and on the sides, the lids had a self straining capability.

I grated a mound of cheddar, added some gouda to give it a smoky taste, and took out a skillet. I placed it on the burner, turning the flame to medium. Adding a good dollop of butter, I stirred it with a whisk until it melted, then sifted in enough flour to make a roux. I paused to stir the noodles to keep them from sticking, then began to whisk in half-and-half to the roux.

As it bubbled up, I added the cheese, salt and lemon pepper, a little dried parsley, and half of a teaspoon of paprika. I drained the noodles, poured them into a casserole dish, stirred in the crab and then poured the cheese sauce over the top. After that, I added a layer of cracker crumbs and popped the casserole into the oven to bake.

I opened the bag of salad and poured it into a bowl, then diced a pint of cherry tomatoes and added those to the mix. I had bought a lemon streusel for dessert, so everything was about ready.

Right on time, the doorbell rang. I went to answer it.

Crystal was standing there, a large flower-power tote bag over her shoulder.

Where I was short and curvy, Crystal was tall and athletic. She was wearing a pair of distressed blue jeans and an oversized lavender turtleneck sweater. And, as a nod to the weather, she had stuffed herself into a parka.

Crystal's hair was ashen brown, and she kept it pulled back in a braid. It set off her deep blue eyes, and she looked like the quintessential country girl.

"I brought wine and chips for later," she said, holding up the tote bag.

I stood back so she could enter. "Dinner's almost ready. I made macaroni and cheese with crab, salad, and we have a lemon strudel for dessert."

She licked her lips. “I’m hungry, so I hope you made enough. You know I eat like a linebacker.”

“That’s probably because you work out more than anybody I know.” I tried to keep in shape enough to where I could do a day hike without wheezing, but Crystal had muscles.

“I love the gym. I love hiking. I’m amazed that I actually decided to open a coffee shop, because I always thought about being a physical trainer. But I like interacting with my customers, and I love coffee.” She shrugged off her coat, hanging it on the coat rack. Then, she carried her tote bag into the kitchen and pulled out a bottle of red wine, along with two bags of corn chips. She sniffed the air. “That smells incredible. What can I do to help?”

“Why don’t you get out the dishes and silverware, while I take the casserole out of the oven. We can eat in front of the television.”

We worked in silence for a few minutes, readying our dinner. Finally, we served ourselves and carried our plates into the living room, setting them on the table trays that my aunt kept around. As we settled on the sofa, ready to eat and watch a movie, Miss P. began to pace back and forth in front of us.

“No, mooch. Silly girl, I gave you your dinner,” I said.

“She’s so pretty,” Crystal said. “I remember when we were kids and you use to beg your aunts to let you get a cat.”

“Well I finally have one, and you know the funniest thing? Astraadoresher.” I paused, then said, “I don’t think my aunt wants me to move out. I think she likes having me here.”

“Do you think you might stay?” Crystal asked.

“You know, I’m considering it. I love having my own house, but since Dan died the house has been awfully empty. I wish we’d had more time together.”

“You tworeallyloved each other, didn’t you?” Crystal’s voice was gentle.

“Yeah,” I said, staring at my dinner. “Dan loved me forme. And I knew that he always would. No matter what I looked like, no matter if something happened where I got hurt or gained weight, or even aged naturally, he would be there.”

“That’s a keeper, for sure.”

“Dan was the type of man that I always dreamed of marrying.” I let out a long sigh. “I keep telling myself I should be grateful because I hadthat wonderful, immersive love that so many people dream about. But sometimes...” I stopped, not wanting to voice the next thought.

But Crystal could tell when I needed to get something out. “Go on. You know you can say anything to me.”

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I nodded. “Yeah, and thank you for that. It’s just... Sometimes I get so angry because he was stolen away from me. And it wasn’t an accident. I know I sound horrible, but the one comfort I have is that the stinking drunk who killed him, died in the accident too. He didn’t get away with it and he didn’t get a slap on the wrists. Karma won out this time. I feel vindicated.”

“You feel what you feel. I would have been angry, too. I’m surprised you didn’t sue his insurance company.”

“I did,” I said, looking over at her. “I got a large settlement, which I tucked away for the future. I haven’t touched it since I bought a new car, given he totaled Dan’s and mine was on its last legs. But I didn’t tell anyone. On one hand, it feels like blood money. On the other, I know I may need it some day. So, it’s there, as a safety net. I think Dan would have approved.” I shook my head, biting my lip. “All right, let’s switch away from melancholy subjects. What do you want to watch?”

Crystal knew when I needed to stop. She shrugged. “I’m good with whatever.”

“I think there’s a Hitchcock marathon on Mysteries Unlocked,” I said, flipping to that.

Both Crystal and I had been obsessed with thrillers and mysteries when we were teens, and we’d discovered Alfred Hitchcock. Sure enough, the Mysteries Unlocked channel was running a movie-marathon, and *Rope* was on—what I considered Hitchcock’s best.

The movie was commonly thought to be filmed in one continuous shot, stopping only

to change the film in the cameras. However, it was actually ten shots, edited so that it appeared to be one magical shot. Regardless, it was a fantastic movie based on a gruesome murder that had taken place in the early twenties, when a couple of arrogant college kids decided to try for the perfect murder, back in the early twenties.

As the movie sucked us in, I noticed the room was getting colder. Frowning, I paused the streaming service. “I’m going to check the thermostat. It’s feeling awfully cold in here.”

“I noticed that,” Crystal said. “I know it’s cold outside but I didn’t think the temperature was dropping that fast.”

The thermostat was on the kitchen wall. As I headed toward it, I walked through an icy patch where the temperature felt about ten degrees cooler.

I froze, looking around. One of the signs of a haunting was a cold spot—a place in the home where the temperature dropped for no obvious reason. I stood there, looking around. Nothing obvious jumped out at me, but the hairs on my neck were standing up and I felt like I was being watched.

“Crystal! Come here,” I said. My voice seemed to reverberate against the walls.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, entering the kitchen, but her voice dropped away and she let out a gasp, pointing.

I turned, following her direction. There, against the other side of the wall, was a floating mist. It boiled up from the floor, swirling in loops. The mist was a pale green color—pretty, but there was something dark about it that made me uneasy.

“What’s that?” Crystal asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said, but I had the feeling that it was very much alive. Or at least, sentient. “Maybe a ghost?”

“Are you sure?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s something else, but it’s not just some fog that got lost and wandered into the house, I can tell you that.” My alarms were screeching loud and clear—whatever this was, it wasn’t friendly.

“Do you think it’s one of the Unliving?” Crystal asked.

According to the spirit shamans, there were several types of dead. Most spirits could be categorized under one of those types. But I truly believed that there were other forms of entities that straddled the spirit world and other worlds—and those weren’t necessarily under control of the spirit shamans.

I slowly walked toward the fog, hands out, trying to get a feel for what it was. My entire body felt electrified. I glanced over at Crystal, shaking my head. “Not good,” I mouthed.

The mist began to take form, solidifying into a column that reminded me of a coiled snake. In fact, it made me think of a king cobra, rising up, ready to strike. I stopped outside of what I hoped was its range. As I faced it down, a hiss came from the doorway and I glanced back to see Miss P., her back arched. She hissed again and turned to run out of the room.

“What are you?” I asked.

The mist swayed back and forth, just like a snake, then it opened its mouth. Ready to leap should it attack, I braced myself.

“What are you?” I put force behind my words.

Again, it didn’t answer, but let out a long hiss that felt like wind passing through my hair.

“I don’t trust it,” Crystal said, her gaze glued on the creature.

“Neither do I, and I’m done asking questions,” I said. “Watch it, I’ll be right back. Yell if something happens.”

I eased away from it, dashing out of the kitchen and back to my room. I grabbed my dagger, and found my crystal necklace that amplified my powers and draped it over my head. Then, stopping to find my Binding Powder, I hurried back to the kitchen.

As I entered the room, Crystal backed away. I opened the jar of powder and tapped out a handful, then—dagger in one hand, powder in the other, I approached the apparition.

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“Whatever you are, it’s time to leave,” I said. I pointed the dagger at it.

“Creature unknown, invader of space,

I banish you forthwith from this place.

Be banned, be blocked, be banished, be gone,

From dawn till dusk, from dusk till dawn!”

I threw the Banishing Powder on it and carved a pentacle through the air, then focused all my energy on the mist.

The “snake” let out a loud shriek as the powder hit it, then began to lose its form, returning to mist in a roiling cloud. A bright flash overhead formed on the ceiling as the column of mist began to stream out of the kitchen, and then...it was gone and the portal on the ceiling vanished.

“Fucking hell,” I said. “What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know,” Crystal said, returning to the kitchen. “I thought your aunt warded her house.”

“She does. And she’s a powerful witch. For whatever that thing was to gain access... Either something managed to punch a hole through the wards, or it was stronger than she was. I have no idea what it was. It felt like a spirit, but I’ve never seen anything quite like it.” I shivered. “Come on, help me build a patch in the wards. I don’t want

to chance it breaking through again. Then, I suppose we'd better check all of her wards."

"Let me look at it," Crystal said. "I'm good with protection magic. I use it in my cooking a lot." She pulled a chair beneath where the portal had opened up and stepped up on it. She put her hands on the ceiling and closed her eyes. After a moment, she caught her breath and her eyes flew open.

"Crap, the wards are there, all right, but whatever that was literally punched a hole through them. It's strong, that I can tell you, because Astra's wards are strong enough to keep out almost anything," Crystal said.

"What do we need to fix it?" I asked.

"I'll need a bottle of War Oil, a small paint brush, and your help. We need to weave the strands of the wards back together and I think if we both work on it, the result will be stronger."

Crystal ran her hands over the area where the portal was and I could suddenly see the strands of energy. She had a gift for exposing magic to others, though neither of us knew where it had come from. By the Aseer's evaluation, she was mostly a kitchen witch, and kitchen witches were usually oriented toward creating magic through food, scent, and drink.

"I'll be back." I headed toward my aunt's ritual room. As I opened the door, it was like being hit with a ton of bricks—the energy was so strong.

I poked through the bottles on the shelves and found her War Oil. Not sure where to find a paint brush, I grabbed one of my clean makeup brushes, and then headed back to the kitchen. Crystal had dragged a tall console table below the area where the wards were broken, then placed two dining room chairs atop it.

“We sit up there?” I asked, staring at the set up with trepidation.

“Yeah. It’s easier than trying to stand on a chair.” She clambered up without a problem, then reached down to give me a hand. I dragged over the stepstool, stood on that, and then scrambled up beside her.

Once atop the table, I could sense the broken wards much easier. If you pictured a grid, formed of triangular pieces to create a dome—like a geodesic dome—over the house, and then imagined that one of those triangles had been broken, it was easier to envision.

Immediately, I understood what she wanted to do. We’d weave the ends back together, then seal it with the War Oil. I took my seat and she took hers. We’d played with energy together more times than I could remember. This wouldn’t be any different, except that our focus was on re-weaving strands of energy together, rather than creating new ones.

“All right, I see what we have to do,” I said. I set the War oil on the table, near my feet, along with the paint brush.

Crystal held out her hands, then took hold of the broken strands of energy on her side. I reached up and cautiously grasped the strands on my side of the hole. The magical threads tingled in my hands, spreading through my body. I closed my eyes and examined the pattern that my aunt had used.

“Can you see how she originally wove them?” I asked.

“Yes, I do. Crossing knots, in a web-like pattern. Ready?”

“Let’s go.” I began to braid the strands, trying to match my aunt’s pattern, weaving them over and under one another, tying off knots here and there, re-energizing the

broken ends. Crystal was doing the same on her side, and as we worked in unison, we finally met in the middle. I touched my strands to hers and they took, merging and blending, forming the last of the patch. Then, as she kept hold of the patch, I retrieved the War oil and opened it. I dipped the paint brush in, and then began to coat the strands with the magical oil, infusing it into the patch to seal it and strengthen it. Another moment and we were done.

I reached for her hands and she placed them in mine.

“Magic dark, magic bright, magic of the night and stars,

Weave a net, weave a light, weave a web of strength and war,

Those unwelcome find no place, those unwelcome leave this space,

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Those who would seek to invade, Find no space to betray.

By the powers of this spell, those unwelcome, we strike and repel.”

As the energy of the spell sealed over the portal, the uneasiness began to dissipate. I took another breath, then slumped back in my chair, exhausted. Working magic wasn’t for the weak—it took laser focus and strength, and required patience and the willingness to try and fail over and over.

“Well, it’s repaired,” I said. “Whatever that thing was, I don’t think it can get back in. At least not now.”

“I didn’t expect to be doing magic tonight,” Crystal said. “But then again, nothing is ever quite what it seems, is it?”

I laughed, feeling certain that we were protected for now. “No, but I want to know what that thing was—and what it was doing in my aunt’s house.”

As we went back to our TV show, my thoughts kept returning to the mist, and what it could possibly mean. I needed to ask my aunt if this had happened before—and if not—then we needed to figure out what the hell was going on.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Doyou want me to spend the night?” Crystal asked.

“Given what just happened, I’m going to take you up on that offer,” I said. I wasn’t

keen on spending the night by myself.

My nightgowns were more like shirts on Crystal, given how short I was compared to her, but I found one of my aunt's robes for her. I grabbed a bag of Oreos and we settled in my bed—which was king size—and Miss P. joined us.

“Kind of like old times, isn't it?” I asked.

“We haven't had a sleepover since we were kids.” Crystal leaned back against the headboard. “You don't mind crumbs in the bed?”

“Oreos are worth it. What time do you need to get up?” I asked.

“Tomorrow's Friday, so eight-thirty. I don't have to be at work until ten, since Karina's opening tomorrow.”

“Karina?” I had met the barista. She was good at her job but seemed awfully young. Though now, at forty-three, anybody under twenty seemed young to me.

“Yeah, I'm training her to be my assistant manager,” Crystal said, grinning. “She's a good worker, she has a five-year old and needs a steady job, and I could use someone to take over now and then. I haven't had a real vacation in years.”

I let out a sigh. “She has a five year old? How old is Karina? I thought she was twenty.”

“Twenty-one. She's somehow managed to make it on her own with a young child and I can't overlook that. Her parents kicked her out when they found out she was pregnant, and she moved in with her boyfriend. He promptly cheated on her, then dumped her with nothing. The scumbag vanished, leaving her without any child support.”

“Fucking hell. Why do men have to do that? Creep knocks her up and then disappears. I hate that. Deadbeat dads don’t deserve to be fathers.” I frowned. “Good for you, for giving her a chance.”

Crystal bent her knees and wrapped her arms around them.

“Two years ago, on the day she asked for an application, she promised me that she’d prove herself. I gave her a chance, and she’s more than earned the promotion. She needs the extra money, I know that. I also hire her to work on my yard, for the same reason. She’s good with growing things. Anyway, so on Mondays and Fridays, I let her open up and organize things. In about a month, I’ll start letting her run the shop at least one day a week, to give myself a break.”

I yawned. “Hand me one of those cookies.” As I twisted it open and scraped the cream off with my teeth, Miss P. stretched out on her back. “I think we fixed the grid. Miss P. wouldn’t be rolling around like that if the entity was still here.”

I turned on the TV in my room and we snuggled under the covers to eat cookies and watch a late night movie about an beauty queen who hadn’t aged well—Sunset Boulevard. Crystal and I loved old movies and the glamour girls that had populated them. Finally, with Gloria Swanson quoting one of her most famous lines, “All right, Mr. DeMille, I’m ready for my close-up,” we turned off the TV and fell asleep, tired out from the evening.

Morning came with slightly warmer temperatures. It was thirty-two, right at freezing. With snow expected this weekend, temps were going to still be chilly but we weren’t expecting sub-freezing weather the next few days.

Crystal and I woke up to the alarm.

She quickly dressed. “I’d better go home, take a shower, and change. Thanks for the

movies and food.”

“Thanks for staying. Whatever that thing was really unnerved me last night. I’m going to do some research and see if I can figure out what might be going on. I don’t know if the entity was wandering past and noticed the hole in the grid, or if it deliberately broke through. Whatever the case, I’m not too keen on chancing a repeat. I need to figure out if the hole in the grid was there before it came by, or after.” I frowned. “I’d better call Astra and talk to her.”

“Good idea. I’ll see you later. I’m glad I could help,” Crystal said, waving as she shouldered her bag and headed for her car.

I watched as she pulled out of the driveway, then took a shower and fixed my makeup. As I dressed, Miss P. roamed around my feet, meowing. I followed her into the kitchen and fed her, hoping that was all she was asking for. Before I left for work, I took a walk around the house, feeling out the protection grid to make certain it was intact.

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Once satisfied everything felt intact, I grabbed my phone and purse, and headed for the car. I'd buy my breakfast at Crystal's.

Midnight Point was bustling by the time I got to the shop. Shoppers were out in full force, surprising given January usually involved cutting back to pay the holiday bills that always came in around this time.

As I stepped out of my car, I noticed that someone had shoveled the walkway in front of my shop. A shovel sat propped next to Kevin's bridal salon, so I peeked in to thank him.

"Hey, whoever shoveled my walkway, thanks! I appreciate it," I said. The shop was still empty, except for Devon, who was one of the consultants.

She winked at me. "No problem. I had to do ours, so I figured I might as well help you out." She paused, then added, "Maisy, can I ask you something?"

"Sure," I said, coming fully into the shop. It was too cold to stand at the open door. "What is it?"

"I wondered if you offer readings on relationships? I have an issue I need advice on. If you don't, I'd still appreciate your input, given you specialize in love and romance." She sounded worried.

I stifled a laugh. I didn't realize people thought of me as a romance expert, even though I supposed I was. Kind of. "Of course, I'll try to help. I can't guarantee an answer, but we can delve into it." I pulled out my mini-planner. "When do you want

to come in?”

“Can I come over this afternoon?” she asked.

“Sure. When do you have a break?”

“I get off work at 2:30, so how about then?” By the way Devon was fidgeting, I could tell that she was nervous.

“I can do that. I’ll pencil you in. My rates are—” I always felt awkward about reminding people that this was part of my job, that I wasn’t a vending machine for free psychic advice, but Devon put me at ease.

“I’m not worried—whatever they are, I can cover them,” she said. “I’ll see you at 2:30,” she added, turning toward the door as a young woman entered the shop. “I’ve got a client so...”

“I’ll see you then,” I said, heading out the door, past Devon’s client. She looked was both excited and worried. No doubt, she was hoping that she’d find her perfect wedding dress, but afraid that she wouldn’t.

Back at my shop, I dropped off my tote bag, then—carrying my wallet—headed to the Mocha Express. The rush had died down and I had to wait a moment before Karina could take my order. Crystal was nowhere in sight. She was probably in the back, taking care of business.

“Triple peppermint mocha, with a sausage and cheese muffin. Also, add a maple bar to that, please,” I said, handing her a ten and a five. “Keep the change.”

“Sure thing.” Karina adeptly pulled three shots of espresso for my mocha, then heated a sausage muffin. She bagged it separately from the maple bar, so the glaze wouldn’t

melt, then handed me the cup and the bags.

I gave her a little wave, then returned to my shop. As I settled in behind the counter, I turned on my computer to find that I had several emails from several would-be clients. I noted down their names and numbers in a spread sheet, then sent out the preliminary information—my rates, what to expect, and what the next steps were if they were interested in proceeding.

After that, I ate my breakfast, then put in a call to Astra.

“Hey, kiddo, how are you doing?” Astra sounded positively joyful.

“I’m okay. You sound like you’re enjoying yourself.”

“I am. Teran and I are having as much fun as we can, given her back. I plan on staying for a few more days, then I’ll be home.”

I sighed. “Something happened last night that I need your input on. You know the protection grid around the house?”

Astra’s voice dropped. “Yes. What about it?”

“Either there was already a hole in it, or something punched through. Crystal was over for dinner, and we ended up coping with a visitor.” I told her about the mist-snake. “We got rid of it, but I’d like to know what it was and how it got in.”

Astra paused for a moment. Then, she said, “What happened directly before then?”

“We were just watching a movie. We ate dinner, but that shouldn’t have caused anything to happen.” I frowned. The more I thought about it, the more I thought that it had to be random. Nothing else would make sense.

“I’ll talk to January. The company she works for—Conjure Ink—has a database of beasties. They specialize in hunting down freakshow things. If anybody’s heard of something like this, she should be able to find out. But remember, we reinforced those wards a month ago. You helped.”

“I know. So they should have been strong as steel.”

“Stronger. Neither you nor I are slouches in the magical department. I’ll talk to January, but this worries me. That something was strong enough to punch a hole in our wards and actually did, and that it threatened you... No, we shouldn’t take it lightly. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

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“Don’t ditch Teran while she needs you,” I said.

“Tell you what. I’ll call my friend, Ona Sera. She’s one of the Strega, and they deal with this sort of crap all the time. I’ll set up a meeting. She can sense all sorts of things that live on the astral and etheric planes. It sounds to me like this wasn’t a ghost or spirit, but some sort of creature.” Astra sighed. “Teran went to the chiropractor yesterday, and she’s better today. I’ll see how things go by tonight.”

“Please, stay with her as long as she needs,” I said, even though I wished that she could come home. Astra made me feel safe in a way few other people did, probably because she had raised me for most of my life.

“Don’t worry, honey,” she said. “Everything will be all right. Talk to you later.”

I brought up the matchmaker’s database again and began searching on male star witches. There were five listed in the database for the entire peninsula. I added Moonshadow Bay to the search perimeters, and that brought the total to six.

I then pulled up a search engine and typed in Starlight Williams’s name, and the words “Whisper Hollow.” A number of links came up. Starlight Williams was known as the socialite over there, and she could make or break your reputation. I jotted down her phone number and address, and managed to find an email address for her. I couldn’t very well email her asking her if she knew any male star witches looking for love—that would be weird. But having her information might prove helpful down the line.

I sorted through the six male star witches in the database, taking a closer look at their

profiles. Three automatically went on the no-go list. The first was too young, the second was absolutely dying to have kids. The next three, I didn't get any pings on—my mental alarms were silent. They might work out, but chances are they wouldn't. I'd been wrong before, though those times were few and far between.

One, however, caught my eye. His name was Jamison Wanderson, and he lived in Port Ludlow, eighteen miles from Port Townsend. He was thirty-two, in Brenda's age range, and he was five-nine and looked reasonably fit. I read his bio. He worked at home as a remote software tester, had two dogs and a cat, and he loved reading, hiking, and cooking.

The only red flag I could see was that he'd been on the database for over a year, and his profile had been tapped by a couple matchmakers over that time. I looked at the hidden notes.

There was a section for any matchmaker to leave a note about someone they actually tried to match. None of the clients could see it, if they somehow managed to break into the app, but those of us of us marriage brokers—to use a euphemism—who signed up for the service could access the section. I logged in, looking for any notes.

There was one note, from some matchmaker named Kindra, who said that he was too quiet and sedate for her client. Jamison didn't seem to have much of an adventurer inside him. That didn't really trigger off alarms so I jotted down his information.

"Well, he sounds pleasant enough," I said. "I might as well take a flier on him." I called Brenda. She answered first thing.

"Hey Brenda, this is Maisy. I have a potential date for you, and I was wondering if this was a good time to run his information by you." I'd tell her about him, then contact him and—if he was interested—set up a meeting.

Brenda sounded exhausted. “Sure. But, before you start—I had another dream. It was about you. I wasn’t in it, this time. I dreamed that you were home—though I don’t know what your home looks like. Anyway, I dreamed that something was following you, and you went to sleep and it attacked you. I woke up and, once again, felt like something was watching me.”

One dream could be explained away as a one-off. Two dreams, in such a short time? Something had to be up.

“Would you like me to come over and examine your house? I can tell you about your possible date at the same time,” I said.

“Sure. I can’t tonight, but tomorrow I’ll be home in the afternoon. One o’clock all right?”

“One o’clock. And you live at...” I read her address off her file folder.

“Yes, that’s right. I’ll see you at one tomorrow,” Brenda said.

I sat back, staring at my phone. Her dreams worried me. Even more so the fact that, in the second, I was the target. But I tried to shake off the feeling and I prepared myself for my reading with Devon.

At two-thirty, Devon appeared. She settled in at the table.

“Welcome to Clearwater Street, by the way. Your shop is so pretty,” she said, looking around. “Kevin said you used to live in Midnight Point?”

I nodded. “Yes. I left after I turned eighteen. I backpacked through Europe, then moved to Seattle and lived there until two months ago. Now, I’m back.” I gave her a bright smile. “You said you have a relationship question?”

She worried her lip. “Yeah. I think I’ve met someone who I knew in a past life. The chemistry was instantaneous. Now, I’m trying to walk away, but I can’t seem to let go.” She paused, then said, “You won’t tell anybody what I’m about to say, will you?”

I gave her a firm nod. “Right. If you ask, it’s confidential. What is it, Devon?”

“He makes me feel like crap about myself, but I can’t stay away from him. He won’t leave me alone and I just...I can’t walk away. I keep telling Marcus it’s over, but he always manages to draw me back in. I want to know why. Am I under a spell? Is it past life?” She hung her head, blushing. “I feel like such a bad person.”

I bit my tongue. I didn’t like abusers, and it sounded like Marcus was—at the least—psychologically abusive. But I didn’t want her to feel like I was judging her, because it was clear she needed help and I didn’t want to drive her away.

I held the cards, focusing on them. After a moment, I could see the nexus point over the cards. I reached out, opening the pathway for Devon to feed her question into them. The number five appeared, and I was ready.

Then, I handed them to Devon. “Shuffle them five times, please. Focus on your question, and tell me the exact way you phrased it in your mind, so I read the answer correctly.”

She took a deep breath and shuffled them five times, deftly interweaving the cards. She finished, then handed them back to me. I knocked three times on the back of them, then spread them out, curious to see what would come up.

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The fourteen-card spread was telling.

“Oh dear...” I didn’t like what I saw. The eight of cups, the seven of cups, the prince of cups, the two of cups reversed, the five of swords, the Tower...

“What?” she said, leaning forward.

I took a deep breath, trying to ascertain whether she was the type of person who preferred her advice clear and blunt, or whether I should cushion it. I looked into her eyes and saw hope, but I also saw a clarity I seldom found in clients.

“He’s a psychic vampire, and he has you hooked,” I said. “I’m so sorry, but everything here tells me that he’s siphoning energy off of you. And when you move away, he’s got you glamourised to return to his side.”

Devon let out a long breath and touched her neck. “You mean, he’s an actual vampire?”

“Yes, in the sense that he feeds off your energy, though...” I leaned in, looking at her neck. “I don’t think he’s one of the traditional vampires, but I’m not entirely sure what he is. You have to ward against him. But first, we have to break the attachment, or he’ll continue to drain you until you have nothing left. He feeds on luck, too.” I found myself wanting to push her—to urge her to break this today. Something big was coming her way via this creep, and it wasn’t good.

She held my gaze for a moment. “There’s more, isn’t there?”

I nodded. “Yes, see the Tower? This indicates a shower of destruction in your life. You need to break this off now, Devon. And you need to ward up—to protect yourself. I assume he knows where you live?”

“Yes,” she said, her voice hesitant.

I wanted to urge her to move, but the truth was, if he lived here, he’d find her eventually. I thought about it for a moment. “All right, here’s what I want you to do. Rather than go home tonight, I want you to check into a hotel and don’t tell anybody about it. Meanwhile, I’m going to do some research and consult a friend. Give me Marcus’s address. Meanwhile, I’m going to call a friend over so we can figure out what to do. Marcus has planted cords into your third chakra and your sixth chakra.”

When someone corded into you, they hooked your energy and were able to draw off or to feed energy into you. Usually, cords were problematic. Some were fine—the ones our pets connected to us through, or the ones our loved ones connected to us that were more loving than draining. But most people who corded were looking for something—sympathy, help, or even themisery loves companymindset. And then, there were the psychic vampires, seeking life force and energy.

“Do you have any pets at home?” I asked. I didn’t want to leave them to his wrath, once he figured out she had vanished.

Devon shook her head. “No, I don’t.” She sighed. “I feel overwhelmed.”

“I know you do,” I said. “But your life depends on listening to me, and I’m not exaggerating. His energy is swirling around you right now. When we break that link, he’s going to be furious.” I sighed, sitting back in my chair. I never intended to be doing something like this, but Devon needed me. If Astra was home, she could help. But since she wasn’t, I’d have to handle this myself.

Devon leaned her elbows on the desk and buried her face in her hands. “I thought it was all too strange, but I love him,” she said, looking up, tears streaming down her face.

“I know you do, but honey...he doesn’t love you. He’s feeding off of you.” I thought about it for a moment, then decided to ask Crystal for her ideas. “I’m calling in backup.”

Devon nodded as I texted Crystal and asked her to come over. I wasn’t sure what I planned on doing about Marcus, but I had to do something. And with that, I decided to text Astra, too, asking her to come home as soon as possible.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Crystal popped through the door in less than five minutes. I turned the sign to ‘closed’ and motioned for her to sit next to Devon.

“We have a situation, and you were the only one I could think of, besides Astra.”

I explained to Crystal what was going on with Devon.

“We need to find her a safe place to stay. I’m going to call my aunt and ask her if she can come home early. She said that Teran went to the chiropractor, and while that’s not a cure, it may have helped enough to where Astra can get free. If there is a psychic vampire in town preying on women, then we need to do something about it.”

Crystal frowned. She glanced at Devon, and then said, “Honestly? I wouldn’t suggest going to a hotel. For one thing, it’s too easy to figure out where someone is in this town. We don’t have too many hotels, and it wouldn’t take long to find out where Devon was staying. I do have another idea, though. I know the coordinator at the Midnight Point Women’s Shelter. They’re very low-key, and I can ask her if they

have an open bed, so that Devon can stay there and safety. They have plenty of wards, and a few security guards on site.”

“Is he reallythatdangerous?” Devon asked.

I nodded. “From what I saw in the cards, he won’t hesitate to drain you dry, and that’s a death sentence. And then, he’ll go find his next mark. Psychic vamps live off of life force.”

“Really? What about food?” Devon’s eyes grew wide.

Crystal answered her. “Just like typical vampires need blood to exist, psychic vampires need life force to exist. No matter how much food he eats, it can only maintain him to a marginal degree. Psychic vampires usually don’t drain their prey, unless they’re in great need. They tend to keep them in a half-life state, exhausted and burned out.”

“I feel tired all the time,” Devon said.

“In some cases, that energy drain can be mistaken for something like fibromyalgia, or chronic fatigue. I’m not saying there aren’t any physical markers for those cases. There are plenty of people who actually have those conditions. But the symptoms of being under attack from a psychic vampire can easily mimic them. If you continue on with him, it won’t be long before you’ll be dragging through the day, barely able to handle your work.”

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Crystal put in a call to her friend, and then — in a few minutes — turned back to us. “There’s a free bed at the shelter. The key is to get you over there without being noticed. I’m not going to tell you where it is, because we don’t want — what’s his name? Your attacker?”

Devon cleared her throat. “Marcus. His name is Marcus.”

“We don’t want Marcus to know where you are. And until you’re safe there, we don’t want him knowing where a bunch of...Well, what are essentially sitting ducks...are. Psychic vampires are charismatic as hell. They can charm info out of just about anybody.”

“Crystal is right,” I said. “Where is he now? Do you know?”

“He should be at work. He’s a customer service rep for Justine’s Employment Service. That’s how we met. I was looking for a job, and he matched me with Ever After.”

I glanced at Crystal. “Well, that’s a good place for him to work if he’s looking for victims. With unemployment so rampant, he’ll have a steady supply of victims who are too desperate to notice him infiltrating their lives. And he would see them week after week.”

“That’s true,” Crystal said. “All right, now we have to figure out how to get Devon to the shelter. We can’t chance that he might show up next door in the next hour.”

“While you think about that,” I said, “I’m going to call my aunt.” I put in a call to

Astra and a moment later she answered.

“Is anything wrong? I haven’t had a chance to call Ona Sera yet.”

“Auntie, I know I said not to worry about coming home early, but if there’s a chance you can, it would be helpful. We have another problem, and this time it doesn’t involve me, but it involves someone I know.” I quickly ran down the situation. “We could use your guidance.”

“Teran is feeling better, and January is home from her trip. She and Killian said that Teran can stay with them until she’s better. They have plenty of room. I’ll pack up and come home this afternoon. I’ll text you once I’m on the road.”

As I hung up and turned back to Crystal in Devon, I said, “the cavalry is on the way.”

An alley ran behind our line of shops, so Crystal decided she would pull up to the back door of Married At First Bite. That way we could sneak Devon into her car. She could hide in the backseat with a coat thrown over her. As she went to get her car, I turned back to Devon.

“I’ll tell Kevin that you can’t come in for a day or two. I’ll make sure he understands it’s an emergency. And I’ll also warn him not to say anything if asked. Meanwhile, the moment my aunt gets home, we’ll get to work on what to do about Marcus.” I folded the cards, shaking my head. “Don’t ever make the mistake of thinking he’s out for your best interests. He’s dangerous, Devon. And I’d rather see you stay alive.”

Devon paled, looking sick to her stomach. I offered her a bottle of sparkling water and she sipped on it. A moment later I got a text from Crystal that she was waiting out back. Making sure no one was watching us from the front window, I escorted Devon back to the break room, where the door to the alley was.

Crystal opened the back door. She had a thin blanket in there. Devon hurried into the back seat and laid down, with Crystal covering her up with the blanket. She shut the door, and turned back to me.

“I’ll let you know when I’ve dropped Devon off at the shelter. Ping me when your aunt gets home. Psychic vampires are far more dangerous than traditional vampires,” she said. “Their natural predators. At least the traditional vampire has been human at one time, and sometimes they retain some of their humanity.”

“I’ll text you. Meanwhile, I’m going to do some research on this guy and see if I can find anything on the net. Maybe I’ll call Stuart and ask him if he has any record.”

“Stuart?”

“Didn’t I tell you? I met Stuart Waterline at the supermarket. We haven’t seen each other in years. And now that he’s the sheriff, well, he can be a valuable contact.” I shut the door as Crystal slid behind the wheel, and waved to her as she drove off. Then, shivering as a gust of wind blew past, I headed back inside.

A few moments later, I went next door, managing to catch Kevin between clients.

“Kevin, are we alone?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Two of my consultants have clients right now. Why?”

“Can you come over to my shop for a moment? It’s important.”

A quizzical look on his face, he followed me out the door and back to my shop. When we were inside, I locked the door and turned back to him. “Devon’s not going to be at work for a few days. At least, I hope it won’t be longer than that.”

“What’s going on?” He asked. “Is she okay?”

“This is important. Promise me that you won’t say a word.”

One look at my face and he sobered. “What’s going on, Maisy?”

“Her boyfriend is a psychic vampire. My aunt’s coming home early so that we can try and do something about him. He’s got his cords into Devon, and we’re trying to remove them as best as we can. Until then, she needs to stay someplace safe and warded against his eyes. Don’t ask me where she is, because I can’t tell you.”

“Psychic vampire?” He sat down with a thud. “I didn’t know we had any in town. At least, if you’re talking about —”

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“I’m talking about the real deal. This isn’t some guy who’s leeching off of her. I’m talking full out psychic vampire whose draining her dry. Don’t tell anybody anything if they ask about her. You don’t know where she is, you don’t know why she left, all you know is that she hasn’t been into work. Can you do that?”

“Of course I can,” he said. “You can count on me. And Devon doesn’t have to worry about her job. It’s here when this is over.” He glanced at his watch. “I’d better get back, I have a client coming in in 20 minutes. And we are talking bridezilla here. I’m not looking forward to this.” He waved and left my shop.

Astra texted me. I’m catching the 4 o’clock ferry. I’ll be home at about four forty-five.

I’ll see you then.”

I glanced at the clock. It was quarter to four. I closed up early and decided to head home. Auntie had her car, so she wouldn’t need me to pick her up at the dock. But as I got into my car, a thought occurred to me. I pulled out my phone and searched on directions to Justine’s Employment Service. It wasn’t far from here, on Ferry Street. Deciding on a quick drive-by, I headed out.

Ferry Street led from the center of town all the way down to the shore. Not only were the docks for the ferry there, but running to one side of the ferry was Shorestar Park, a long and narrow strip that was at least 20 acres. Behind the park was a thickly wooded copse at the base of one of the island’s hills. With nature trails, and a self-guided estuary tour, Shorestar Park was a peaceful place to walk or sit while you were thinking. It had a magical feel to it, one that was hard to ignore. Sometimes it could feel dark and menacing—like you might turn the corner and meet a troll.

I parked in the lot next door. The parking lot served both the ferry and the park. I buttoned my jacket, then headed down the trailhead, through the snow shower, toward the shore. The beach—the merging of water and earth—seemed to be the best place to clear my thoughts.

There were few people in the park today, given how cold it was, and I found myself slowing down, walking next to the guardrail that kept hikers from dropping over the edge down to the beach, about a ten foot drop. Every so often there was a gate, with a staircase leading down to the shore. I took the first one, walking out on the sand as I stared at the rolling water.

The Strait of Juan de Fuca fed into the Salish sea, and the wind kept up a perpetual moaning. I walked over to one of the large driftwood logs that sat on the shore. It had been chained, embedded in cement buried deep in the sand.

People who weren't from our area didn't understand how dangerous these driftwood logs could be. Formed from tall timber that crashed into the ocean, they'd been stripped bare of bark, and weathered as they bounced through the waters. Periodically the logs would wash up on shore. If you were in the way when timber-laden tides came in, you could easily be pinned or knocked down and dragged under. But the logs made for good benches, and so the city would cement them down so they wouldn't float away in the high tide. I sat on the nearest one, staring out at the rolling waters.

The waters on the Pacific coast were icy, seldom temperate for swimming, even in summer. But they were a goldmine of seaweed forests and fish and crabs. As the wind caught my hair, tossing it around my shoulders, I turned my face to the ocean, and closed my eyes.

I needed to do this more often. It helped me ground, and focus on what I needed to think about. I leaned back, resting my hands on the log behind me. It was at least five

feet in diameter, and here and there I could see sand fleas hopping around. I let out a long breath, trying to clear some of my tension with the breeze.

Sure enough, a few moments later my mind felt clearer, and I felt calmer. “Well, at least life here isn’t going to be boring,” I said to myself.

You can say that again.

I jumped. The voice felt like it was coming from beside me, but no one was there. I reached out, trying to feel whether a ghost was near me, but I couldn’t sense anything. Maybe it was a guide, or maybe it was simply my inner self.

“I’m not sure what to do about Devon,” I said. “Or even Brenda. This isn’t working out the way that I hoped it would. I thought I come back home, open my business, and be a heroine for finding so many people there matches. Come to find out, I can’t even find a simple star witch for my first client.”

Maybe you’re looking in the wrong place.

I jumped again. Now I really did want to know who was nearby, because that wasn’t me thinking—I could tell that much. And while I wasn’t proficient with death magic, I was used to ghosts and spirits. And this didn’t feel like either one.

“Who are you? What are you doing here? Why don’t you show yourself?”

Again, there was no answer.

I stood, and began to walk along the water’s edge, keeping my eyes on the rolling waves so a rogue surge didn’t catch me up and drag me away. The rip tides were dangerous, and the undertow, deep. If I happened to get knocked down, I might not make it back to my feet in time to keep from being swept out to sea. I was a proficient

swimmer, but with riptides that didn't matter all that much. People died in them.

I picked up a rock, rubbing my fingers over the smooth surface, and tossed it out into the ocean. It skipped across the water before sinking.

Do you ever ask yourself why you really came home?

I let out a sigh. Whoever it was, they were determined to make me think. "I came home because my house burned down."

Are you sure?

"Of course I'm sure," I said. But inside, something stirred. Had I really come home because of that? I wasn't entirely sure, now that I thought of it.

For a long time, I had been restless. Ever since Dan died, everything had changed. Even my job. Of course I had been unhappy without him, missing him greatly, but when I really thought about it, I sensed there was more to it than that. I had felt adrift, without a real purpose. Oh, I loved matchmaking, but it didn't feel like enough. I didn't feel like I was making that much of a difference in the world.

"So, if I came back for reason, can you tell me what it is?" I waited.

The wind ruffled through my hair, as the waves crashed against the shore. The frothy whitecaps inched higher up the beach each time they rolled in. The tide was coming in, and soon the driftwood log I had been sitting on would be covered. The water would go right up to the cliff, leaving no sign of the shore. I decided that it might be time to turn back.

As I headed back to the staircase leading up to the walkway, I noticed signs on the beach warning against loitering during high tide. In fact, the tide tables were posted

every 10 feet or so near the cliff, on waterproof signs. I glanced at one. High tide would crest in about two hours, so I sat on the steps, watching as the waters inched in.

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The Pacific was a wild ocean, she was, and I could feel her energy as I sat there, watching her froth and spit as her waves rolled past. My matchmaking magic and love magic connected me to the ocean. To all water, actually, for the element represented emotion and the hidden depths of the psyche. While I wasn't a water witch, my energies were perhaps most similar when it came to the elements.

Seek inside your heart, ask yourself why you're here. Again the voice whispered in my ear. This time, it took on a distinctly female since, low and sultry — the voice of seduction.

A thought crossed my mind, but it seemed ridiculous at first thought. Still...

“Are you Aphrodite? Are you speaking to me?”

A faint hint of laughter peeled in the wind, almost delighted, and then it faded away. A cold mist hit me, seeping through the layers of my coat. The skies were glistening silver as the snowfall thickened. When I turned back to the ocean, she had become tumultuous, rolling dark waves that rushed toward the shore. I darted up the stairs as the first wave of breakers hit the cliff and began to rise.

Finally, I was standing on the trail again, leaning on the railing as I looked down at the waters swirling beneath me. It was hard to imagine there was a beach down there, and that I had been sitting on a log an hour before.

I glanced up at the sky, shivering as a bright flash jumped from cloud to cloud and a roll of thunder echoed through the air.

Thunder snow, I thought.

The hairs on my neck stood on end as the icy hot flash of lightning seared against the snowflakes. Electricity and water didn't mix well, and so I turned, jogging back to the parking lot and to my car.

I reached the lot and turned toward the water once more. For a moment I thought I could see elementals playing in the waves, rising up to clash against each other, or perhaps they were playing chase or tag. Shivering, I slipped in my car and slammed the door, then turned on the heat. As I pulled away from the parking, I glanced at the clock. It was almost time for my aunt to arrive. I headed home, longing to get out of the wild weather, back to someplace safe and secure.

CHAPTER NINE

By the time Astra arrived home, I was settled at the table with a cup of hot cocoa and some cookies. I was still shaken by my experience at the beach. I had a feeling it was Aphrodite talking to me, but even though I honored her and occasionally called on her for spell work, I had never had direct dealings with her. So why would she push me with those questions? And if I hadn't come back to Midnight Point because I wasn't sure where else to go, then why was I here?

Miss P. jumped up on the table, letting out a long purr. I pushed aside my plate of cookies and pulled her to me, burying my head in her fur. She smelled warm and comforting and safe, and as I held her against me, she purred and let out little squeaks.

"You're such good medicine for when I need reassurance," I said. I sat back and stared at her. She gazed into my eyes and gave me a slow blink, and I returned it. In cat language, it meant I love you and I feel safe with you.

I took a sip of my cocoa, wiping the whipped cream off my lips.

The front door opened. "I'm home," Astra called. "Are you here?"

"I'm in the kitchen," I shouted back.

A moment later, she joined me. "How are you doing, my dear?" She wrapped her arms around me from the back, squeezing me tightly, and placed a kiss on my cheek.

"That cocoa smells good. Is there more?"

I nodded. "In the pan. You may have to heat it up if you want superhot."

Astra heated up the cocoa and carried it over to the table. Dahlia came bouncing into the kitchen, yapping her head off. Miss P jumped down, giving her side eye. The two bounced away together, racing back into the living room.

"I swear, they act like best friends who haven't seen each other for years," Astra said.

"Yeah, it sure seems that way. So...So much as happened in the past couple days it's hard to keep track."

"Why don't you start from the beginning?"

I nodded, thinking back. I told her about Brenda and her dreams, the snake creature, and about Devon's predicament. After that, I told her what happened with me down at the beach.

"Well, it seems like you've been busy while I've been gone. Let's take these things one at time. First, from what you say you heard at the beach, I think you need to meditate and ask Aphrodite if she's trying to contact you. It could be a spirit guide, or

it could be your own subconscious talking to you. Regardless, it sounds like you have issues to think through.”

I nodded. “That’s what I was thinking. I’ll do a ritual tonight and meditate on it.”

“As far as the snake creature, I asked January to text me if she had any information. So far she’s come up with nothing. I also called Ona Sera, but she’s on vacation, her husband says. So she won’t be available for another week. I’ll check the wards tonight, and reinforce the patch that you and Crystal created.”

“What about Brenda’s dreams?”

“There’s something to them. I can’t tell you what, but I can sense it. Now, with regards to your friend Devon. Psychic vampires are extremely dangerous. Let me talk to Nightshade, the high priestess of the Dark Moon Society, and see what I can find out. Meanwhile, it sounds like the women shelter’s the best place for her.”

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“If it is a psychic vampire, like I think it is, what can we do about it?”

“I’ll have to ask Nightshade. We cannot allow someone like that to stay in Midnight Point. Unlike traditional vampires, psychic vampires very seldom conform the rules. They’re chaotic, and they usually like to create even more chaos around them. In fact, I believe a number of them belong to the Covenant of Chaos, and that makes them even more deadly.” Astra held her hand out for a cookie.

I handed her one. “It’s good to have you back. Even though you were only gone for a couple of days, I missed you.”

“I missed you, too, hon. I’m glad January’s back, though. I don’t think Teran should be on her own for the time being.”

“How did she wrench her back?” I asked.

“That’s a good question. I gather she was trying to pull fifty-gallon bags of soil off the back of her truck, and she’s not as young as she used to be. She thought she had one in hand, but when she pulled, it threw her off balance and she twisted as she fell. The bag landed on top of her.”

“That sounds horrible,” I said.

“It wasn’t pleasant. She has a couple bruised ribs, and a broken finger. She’ll be all right. She may need some PT, but none of her ribs are actually fractured. Though, a sprain can be worse than a broken bone.” Astra poured another cup of hot cocoa for both of us.

“Well, that’s good.” I paused, then asked, “Astra, do you think I came back to Midnight Point for a reason? I mean, beyond losing my house? That maybe fate was playing her hand?”

Astra stared at her cup for a moment. “When you called me to say you were moving back, and asked if could you stay with me for a while, I was overjoyed. But when I think about it, I did believe there was something going on behind the scenes. As to what? I don’t know.”

I didn’t like thinking that I had been funneled here. I hated not having control. But when I searched my heart, I had to admit, it really did feel like fate had brought me home.

The doorbell rang and I answered it. Crystal was standing there, shivering. The snow event we were expecting this weekend had announced itself early. A light snowfall was drifting down to cover the ground, and while we’d been having some snow, this felt different.

“Come on in, we’ve got cocoa in the kitchen.” I hustled Crystal in, and took her coat, hanging it up on the coat rack.

She rubbed her hands together. “Cocoa sounds wonderful. I got Devon stowed away and the shelter will keep an eye on her. I also checked and they are heavily warded against outside interference and eyeballs. I doubt if Marcus will be able to find her there, though there’s no real guarantee. We need to clear those cords out of her. Even I could see them.”

“My aunt’s home.” I let her into the kitchen, stopping to pour her a cup of hot cocoa. As she sat at the table, I said, “Auntie, Devon safe in the shelter. But we still have to clear her cords.”

“I’ll call Nightshade in a few minutes,” Astra said.

“Astra thinks the Covenant of Chaos spawns a lot of the psychic vampires,” I said.

“Well, they don’t spawn them, but they provide a haven for them.”

“That would make sense,” Crystal said. “Psychic vampires break every rule they can. It’s not like they’re part of the Fae, either.”

“True that.” There were several species among the Fae races who fed off life force. While they weren’t welcome, they weren’t out in society, siphoning chi off everybody they met.

Astra set down her mug. “All right, I’m going to go call Nightshade and ask her what we should do.”

Nightshade was in her sixties, though she—like my aunts—didn’t look as old as she was, and she had taken the mantle of high priestess when Ella Sanders died. Ella had been close to one-hundred and sixty—not an old age for witchblood—when she passed, and she had maintained control over the Dark Moon Society until that time. Members of the witchblood lived longer than humans, though not usually longer than shifters.

I turned to Crystal as Astra stepped out of the kitchen. “So, I’m going over to Brenda’s house tomorrow. She had another dream about me, so I figured I’d better look into this. I also want to run one potential candidate past her. I found a star witch who lives in Port Ludlow, and while I don’t have that feeling I usually get when I’m about to make a match, he seems like he might have potential. Something tells me to go ahead and try.”

“Do you really enjoy your job?” Crystal asked. “I mean, I know you always have had

a knack for bringing people together, but...”

“It is an odd job, being a matchmaker, but knowing I’ve helped bring love into someone’s life? It makes me happy. It makes the world feel like a better place. I am concerned that I won’t be able to drum up enough business here, I admit that. In the Seattle area, there are thousands of people looking for love. Here, I’m not so sure.” I stared down at Dahlia, who was bouncing around, begging for a cookie. “No, you cannot have a cookie. But you can have a dog biscuit.”

As I opened the drawer with the dog and cat treats, the Pom bounced around my feet, then stood on her hind legs, dancing like a maniac.

I snorted. “Good girl. Here.” I tossed her the biscuit and she caught it midair, then daintily carried it over to the dog bed in the corner, where Miss P. was snoozing. Miss P. took up most of the bed. She was over three times the size—in weight—as Dahlia. Dahlia glared at her for a moment, but when the Maine Coon showed no sign of moving, Dahlia let out a sigh and curled up on the edge of the bed to chew on her biscuit.

“What are you going to do if you find out you don’t have enough clients?” Crystal asked.

“Well, first I hope that’s not the case. But, even though I’ll likely have to dilute my time with doing psychic readings and house cleansings, as long as I have a few clients looking for love, I should be happy.” I shrugged. “It’s not the amount of people, it’s that I still get to help others make their dreams come true.”

Astra returned at that moment, her expression serious. “Well, I talked to Nightshade.”

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“What did she say?” I asked.

“She asked us to catch him to go before the Court Magika. Since I’m a member of the Dark Moon Society, I have the authority to lead the case. She can offer me some assistance, but we have to find him on our own.” She paused, then looked at me. “Nightshade’s interested in meeting you,” she said. “We have a couple openings in the Society.”

I froze. “You mean, me join the Dark Moon Society?”

“Yes.” Astra smiled. “Frankly, it’s a good idea. You’d make a valuable member and we could use your help.”

“But...” I tried to think of reasons why I shouldn’t. For one thing, it meant giving up some of my time to the group. For another, it meant I’d be governed by strict rules, in terms of Court Magika laws. But then again, since I was a member of Queen Heliesa’s court anyway, and I was on the witchblood rolls, I had to follow the rules no matter what.

“I think you should do it,” Crystal said. “I’d love to become a member. I think it would be exciting.”

Astra laughed. “It’s not that exciting, not usually. But we do valuable work, and we help govern the world of witchblood. Being a member of Order of the Moon means giving back to society.”

The Order of the Moon ruled over all the individual witchblood groups that existed in

every shadow town. We worked with the local governments and, when need be, the local authorities to align our purposes. Queen Heliesa and the Witchblood Nation had stricter rules for our members than most local governments, but that was because we were more dangerous because of our powers and the things we were capable of.

Astra put the kettle on for tea. “I’ll talk to Nightshade, if you’re serious, Crystal.”

“I’m absolutely serious,” she said. “I would love to be part of the Dark Moon Society.”

“We’ll see if we can make it happen.” She slid back into the booth. “All right, since we—I—have been charged with finding this psychic vampire, we need to do several things. First, I have to verify that Devon’s being attacked by him. After that, we arrest him.”

“I saw the cords coming off Devon, and so did Crystal,” I said.

“Yes, but since I’m the official agent on this, I have to make that call. Once you’re both members, then your word would be good enough. But you aren’t, so I have to verify that it’s true. Which means, I need to meet Devon. We should take her to one of the safe houses.”

I blinked. “What’s a safe house? She’s at the shelter. Isn’t that safe enough? They’re warded against intrusion.”

“I guarantee you, it’s not safe enough. We keep safe houses to protect those who are in magical danger from those who are witchblood. They first were fashioned when the Covenant of Chaos rose to power, but even though the order faded, we kept with the tradition. It’s a good thing, too,” Astra said, staring glumly at the table.

“Why? Hasn’t that order all but vanished?” I asked.

“It almost did, but in Moonshadow Bay, the Covenant of Chaos is making a resurgence. Which means it’s only a matter of time until they show up here again.” She frowned. “I talked to Rowan and January while I was over there, and they both verified that the chaos magicians are banding together again. Queen Heliesa knows, which means that the Court Magika is going to be busier than it has been for a while, if this keeps on.”

“That’s not good,” I said. “What do we know about them? I’ve heard of them, of course, but my knowledge is limited and I thought they had mostly died out.”

“For one thing, they work with a group of rogue vampires—traditional ones—known as the Blood Collective. Not all the time, but often enough. The Court Magika considers them domestic terrorists because all of their activity is focused on disruption through magical means. The Covenant, that is, not the Blood Collective. The rogue vamps are also terrorists, but oddly enough, they aren’t as organized as the chaos magicians.” Astra rose, pushing her chair away from the table. “Hold on for a moment. I want to talk to Nightshade again.”

As she left the kitchen, I looked at Crystal. “We’ll have to bring Devon here. I doubt if the shelter will allow us to visit her there.”

“Right. They aren’t going to want us drawing any attention to them. I was sworn to secrecy in terms of taking Devon there. In fact, a few blocks from the alley, I had to pass her off to one of the organizers of the shelter, so I can’t even tell you what the exact address is. I’ll call them and see if they can either drop her off here, or I can meet them to pick her up. Do you think your aunt will want to see her tonight? It’s getting late.”

I glanced at the clock. It was nearing eight. “I’m not sure, but if she’s not safe at the shelter, probably. I’d call her, just in case.” I froze, my alarm bells ringing like crazy. “I had a thought. He might be able to track her by her phone’s location. Call her, tell

her to get ready. We need to bring her herenow.”

Crystal pulled out her phone as Astra returned, her face pale.

“Crystal’s calling Devon. What if Marcus can track her via her phone? We need to pick her up now.”

“Good, because Nightshade told me to bring her in tonight. She made a couple calls. I gather the Order of the Moon knew that a psychic vampire was in the area, but they didn’t know exactly where. Marcus is dangerous. He killed two people in Terameth Lake. Cleo, the high priestess of the Mountain Moon Coven, had one of her operatives—Marquette—on his tail, but he managed to vanish before they could catch him.”

“Crap. Two victims already?”

“Yes, until they caught onto him. Somehow, he found out and skipped town.” She shook her head. “Marcus has no reason to give himself up. We have to hope he doesn’t realize that we’ve found out, so he’ll probably still be after her. Psychic vampires gain the most energy from an actual kill. So, if he thinks he’s in danger, he’ll go for max energy and then run.”

“Which means a string of dead bodies,” I said.

Crystal returned. “They’ll drop her off here. I told them that someone may be able to trace her phone, so they’re bringing her immediately.”

“Once she gets here, we need to break the cords, then get her to the Safe House,” I said.

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“We have to get his address,” Astra said. “Surely, Devon has to have his address since they’ve been involved for a while. Then we go after him.”

“How are we going to arrest him?” Crystal asked. “He’s stronger than us?—”

“Not true,” Astra said. “I’m far stronger magically than most psychic vampires. Not only that, but I’ve also called for backup. Reese is coming over.”

“Who’s Reese?” I asked.

“Reese Saremay is one of the members of the Dark Moon Society. He’s not exactly a witch, but he’s...let’s put it this way. He’s what we call a problem solver. Most of the Order of the Moon societies have at least one around. Reese works with the police, unofficially. Officially, he’s branded as being on the wrong side of the law. But he steps in where the actual authorities can’t take a stand. I called him, and he’s on his way over.”

I still didn’t understand, but if my aunt said he would help us, I believed her.

“When Devon gets here, we’ll get Marcus’s information from her. Then, Reese will escort her to the Safe House. After that, we go after Marcus.”

In a matter of moments, my aunt had gone from being a firm, but sweet older woman to a take-no-prisoners official. I flashed back to when I was young. Astra had always been one of those women who kept under the radar until she was needed, then she burst forth like a dazzling ray of light. Now, she was practically glowing.

A car pulled up outside—its sounds muffled by the snow. Crystal peeked through the window. “It’s Devon. I’ll go get her.” She threw on her jacket, then vanished out the door.

“How long till Reese gets here?” I asked.

“Not long,” Astra said. “He should be here within ten minutes.”

Crystal escorted Devon in, locking the door behind her. I led her into the living room and my aunt approached her.

“Look into my eyes, child,” she said.

Devon obliged. A moment later, my aunt let out a sigh.

“He doesn’t have his full hooks into you yet. Or, at least, he hasn’t tried. The cords are there, and we’ll take care of those before the evening’s done.” Without a beat, she added, “Maisy, can you get the door?”

“But I didn’t hear—” I had no sooner started to speak when the bell rang.

I hurried to the door and opened it. A tall man stood there, husky and muscled, with pale hair against his tanned skin. He looked weathered, as though he’d seen too much anger in his life. He handed me his wallet, and I scanned it, seeing that he was who he said he was. I handed it back and motioned for him to enter the house.

Astra glanced at him as he entered the living room. “Hey, Reese. I was about to do some cord cutting. As soon as I’m done, you need to get her to the safe house.”

“Can do,” he said, sitting on the edge of the sofa.

Turning back to Devon, my aunt said, “I’ll need your phone.”

Devon handed it to her.

Astra gave it to Reese. “Wipe Marcus’s information from it, after taking down the number.” To Devon, she said, “Marcus can track you through it, thanks to the app here.” She pointed to one of the apps on the home screen. “If we can’t catch him, you’ll have to stay at the Safe House until we make certain he’s been neutralized. Do you have his address?”

“I understand, and yes, I do.” Devon said.

“Then sit down. Maisy, fetch me my athame and wand from the ritual room.”

I nodded, hurrying down the hall.

The ritual room had been a den until my aunts changed it into a personal temple. I’d joined them many a weekend afternoon, meditating and learning magic at their feet. Oh, the Academy taught me well, but my aunts had taught me all the shortcuts. In front of the altar, where Astra kept her magical gear, I gave a respectful bow, then picked up her dagger and wand. I kept my own ritual gear on a small altar in my room.

I hurried back with the tools. “Did you need anything else?” I asked. “war water? Begone potion?”

“No, I don’t think so. He’s probably not expecting someone to free her from his cording, so it shouldn’t be difficult. If he was prepared for the attack, then it might be a different matter.”

She motioned for Devon to sit on a chair in the center of the living room. After

casting a circle, which magnified all the emotions and energy in the room, Astra began to slowly chant. I couldn't understand what she was saying—she spoke so softly—but the energy felt like waves, caught in a glass, sloshing from side to side.

The words seemed to take a power of their own, circling Devon like autumn leaves caught up in a gust of wind. I could see the cords that Marcus had tethered into Devon. They were sickly vines, pulsing with energy as they siphoned it off of her. They reminded me of leeches, almost making me gag.

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But the incantation formed into winged shards, hacking away at the cords. Astra changed tone, and one of those shards turned into something that looked like a drill bit, luminous and sparkling, and it rose over Devon's head and began to spin as it lowered itself into her crown chakra, burrowing deep into the biggest cord there. As the tip of the drill hit the flesh of the cord, it burst, sending bits and pieces every which way.

The splinters of cord immediately withered, like leaves on a vine in the hot sun. The cord began to glow with a pinkish undertone, looking more like an earthworm every second. I tried to keep from gagging—it looked disgusting. And then, as the energy drove inward, the cord exploded. Bits of energetic debris flew every which way as the cords turned to dust.

Devon let out a sigh and slumped, looking exhausted. She was free, and now our job was truly beginning.

CHAPTER TEN

“She’s clear,” Astra said, though I could already see that Devon was free from the cords. “How do you feel, dear?”

Devon looked at my aunt, her eyes wide. “I feel so odd. I was feeling so draggy, but now—I feel like I’ve caught my second wind. I haven’t felt this much energy in months.”

Astra nodded. “That’s what cords will do for you—they drain you. My guess is, in a couple days, you’ll be feeling back to normal, and Marcus’s hold on you should be

gone for good.”

Devon sat there, silent for a moment, then shook her head, her eyes wide. “I feel clear headed. Like some fog has lifted.” She shifted in her seat. “How could I have been so blind to what was going on?”

“It was his charm. He corded you with his glamour. Psychic vampires can use glamour as easily—if not more so—than traditional vampires. Reese, deliver her to the Safe House,” Astra said.

Devon blushed. “Um...there are pictures on there...he made me send them.”

“Marcus made you send him nudes?” Astra said.

Devon nodded, wincing. “Yeah. What if he uploads them to the net to punish me?”

“Don’t worry about it, Miss,” Reese said, his voice husky. “We’ll take care of that while we’re at it.” He turned to Astra. “I’ll be back in about an hour. Did you get his info?”

Astra shook her head. “Not yet. Devon, we need Marcus’s address. Can you please give it to me?”

Devon wrote out his address and phone number, then followed Reese to the door, where she turned back. “I’m so glad I decided to ask you for a reading,” she said, her eyes misty. “I can’t believe all this has been going on, and I’ve been letting it.”

“You aren’t to blame. Psychic vampires pick their victims carefully. There was something in you that Marcus saw, that he was able to play on. Some heartbreak in the past, or some loss, that he was able to manipulate. But, I think you should talk to a therapist. Our people at the Safe House can help you.” Astra gave her a hug, then said

to Reese, “Return as quickly as you can. He’s going to feel the break, and he’ll either go on the hunt, or hie himself out of town.”

“I’ll hurry,” Reese said, closing the door behind them.

While we waited for Reese to return, Astra took the time to make sure that neither Crystal nor I had picked up any of the cords by accident. Sometimes, when energy went flying, it landed on people who were nearby. But Astra saged the room, and chased out any last feelers.

“How are we going to arrest him?” I asked.

“Reese told me he’s bringing backup when he returns. We won’t be going in alone.” Astra stood. “I’m going to change. I want to be warm and comfortable when we head over to Marcus’s house. When Reese gets back, let him in if I’m not done.”

While she was in her bedroom, I pulled a couple doppios for Crystal and myself.

“You have any creamer?” Crystal asked. “I’m not a straight-shot girl.”

“Of course,” I said. “We have peppermint mocha, and hazelnut.”

“Hazelnut, please,” she said.

I handed her the creamer, then when she finished, I added a spoonful to my own drink. As we sipped the espresso, I stared out the window. It was snowing heavily. “I guess we’re getting the snow event, after all. I wonder if the club meeting will still be on tomorrow night. I don’t know how I’m going to find a star witch for Brenda. Maybe this was all a bad idea,”

I had no clue why I felt so depressed. It had come on suddenly, as soon as Astra had

saged me. It occurred to me that maybe I'd been masking it, not realizing that I was down in the dumps until Astra cleared my aura, along with everyone else's in the room.

"Don't go there," Crystal said. "It's been a long day, and this mess with Devon has messed with your head."

"Maybe," I said. I finished my espresso as the doorbell rang. "That should be Reese."

I peeked through the peephole. It was, indeed, Reese, along with another very large man beside him. I opened the door. "Come in."

Reese motioned for the other man to stay out on the porch.

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“It’s cold out there,” I said, closing the door.

“Garn’s fine. He’ll keep watch until we leave. Cleo’s not about to let you get hurt,” he said. “We should go, though, because we don’t want the psychic vampire to escape. He’s killed before, he’ll kill again,” Reese said. “You might want to wear any protection charms you have.”

“Here,” Astra said, returning from her bedroom. She handed Crystal and me smoky quartz pendants. But in addition to the energy of the crystal, magic emanated from the stone—protective magic. We draped them over our heads.

“Ready?” Reese asked.

Astra nodded. “Ready. Let’s go.”

As we headed out, I wondered what the hell we were in for. I had never counted on being in this position when I came home to Midnight Point.

At night, Midnight Point could be a spooky place. Most shadow towns were dangerous for the unwary, and ours was no exception. It wasn’t so much that we had a seedy side to the town, or that gangs roamed the streets. But when a town existed on the edge between worlds, anything could cross over.

Following the address that Devon gave us, we found ourselves in front of a set of three-story apartment buildings. Walk-ups, three apartments on either side were joined by the stairwell. Three groups of buildings meant the complex had eighteen apartments total. Outside, floodlights illuminated the sidewalks.

“He lives in apartment 3-3-B, which means building three, third story, apartment B,” Astra said. “Which puts him in...there—that building.” She pointed to the furthest building down the sidewalk. The complex also had a common area, along with a pool which was drained and covered for the winter.

The light in the apartment was on. Hopefully, he was home, and hopefully, he’d go quietly. I had never participated in anything like this in my life, and I really didn’t want to be here. But if my aunt could handle the situation, so could I.

Reese took the lead, with Astra and me coming next, and then, Crystal and Garns leading up the rear. We quietly ascended the two sets of stairs, coming to rest on the landing by Marcus’s apartment. I swallowed my fear as Astra knocked on the door.

No answer.

She knocked a second time.

Still no answer.

Reese motioned for her to move back and she stepped out of the way so he could take her place. Instead of knocking, Reese held the doorknob in hand and muttered some kind of incantation that I couldn’t catch. There was a sudden click, and he slammed open the door and darted inside. Garns followed him, motioning for the three of us to follow.

As I pushed through the door, Reese raced over to the window, where a man was trying to get through the open pane. Reese grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hauled him back into the room, slamming him to the floor. My first thought was to close the window so he couldn’t get away, and I dashed over, slamming the window shut again.

The man on the floor—I assumed it was Marcus—pulled away from Reese and rolled to one side, coming up on his heels. He crouched as he held onto the floor for balance. With dark hair and eyes, he was handsome enough, but there was something behind his eyes—a smoldering, repressed anger that chilled me to the bone.

“What the fuck do you want?” he spat out.

“You’re under arrest, by ruling of the Order of the Moon. Surrender now, and we won’t use force,” Astra said, reading from her phone. It must have been what Cleo told her to say.

“I don’t yield to the fucking Crown,” he said. The next moment, he launched himself in a blur toward Crystal and grabbed her, his arm around her neck. “Let me go or I break her neck.”

I stared in horror, trying to think of what I could do.

Astra stood her ground as Garns and Reese edged to either side of him. “You’re surrounded. You do that and we have the option to kill you right here.”

Break her neck...his words reverberated through my head.

What the hell kind of nightmare was I in? Life had gone from twenty to two hundred in seconds. I wanted to beg him to let her go, but if I interfered it could result in more people getting hurt. I forced myself to keep my mouth shut and watched, wondering what we’d expected. Had we thought he was going to meekly raise his hands and go with us? This man was a killer.

But Reese and Garns looked unperturbed.

Reese cleared his throat. “You’re going to let her go and you’re going to come with

us quietly.”

“What makes you think I’d choose to do that?” Marcus asked. His eyes glittered with a cold light, I found myself more angry than shocked. He was threatening my best friend, and I wasn’t going to have that.

A well of energy began to build inside me—one that I had never felt before—but it coiled up, seductively. I held out one hand and began to whisper. The words felt like they were coming from far, far away—from someone standing behind me. They were silken, like a soft caress as they fluttered out of my mouth. I could almost see them—music notes on the wind, targeting the psychic vampire and no one else.

“You don’t want to do that. You want to let her go. Let the woman go and come to me. You know who I am and you know what I can offer you,” I said, from inside a warm, golden shroud.

Marcus faltered. He hesitated, loosening his arm a little from where it rested around Crystal’s throat. At that moment, Reese grabbed hold of him, yanking his arm away. Garns grabbed Crystal and dragged her away from the psychic vampire, pushing her toward Astra. Marcus let out a sharp bark and pulled out a knife, but Reese brought his arm down on Marcus’s wrist and the cracking of bones filled the air.

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Marcus let out a shriek as Reese produced a pair of handcuffs. They had an air of magic to them, and the moment he slapped them on Marcus's injured wrist, Marcus let out another shout, but I immediately relaxed. Astra brought up her phone and handed it to me.

"Record this," she said, turning to Marcus.

"Marcus Levius, you are under arrest by the order of the Court Magika, for murder. You have the right to remain silent. If you speak, we may hold anything you say against you. By the order of Queen Heliesa, Her Majesty of the Witchblood Nation, we take you into custody. Any attempts to escape will be considered an admission of guilt and will be met with violence."

Astra let out a sigh, then nodded to me. "Okay, you can stop recording."

As I turned off the video, she turned to Reese.

"You can take him in. I'll text the video to Nightshade, and she'll send it to the Court. I suppose that we can release Devon from the Safe House?"

"Leave her there till morning. It's late, and she needs her rest. Plus, we need full statement from her for the court, and it's better we do it there. Not everybody wants to give evidence once they feel the problem is over."

I was still shaking. I had no idea what had come over me or where those words had come from. "Are we done here?"

“We’re done for the day,” Astra said. “I suggest that, while Garns and Reese take Marcus into custody, we find a diner and have a bite to eat.”

“I could go for food,” Crystal said, still looking shaken. She touched her throat. “That was too close for comfort. But whathappened—what did you—” She paused as Astra gave her a shake of the head.

I cleared my throat. “I could use some food, too. Are we done here?”

Reese nodded. “You can go. We’ll search his apartment for any evidence, and Cleo will call you in the morning, Astra.” He motioned for us to leave. “Trust me, this ain’t my first rodeo.”

We had come in Astra’s car, and Reese and Garns had ridden together. As we headed back to the parking lot, I had the feeling that I’d stumbled into some surreal movie plot—where everyday life had taken a stand on its head.

The feeling lingered all the way out to the car, and all the way to the Pacific Blue, a diner that was open all night long.

The diner was empty save for a few patrons. The waitress led us to a booth in the corner, and I gratefully slid into the soft, velour covered seat. She handed us menus.

“Drinks?” the waitress—who was wearing a nametag that read Jelico—asked.

“Hot cocoa with lots of whipped cream and chocolate shavings,” I said.

“Same,” Crystal ordered.

“Why don’t we make it three?” Astra said. “I think we know what we want to order for food.” She ordered pancakes and bacon, I asked for fried chicken and mashed

potatoes, and Crystal wanted a burger and fries.

After the waitress moved off, we leaned back against the booth and let out a simultaneous sigh.

“This morning, if someone told me I’d be breaking into some guy’s apartment, arresting him after he threatened my bestfriend’s life, I’d have laughed them out of my shop.” I shook my head, still trying to process everything that had gone on.

“Me too,” Crystal said. “Except...Instead of my best friend being threatened, well...me.” She stared blankly at her menu.

“Howisyour throat?” Astra asked. “Do you want to see a doctor?”

Crystal thought for a moment, then shook her head. “No, I think I’m okay. Though I think he would have actually gone ahead and broken my neck, if circumstances deteriorated.” She turned to me. “So, what the hell wasthat? It wasn’tyoutalking to him.”

“She’s right,” Astra said. “The words may have been coming out of your throat, but you weren’t the one saying them. Your eyes turned black, Maisy. There wasn’t a gleam of color in them. Somebody was speaking through you.”

“I know, but I don’t know who.” I decided to ‘fess up. “Although I have my suspicions—just like we were talking about, Astra.” I turned to Crystal. “I’ve been having instances lately, where I thought somebody was talking to me. I hear a woman’s voice on the wind, or in my head, or wherever. I’ve been writing it off as my inner thoughts coming out, but I don’t think so now. Somebody is trying to get my attention, and I have my suspicions that it might be Aphrodite. Whoever it is, she’s the same one who spoke through me tonight. I recognized the energy. I was going to meditate on it later tonight, but then the whole thing with Devon went

down.”

“What did it feel like tonight?” Astra asked.

I thought about it for a moment. “All I know is that when I realized he was holding my best friend hostage, I was furious—and then, that energy came through. It was preceded by...oh...the best way I can describe it, is a feeling of ‘oh no, you don’t!’.”

At that moment, the waitress returned with our drinks and our food.

“That was fast,” I said, realizing I was starving.

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“You’re the only customers in here right now,” the waitress said, with a grin, before placing our check on the table. “Just call me if you want anything else.”

I dug into a chicken thigh. Pacific Blue made some of the best diner food I’d ever tasted.

We ate in silence for a few moments, then I set down my fork and leaned back. “Okay, I’m going to say it. What the hell was all of this? How did we end up involved in arresting a psychic vampire? Yes, I know it was my tarot client who started it, but...I’ve read for hundreds of people—maybe a thousand, in my life. And not once did I end up charging into someone’s apartment to arrest them.”

Astra bit into a strip of bacon. “Here’s the thing. You’re back in Midnight Point. You left when you were relatively young, and though you’ve been home to visit, consider that you’re now experiencing the town for what it is. Shadow towns aren’t like other towns. If they want you, they suck you in, and then they open up their secrets to you.”

“I guess you’re right,” I said. I thought about the town and my move. “As scary as today was, and as unexpected, I’m so grateful I moved back here. And I’ve been thinking. You said that I could stay as long as I want. Do you think the house is big enough for both of us?”

Astra perked up. “Do you mean you’d consider staying?”

I worried my lip. “After Dan died, I missed living with someone. I didn’t realize how much, until I came back here. Obviously, I miss Dan. But...I don’t think I’m very good at living alone. I like having someone else in the house.”

Astra reached out and patted my hand. “I told you you’re welcome to stay, as long as you like. If you want to move back in, I’m good with it. If you choose to find your own home, I understand.”

I put my hand over hers and let out a long breath. “Thank you, Auntie. I need you. I need you more than I realized.” Tears began to well up, and a wave of loneliness swept over me. “I never thought Dan would leave me so soon. I know it’s been two years but...”

“Two years or twenty, their absence still hurts. Take a deep breath, hold it, then exhale slowly.” She held my hands while I did as she asked.

As the breath streamed out, so did my tension from the day. “I suppose now that I’m back in Midnight Point I’d better be prepared for anything, because anything might happen.”

“I think you’re right,” Astra said.

We decided to table the discussion over Marcus and Devon for the night. As we finished our food, the snow began to come down seriously, swirling in eddies with the wind. I shivered, staring out into the night. Midnight Point was definitely working its magic on me, but I couldn’t see whether it was for good or ill, and that made me nervous.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Next morning, I slept in. It was Saturday, and I felt both invigorated and yet, a little dazed. The light streaming through the window had an icy feel to it.

I curled my arm around Miss P. and gave her a hug—she’d been snuggling with me, on the pillow next to me. She opened one eye as I kissed her head, gave a little trill,

then went back to sleep. Finally ready to face the chill, I slid out from beneath the covers, shivering.

I was wearing a thigh-high sleep-shirt with little snowflakes all over it, and the air hit my legs and arms the moment I stood up. I quickly slid on my slippers and pulled on my robe, then cinched the belt tight as I walked over to gaze out the window. I leaned on the sill, staring out at the wonder in white that spread over the yard.

We had at least three inches already, and the sky promised more. I pushed open the window and the smell of snow filled the air, along with a lot more chill. Quickly, I closed it again. Fresh air was good, but that was a little too fresh.

“Jeez,” I said, turning around to the now-awake Miss P.. “I don’t know why I thought that would be a good idea,” I added. She blinked. “Okay, a hot shower to start the day, I think.” I grabbed my phone and texted my aunt.

taking hot shower. will be down after that. are you making breakfast?

of course i am, she texted back. i’ll wait on yours till you get here. i thought pancakes, eggs, sausage, and mimosas would be good for brunch.

sounds good to me. okay, talk to you in about twenty minutes.

I tossed my phone on the bed and headed for the bathroom. After a luxurious, long shower, I dressed for the day. Striped leggings in purple and white, a black circle skirt with a cute little witch applique on the hem, a purple cowl-neck sweater, and a gold belt. Then, I brushed out my hair—I’d skipped washing it—and applied my makeup. I found a cute pair of Mary-Jane chunky-heeled pumps. Finally, feeling pulled together, I headed downstairs to breakfast.

Aunt Astra must have heard me coming because by the time I entered the kitchen, she

was putting the last pancake on a huge stack of them. A platter with sausages and scrambled eggs sat already sat on the table, along with orange juice, and the espresso machine was primed and ready.

I kissed her on the cheek. “Morning.”

“How’d you sleep?” she asked, setting the tray of pancakes on the table. “Can you grab the butter and syrup?”

I pulled both out of the fridge. We used real maple syrup, not the sugar water that posed as it. After setting them on the table, I pulled three shots of espresso.

“I’m making mocha. Want one?”

“I’d love it,” she said. “Three shots, please. Extra peppermint.”

“Always,” I said. I’d developed my caffeine habits thanks to Astra. Sara had preferred tea. I pulled another three shots, then mixed the espresso with chocolate milk, some half-and-half, and peppermint coffee syrup, then nuked both till they were hot. I added a swirl of whipped cream, and handed one of the latte mugs to my aunt before sliding into the booth.

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“What are you doing today?” she asked, spearing three pancakes and dropping them on her plate.

I scooped some scrambled eggs and four sausage links onto my plate, then added two pancakes, and drowned them in butter and syrup.

“Well, I’m due over at Brenda’s house at one. She doesn’t live that far away, so I’m going to chance it. And tonight’s the Midnight Hour Social Club mixer. Crystal and I are supposed to meet up there. We’ll see if they’re still holding it before we go. The snow’s really coming down out there. For once, the forecast was right on.”

Astra glanced out the window next to the booth. “Yeah, it’s going to pile up today. I can feel it. The earth is settling in for a long winter. La Niña can wreak havoc in the Pacific Northwest. They may say next week will be warmer, but there’s going to be enough snow that I’m not betting it will go away for a week or so.”

“What’s your itinerary for the day?” I added a couple more sausages to my plate.

“I thought that I’d start making some plans, since you’ve decided to stay. I want to clear out my sewing room so you can have a home office, too. So, the ritual room stays, but that still leaves the guest room, and I can double up with my sewing supplies in there—that’s not a problem.”

Astra loved to sew and quilt.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to take away your craft room.” I finished eating and pushed back my plate, lingering over the mocha.

“All we really need in the guest room is the bed and a small dresser. The rest of the space should fit my crafting cabinet, sewing machine and work table.” She beamed and I realized that she was truly happy that I was staying. It felt good, knowing that she’d missed me.

“Were you serious about Crystal and me joining the Dark Moon Society? Do you think they’d welcome us?” I still wasn’t sure, but the thought of having so many friends who had so many resources felt good, especially if I ever encountered anything else like Marcus’s case.

“As serious as I am about my own membership. I think you’d both do well. I’m going to talk to Nightshade later today about it.” She leaned back and rubbed her hand on the table. “So, what do you think about taking out this booth and putting in a kitchen table with chairs? We could expand the kitchen and make it twice this size.”

I frowned. “Extra space would be nice, but I always loved sitting in the booth when I was a kid. It always made me feel like we were going out to eat. But if you want more space in the kitchen though, I’m good with it.”

“Well, I would like space enough to do some canning in the autumn—the apple tree I planted five years ago is brimming with apples now. Well, during September. And I’m really getting into breadmaking lately. Prices are crazy, and while we can get great vegetables from the Farmer’s Market, winter’s pretty sparse, so I might want to expand the garden and can and freeze produce.” She paused, then added, “By the way, I had my check up last week. Everything looks good, and my bloodwork is fantastic.”

My aunt was barely middle-aged at 78, but this was the time when a lot of witches began to show some of those maladies most humans faced at around their late forties or early fifties.

“I’m glad. I suppose I should go in and get a check-up. What with the fire and moving, I missed my annual. I’d better find a doctor.” I stood, stretching. “It’s almost eleven. I’ve got an hour and a half before I need to head over to Brenda’s. You want some help getting started on the sewing room?” She was right in that it would help me to have an office, and it was right next to my bedroom. Maybe I could open it up, put in a door or an archway so that I could easily go between the two.

“That would be lovely, dear. There are several empty boxes in the attic. Would you be a lamb and get them?” she asked.

I nodded. Truth was, I didn’t like going into the attic. It had always made me nervous, ever since I was a little girl. Not because I was afraid there was anything spooky up there—my aunts kept the house well-warded, but it was a small, dark place and I never knew whether I’d find a bat or squirrels or spiders there.

In reality, I’d never run into anything that had been remotely dangerous. It had been at least seven years since I’d been up there—the last time was one year I came home for Thanksgiving, with Dan. We’d gone up in the attic to bring down the Yule ornaments for Astra.

After brunch, I went out into the garage and brought back the stepladder. I returned, set it up beneath the crawl space, then climbed up to open the crawlspace door. After I was back on the floor, I moved the stepladder and pulled on the chain which brought down the folding stairs.

Once I was in the attic, I flipped on the switch, flooding the A-frame shaped room with light. I glanced around. Astra had moved the decorations to the garage for easier access. Now, the only things left in the attic were several trunks, a few overflowing boxes, and some boxes that looked like they’d never been used.

I pushed against a long cobweb that was hanging from the ceiling, stepping over a

couple boxes till I was standing at the trunks. I recognized them from my childhood. One had belonged to my mother. As I knelt by them, I brushed a layer of dust away. The trunks weren't locked. One was engraved with my mother's initials: MLS. Marika Leann Svensson. The one beside it had Astra's initials on it, and the third had Sara's initials.

I opened my mother's trunk and sat down on the dusty floor beside it. I lifted out a framed picture of my mother and smiled. She must have been in her twenties. She'd been so pretty, with those sturdy Scandinavian cheekbones and fair skin and blonde hair. I traced her features on the glass, then set the picture aside. I'd ask Astra if she minded if I hung it in my room.

The next thing were several yearbooks from the Starlight Academy, back in Eerie. I opened one at random to see the inside cover covered with signatures. As I read the usual 'have a great summer' and 'so glad we took botany together' posts, I tried to imagine my mother when she was young and carefree.

I set the books to the side, then went through the rest of the trunk. There were a couple dolls—Barbie dolls, and a rabbit plushie that was so loved it was missing most of its fur. A diary that, when I peeked inside, was filled with poetry in my mother's handwriting.

Other trinkets filled the rest of the trunk, including a small jewelry box and inside, there were a few little pieces of costume jewelry. I had my mother's wedding ring. It had been on her finger when they recovered her body. I looked down at my own wedding ring, thinking about Dan, again. I packed up the trunk except for the picture and my mother's diary filled with poetry, then carried them—along with the empty boxes—down the ladder.

Astra was waiting for me. I asked her if she minded if I kept the picture and the journal.

“Whatever you like, my dear. I should have given you the trunk earlier. It’s yours, rightfully.” Astra smiled at the picture. “I remember the day we took that picture. It was taken the day after your mother got engaged. That seems like so long ago...”

I carried the picture to my room and hung it on the wall. Then, I sat down at my vanity table and opened my jewelry box. I took out my mother’s wedding ring and tried it on my right hand ring finger. It fit perfectly. As I held it out, it felt right. I smiled. It felt good, having a part of my mother next to me. Then, I glanced at my own wedding ring. I tried to imagine my finger without it, and slowly began to take it off, but halfway through, I stopped and slid it back on. Not yet, I thought. Not yet.

Shortly before twelve-thirty, the snow was still falling. We now had at least four inches. Given we were due for five to seven inches, I had the feeling the prediction might fall short of the reality. I slid into my jacket, then picked up my keys, my portable-magic kit, and my purse. I tossed a couple protein bars into my purse, then headed for the door.

“I’m leaving,” I called to my aunt. “I’ll text you when I get there!”

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“Please do,” she called back from the guest room where she was rearranging furniture.

“Don’t try to lift anything heavy till I get back. I’ll help you later!” I closed the door behind me, shivering as a gust of wind rushed by. Cautiously, I crossed the porch and managed to reach the car without slipping. I scraped off the snow, then—as I waited for the engine to heat up—I turned my thoughts to Brenda.

While waiting, I texted her. you still good with me coming over?

of course, but take it easy. it’s slick out on the roads.

i’ll be careful. see you in a while.

I fastened my seatbelt, eased out of the driveway, grateful that I’d learned to drive on snow.

Brenda lived on a cul-de-sac about ten minutes drive away from our house. But that was ten minutes on a day where the streets weren’t covered in snow. I watched my speed, trying not to be so cautious that I caused a problem.

As I pulled into the cul-de-sac, I saw Brenda’s car. Her house was two-story, modern, and totally non-descript. I stepped out of the car, looking up at it, as I tried to sense what might be going on inside. A pall hung over the house, but when I tried to connect with it, all I got was a push-back. Whatever it was, it didn’t like me snooping.

Carrying my purse over one shoulder, and my tote over the other, I approached the door and rang the bell. A few seconds later, Brenda opened it and welcomed me in.

“I hope that you had an easy trip,” she said.

“Actually, it wasn’t too bad. Not many people are out on the roads, and that’s a good thing. The snow’s still coming down and it’s adding up on the streets.” I followed her into the living room. There, I set my tote and purse on the coffee table and took a seat on the sofa. The room was painted a pale sage, with eggshell accents. It was soothing, actually, and from the look of things, Brenda had a minimalist aesthetic. Either that, or she was exceptionally tidy.

“You have a lovely home,” I said. But even as I sat there, I could feel something lurking around the corners. “So tell me, how long have you noticed the intrusive energy?”

She offered me coffee and I accepted. “Two sugar, please, and cream.”

As she handed me the cup—a large, teal colored mug—I sat back, crossing my legs. As I did so, I caught sight of something glimmering in the mirror on the far wall. I straightened, setting down my cup as I stared at the mirror.

“How long have you had that mirror?” I asked.

“I don’t know. My husband bought it. My late husband. He was the one who decorated this house. I don’t like the look, to be honest. Edgar said that my taste was gawdy, and he planned to teach me how to ‘acquire a pleasing aesthetic,’ as he put it. I have thought about changing things up over the years, but to be honest, it seems like a waste of money. Or, I’ll start planning out what I’d like the house to look like, and suddenly I get sidetracked or something happens and I need to pay for a major repair.” She let out a grumpy sigh.

“So, how long has the shadow been here?”

“Oh, right. I’m sorry, I went off on a tangent. Let’s see...I’d say...about three years—since shortly after Edgar died.”

The timing seemed awfully suspicious to me. “You said you were married for seven years. During that time, did you notice anything like the shadow?” My guess was that Edgar had left his mark in the house, but I couldn’t let myself jump to conclusions. And if it was him, and he was spurring on her dreams, why would I be in them?

She thought for a moment. “I don’t honestly know. It was always so hard—he was such an asshole to me. If there was anything else going on, I doubt that I would have noticed. He gaslit me, he constantly made digs about my looks and my manners... There were a couple times he slapped me around.”

I winced. The look on her face when she mentioned his abuse was painful. I could hear the memories in her voice, and it made me want to reach out to wherever he was to smack him a good one.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “No one should ever do that to their partner. Okay, so why don’t you show me around. I’ll need to poke and pry, but it’s because?”

“Oh, I’m not worried about you being nosy. Of course you need to check everything out. I expected it. I’ve got nothing to hide.” Brenda stood, smoothing her skirt. “So, should we start with the upstairs?”

She led me up to the second floor. The house was a generic McMansion, as we called them around here. Cookie cutter houses, large in size on tiny lots, crowded together by developers out for every cent they could get.

Except here, in Midnight Point, there were ordinances against building houses too

close together. So, while we had a semblance of the current trend, each house had a decent sized lot and looked less like a subdivision and more like a regular neighborhood.

The sage and eggshell theme continued upstairs, and I began to see how it didn't suit Brenda's personality. She was a sunny person, and it felt too pale for her—too neutral.

“You need to go through with your plans to redecorate,” I said. “This house is affecting you on an emotional level.” The moment I said that, the lights flickered and the energy grew thicker. I shivered, turning to Brenda. “Did you feel that?”

She nodded. “Yeah, I did. Whatever's hanging around, it didn't like your suggestion. Do you think it's Edgar?”

“I think it might be, but I don't want to say for sure because I've learned: never assume. Never decide something without investigation, because if you try the wrong fix for a magical issue, then you might make things worse.” I followed her into the bedroom, and reached out, looking for anything I could sense. Immediately, I felt a push back, like bouncing off a brick wall.

“Is something wrong?” Brenda asked.

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I frowned. “I’m not certain, but something doesn’t like the fact that I’m here. Let me try again.”

Again, I reached out, pressing harder, and this time I had barely attempted contact when I was hit so hard by the repelling force that it knocked me off my feet. I went flying back onto my ass, landing outside the door. If I’d been standing just a few inches to the side, I would have slammed into the wall, and that could have given me a nasty concussion. As it was, I had a sore tailbone and the beginnings of a headache.

“Okay, then...” I said.

Brenda reached down, offering her hand. She easily pulled me to my feet, once again, reminding me that she was a bear shifter. Bear shifters were strong, a lot stronger than I was.

“Thank you,” I said.

“I’m so sorry. Are you all right?” she asked.

“I think so. But whatever you have here, it’s aggressive.” I headed back downstairs. It was obvious that whatever force that had taken up residence in her house was alert and physical.

“I know,” she said, her voice low. “I’m certain it’s what has been giving me those nightmares.” She looked over her shoulder. “I’m not even sure I want to discuss all of this here. I think anything we say is going to be overheard.”

She was right.

“All right, let’s go for coffee,” I said. “I want to ask some questions.”

She shrugged into her jacket and followed me out to the car. “There’s a little coffee shop about five minutes from here. We should be out of range there, I should think.”

Once we were belted in, I eased onto the street, then slowly began to drive through the snow. It was falling so heavily that I could barely keep that the windshield wipers could barely keep up with clearing the windshield. I was so tense that I had to force myself to relax my grip on the wheel.

I was just starting to feel comfortable when we came to the corner of the street with the coffee shop. As I made a left hand turn, on the light, a car from the opposite direction came slip-sliding down the hill, at full speed, swerving from side to side.

Brenda screamed and I desperately tried to steer out of the way. I managed to swing the rear end of the car toward the oncoming vehicle, but I couldn’t fully evade it, and before I knew what was happening, the shriek of metal on metal filled my ears as we were jolted across into the oncoming lane and went spinning against the curb and a tree that was close by on the sidewalk.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The thing about accidents was that, when you watched one happen, it seemed to go in slow motion, taking forever for all the pieces to fall together and then settle. When you were in an accident, everything moved at breakneck speed, a blur of fear and screams and prayers.

As the car spun, I did my best to drive into the skid, to keep from flipping the car. I tapped on the brakes as lightly as I could, steering into the turn. A few seconds later,

we came to rest, my rear right tire on the sidewalk, and the front of the car jutting out into traffic. The other car had spun in the other direction, and now, I could see that the driver had hit a post office box head on. Smoke was coming from the hood of their car.

Both air bags had deployed and I felt like I'd been hit by a massively hard pillow. I slowly floundered through the billowing material as I reached for the seat belt to unlock it. Then, I turned to Brenda.

“Are you all right?” I wasn't even sure if I was all right, but my first thought, now that the car was stopped, was for my passenger.

She was breathing hard, but she nodded.

“Just shaken up,” she said. I think everything's okay.”

My door didn't want to open at first, but I managed to jimmy it open. By that time, pedestrians who had been braving the snow, along with a couple store owners, were at our car. Others were heading to the car who had hit us.

A man offered me his hand as I stepped out. “She'll need to climb over the seat and come through the driver's door. I think the front door was damaged when the other car hit the back door. I think it's stuck, he said.”

He helped me to the side, then leaned in and helped Brenda scramble over the center console. Then, once she confirmed she could stand, he fetched our purses and my tote bag. “You're not going to be driving this baby home,” he said.

“Right...” I glanced over at the other car. By now, the fire truck and a medic unit had pulled up and they were trying to open the car door to get to the other driver. I froze. There was a man standing next to the car, staring at it with a dazed look. His head

was covered with blood from a head wound, and blood slicked down his shirt. He looked over at me, then headed my way. I froze as he crossed the intersection and approached.

I'm so sorry,he said.I couldn't stop. Why won't they listen to me? I'm all right.

At that moment, I realized I could see through him. He was translucent. A sharp piece of metal was protruding from his chest and blood was seeping out, surrounding the wound.

I shivered and tried to project my thoughts toward him.I know you didn't mean to do it. Do you know what happened? Turn around.

Obviouslyhedidn't know, but as he turned around I had the feeling he soon would because they managed to open the driver's door, prying it away. There was a moment of silence as the medic leaned in, then he stood back, shaking his head.

The driver frowned, looking puzzled, but as they gently removed the body from the car, he let out a gasp and turned back to me.

That's...me...

I know. I'm sorry, but you didn't survive the crash. I wasn't sure what else to say to him.

My wife! My kids! What will they do? He gave me an anguished look. Please don't sue them—they didn't do anything. This was my fault.

I promise you, I won't sue them. I only want coverage for my car and if we have any injuries. Do you want me to tell your wife anything?

Looking relieved, he nodded. Please...I love her. I love the kids. I'm so sorry this happened. He paused, then added, Can you tell her to look in a safety deposit box at the Midnight Point Credit Union? Box 225. The key's in my sock drawer. There are documents there she'll need. He paused, then whispered, What do I do now?

I scrambled, trying to think of what to say, but then I saw an older woman walking in the middle of the street, directly toward us. There was a remarkable resemblance and, as she drew closer, I saw that she, too, was transparent. She had a shocked look on her face.

Will! Oh, honey, it's too soon. You shouldn't...I thought it would be so much longer before I saw you again. She smiled sadly and held out her hands. Come with me, my dear.

He stared at her for a moment, then let out a soft sigh. Mom. You came for me?

Of course I did. I told you I'd be watching over you. Now take my hand, and let's get out of here. She turned to me. Thank you. Please, talk to Marlene. She's going to need support now, as well as my two grandbabies.

And with that, she turned and silently led Wilson away. They walked off into the snowstorm, and a moment later, vanished into the mists.

"Maisy? Are you all right?" Brenda startled me.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts and said, "I was talking to the driver. He didn't survive. He lost control of the car."

"He talked to you?"

"He didn't realize he'd died. But his mother came to get him, and he's gone now, so all is well. I guess. Except for his family. He asked me to give his wife a message, so now I'll need to contact her and explain that I can talk to the dead."

"That's not all that easy of a conversation to have."

"No. I know that in Midnight Point people will believe me more than they would in a different town, but still... Having some woman show up on your doorstep, telling you she talked to your late husband seconds after he died? That's a hard stretch for a lot of people. Especially for someone who's grieving."

Brenda started to say something but at that moment, the medics headed our way, along with one of the cops. I was surprised they hadn't immediately come over to my car, but then again, we were standing calmly in the street—as calmly as we could—and neither of us looked hurt. Triage ruled, and given Wilson's car was mangled, he had been the higher priority.

“Who was driving?” the cop asked. “I’m Deputy French.”

“Me. I’m Maisy Tripwater. This is Brenda Kline.”

“Are either of you hurt? The medics should check you over,” the deputy said. “They’ll be here in a moment. Unfortunately, the driver of the other car didn’t make it.”

“I figured as much,” I said, then stopped as the sheriff’s car pulled up. Stuart hopped out and, seeing me standing there, hurried over.

“Maisy! Are you all right?”

I tried to smile, but only managed to shiver. “Yeah, I think we are, but I’m not sure. He came sliding across the intersection, through the red light. I was in the middle of a left turn?—”

“We have witnesses to corroborate what she says,” Deputy French said. “I’ve already talked to several pedestrians who saw the whole thing happen. The other driver didn’t survive.”

Stuart caught his breath. “I’m so sorry. Maisy, why don’t you let the medics check you out? We want to make certain you’re okay.” He motioned to the medics’ EMT unit.

“Thanks,” I said. “Brenda, you go first.” As the medic took her aside to sit down on the end of the EMT unit, I turned back to Stuart. “Listen, I have to ask something.”

“Anything,” he said, smiling. His eyes were warm, and his care, genuine.

“I talked to Wilson and he has a message for his wife. I want to know how best to

deliver that. I don't feel I can just show up on her doorstep."

"You mean, he was alive after the crash?" Stuart asked.

I shook my head. "No. I mean... I talked to his spirit. Right after the crash, he came over to me." I told him what happened. "So, I need a message delivered to his wife. I assume, living in Midnight Point, that she believes in ghosts, but..."

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“Well, he was a dog shifter—a German shepherd. I assume his wife is probably a shifter as well, though I could be wrong. I’m about to send a man out to deliver the news. Do you want me to give her your name and card? That might be best.”

I thought about it, then nodded. “Yes, that will work. I leaned on the trunk of my car, writing a short note on the back of a blank sheet of paper. I wasn’t about to hand over my business card. The last thing I wanted was for her to think I was some demented form of ambulance chaser. You’re now single, come and see me for a new romance, and all that. I wrote that I had been in the crash, and that I had some information that I would like to pass on to her. I added my name and number.

“Here,” I said, handing it to Stuart. “Please see she gets this.” I sighed, looking at my car. “I doubt if the insurance will do anything but total my car. I know I sound mercenary, given someone died but...”

“But it’s a pain in the ass, and you shouldn’t have to deal with this sort of thing?” he asked.

I nodded. “Just being practical.” A sudden thought hit me. “Crap, I need to call my aunt so she can come get me.”

“I can drop you off,” Stuart said.

“What about Brenda? She and I needed to have a conversation, but I think that might end up waiting for a day or two.”

“We can take her home, too. But first, you see the medic.” He pointed over to where

the medic team was. Brenda was walking back over to us.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

She nodded. “I think so, but they’re suggesting I let them take me to the ER. My blood pressure’s a little high, but that’s probably the adrenaline rush. I have a bruise on my stomach from the seat belt—it was cinched a little tight, and they want me to get an ultrasound to make sure there’s no internal bleeding. So I’m taking a ride with them to the hospital. The other team will stay here to give you a look-over.”

“I’ll get you Wilson’s insurance info so you can contact them.” I sighed, turned back to Stuart. “I’ll go get checked before they head out. Can you get me his insurance info?”

“Of course,” he said. “Are you still at your aunt’s?”

“Yeah, I’ve decided to stay there for a while, instead of finding a new house. I’m comfortable there, and my aunt likes having me around. To be honest, it’s been lonely since Dan died. As much as I loved our home in Seattle, I have to admit it’s nice to be in a place where every little thing doesn’t remind me of Dan.”

I drifted off, staring at the ground. Stuart reached out, placing his hand on my shoulder.

“It’s hard,” he said. “I lost my fiancée five years ago. Shana had a seizure, and she hit her head when she fell. She broke her neck. She was epileptic, and no one was with her.”

I looked up, holding his gaze. “I’m so sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know that.”

He nodded, his expression grim. “I found her the next morning, when I didn’t hear

from her. If I'd gone over the night before, maybe...The doctors say there wasn't anything I could have done, but I'll always wonder."

"I understand. I keep thinking that if I hadn't asked Dan to go grocery shopping, he would still be alive." I gasped, clapping my hand to my mouth. I'd had never uttered those words aloud before. I didn't even realize that I'd been feeling guilty, until now when they came tumbling out. "I suppose I'd better go get checked out."

Stuart gently turned me toward the medic. "Go on, I'll wait here. If you need to go to the hospital, I'll take you."

He escorted me to the remaining medics, who took my blood pressure, checked me over, and pronounced me fit, but shaken up. I could have told them that.

"I'm fine," I said. "I want to go home."

The tow truck had arrived and was hauling my car to the garage for assessment. I'd call the insurance company when I got home. Wilson had been taken away, and his car was being prepared for towing. I slung my purse and tote over my shoulders and followed Stuart to his car.

"I never expected to have to look for cars this weekend," I said, feeling all out of sorts. Now that the shock was wearing off, my grumpy side was rising.

"Used or new? If you're looking for used, Kenner's Car Lot is the best. Virgil Kenner is a good egg, and he's honest. He'll treat you right." Stuart closed the passenger door as I fastened my seat belt.

"Thanks," I said as he started the car. "And thank you for driving me home."

"I'm sorry about what happened. I'll get a truck out sanding the roads as soon as I get

back to the office. Wilson's tires were practically bald. He shouldn't have been driving on them." He paused, then asked, "So, how does it feel, being back in Midnight Point?"

"This incident notwithstanding, I'm glad, actually. I didn't realize how much I missed it. Astra is thrilled to have me home, and I'm starting to pick up my life again. The past two years since Dan died, I think I've just been existing. In a way, losing my job was a blessing. I wish I hadn't come home that night to find my house destroyed. But at least they saved Miss P.—she's my Maine Coon."

"That's a lot to deal with in one day," Stuart said. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you came home. It's good to see you, Maisy. I mean that." He parked in the driveway. "Say, if you need someone to go car shopping with..."

I hesitated. Talking to Stuart felt natural. Letting him drive me home after the accident was perfectly fine. But car shopping with him?

I knew he probably meant it as a friend, but he had a girlfriend, and I had no intention of stepping on her toes in any way. Stuart had been my high school sweetheart. We hadn't ended on a fight or anything like it and I didn't want Paula thinking that I was looking to win him back.

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Truth was, the thought of dating Stuart again just didn't feel appealing. I liked him, but any chemistry I'd felt in the past was gone.

"Thanks, I'll let you know," I said, unlocking my seatbelt and stepping out of the car. "Please remember to give Wilson's wife my note?"

Stuart leaned my way, in order to see me better. "I gave it to Deputy French. She's headed over to talk to his wife. Her energy is soothing, and I think the news will come from her better than it would from me. I told her it was important that she give Wilson's wife the message."

"Thanks," I said. I shut the door.

He waited and I realized he was waiting for me to make it inside safely, even though it was still light. Grateful for his concern, I waved and headed toward the porch, thinking about the afternoon and all that had transpired.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"You're home!" Astra said, smiling. Then, she stopped. She set down her e-reader and slowly stood. "What happened? I can tell something happened."

"I had an accident," I said, dropping my purse and tote bag on the sofa.

"Oh my gods! Are you all right? Are you hurt?" She suddenly reverted to when I was a child, grabbing me to look me over.

I rested my hand on her shoulder. “It’s all right. I’m fine. The medics checked me out. Can you make me some coffee? And I could use some lunch. I’m shaky, but I’ll be fine. And Brenda’s fine, for the most part. Unfortunately, I can’t say the same for the other driver, or my car. He’s dead, and my car is totaled.”

Astra paused. “Of course. Come in the kitchen, Maisy. How about sandwiches and soup?”

I nodded. “Chicken noodle?”

When I was a little girl, chicken noodle soup had been one of my biggest comfort foods. The kind from the packet, with the freeze dried chicken and the tiny little noodles. And there had been this little soft gel egg in it, which contained the flavoring.

“I still have some of your favorite, so yes. I always keep it around. The stuff lasts forever on the shelf. What kind of sandwich do you want? Tomato?”

I nodded. Again, when I was little, I had read *Harriet the Spy*, and ever since then, I’d been a fan of tomato sandwiches: white bread, butter, a little lettuce, and thick sliced tomatoes. Astra had a greenhouse outback so she always had fresh tomatoes, lettuce, carrots, and herbs.

I slid into the booth. “You know, a table might be nice here, after all. I’m feeling a little claustrophobic right now.”

“So, tell me what happened.” Astra brought out the sandwich ingredients, then a box of the soup mix. She measured water into a pan and then added two packs of soup. I liked the soup a little more concentrated than the recipe called for, so she always used half a cup of water less.

I told her about going over to Brenda's, and the entity that I sensed. "We decided to go out for coffee to talk it over—" My phone sounded and I glanced at it. "Hold on. Brenda's texting me now."

hey maisy. i just arrived home. i'm fine—there was no internal bleeding. honestly, i'm so on edge that i'm going to stay in a hotel tonight. i don't want to deal with whatever energy is hanging out here. can we meet tomorrow? i can take a taxi or something.

why don't you come over to my house at noon? i just got home, myself. i checked out fine, as well, though i doubt my car can say the same.

i'll see you tomorrow, then. i'll text you where i'm staying tonight. i'm packing a quick little bag. oh, i didn't tell you—i met a guy at the hospital. i think i really like him. i'll tell you about him tomorrow and see what you think.

I set my phone down. "Okay, she's fine." I continued with my story.

Astra placed my sandwich in front of me. "Do you think that the accident was caused by whatever it is that's creeping around her house?"

I froze, then slowly turned to her. "Why would..." My first impulse was to say no, but then I leaned my elbows on the table and thought about it. "I don't know," I said. "I'm not sure why it would..."

"What do you think it is—the entity in her house?" Astra ladled out our soup.

Again, I was about to say I didn't know, but something kept dinging at the alarm in the back of my mind. "I think it might be her late husband. He was possessive, abusive..."

“And he didn’t want her, but he didn’t want anybody else to have her, either. Am I right?” Astra sat down with her soup and sandwich—she’d added turkey slices to hers. As soon as she was settled, she stood again. “I forgot the coffee. Latte?”

I shook my head. “Hot mocha, please.”

“Three shots?”

I nodded, still processing what she’d said. It felt right. The reasoning was right there. He was probably a Haunt, a ghost who didn’t want to move on because he was so angry at the living.

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“You know, that sounds plausible. In fact, it sounds right.”

“Sit with your feelings for a while, and see how it settles.” She returned to the table, two large latte mugs of hot mocha in hand. “Let the subject rest while you eat lunch so your subconscious can process the thoughts.”

I nodded. It was a technique I used over and over. My subconscious worked on its own—it processed information and then later, when I least expected it, spit out the answer or the idea I was seeking.

“On to other things, then,” I said. “Stuart brought me home.”

Astra swallowed the bite of her sandwich. “Stuart Waterline? The sheriff? Your high-school boyfriend?”

I nodded. “I met him in the supermarket the other day, and then today, he showed up at the crash site.” Frowning, I added, “He has a girlfriend. I gather he was engaged, but his fiancée died.”

“Then you both have lost someone you loved,” Astra said, stirring her soup with her spoon.

“Right,” I said. “I’m not going to date him again, you know. He’s dating someone. And I’m not ready to date.”

“You’ve been saying that for quite a while. Don’t you think you should start considering taking the next step? I know you’re still grieving, but you will be

mourning him most of your life. I can tell you that right now. You'll never forget Dan, and dating isn't cheating on his memory. He would want you to be happy, to not get stuck in your grief, correct?" Astra finished her sandwich. "More soup?"

I nodded, pushing my bowl toward her. "Thanks, yes. As far as Dan..." I tried to protest. I'd been protesting so long that it had become my go-to response.

"Think before you answer, Maisy. Grief takes as long as it takes, but you can be in two places at once. You can start dating again, and you can still be mourning Dan's loss. They aren't mutually exclusive." Astra leaned back in her chair and glanced out the window. "We're getting the winter snowstorm they projected."

"Yeah, we are." I let out a long sigh. "I guess you're right. I haven't even let myself consider dating. Every time the thought has risen, I've squashed it down before I could even consider it. It feels so traitorous."

"Think of it this way," Astra said. "When you came to live with us, after your mother and father died, did you love us?"

"Of course I did," I said, trying to follow her logic. "I didn't stop loving you because you weren't my parents."

"Right. You were mourning them, but you loved us. The two feelings aren't mutually exclusive. You can love more than one person at a time." She looked at me, and I could feel the care and concern shining through her eyes. Aunt Astra was my rock. I'd loved my aunt Sara, but Astra—she'd always been the rock.

"When I think about it that way, I see you're right. I loved you and Sara as much as I loved my parents. Maybe in a different way, but that difference doesn't matter." I closed my eyes, trying to imagine what it would be like to open myself up to another relationship. I missed sex, yes, but the thought of sleeping with a guy didn't bother me.

It was the emotional aspect that scared me—that felt like cheating. And maybe... Maybe it didn't have to be that way.

"I think I'm scared," I finally said. "It was hard enough losing my parents, and then losing Dan. I don't know if I could do it a third time."

"I thought so," Astra said. "That's enough work for today. Finish your lunch and then, if you wouldn't mind, the front walk could use shoveling. And while I'm healthy enough..."

"Shoveling snow is hard work. I can do it, no problem." I finished my soup and the last of my sandwich, and then—giving Astra a kiss on the cheek—I headed for the front door to shovel the walkway.

By five, I was done and sweaty. I was about to take a quick shower when Crystal called. "The soiree's still on. Do you want to go?"

In all the excitement, I'd forgotten to let her know what happened.

"I had a little accident this morning. I'm without a car, for now," I said. "In fact, I was wondering if you could take me car shopping tomorrow? Maybe early, if possible, since I have a lunch appointment with Brenda."

Crystal hesitated for a moment. "Accident? What kind of accident? What happened?"

I told her everything, including my discussion about relationships with my aunt. "I've got so much going on in my head that I don't know what to think."

"Good grief, that's a lot for one day." She paused, then added, "I'm free tomorrow morning. I can swing by at around nine? We'll find you a new car."

“Nine it is,” I said. “You don’t know what this means to me, lady.”

“I do, I think. As far as dating...well...we can start tonight at the club. I’ll pick you up. I have chains on my car, so don’t worry about accidents. The meeting isn’t far away from your house. And maybe, you can meet a star witch for Brenda. So, how about it?”

I nodded. “I’m nodding,” I said.

“I’ll be there in an hour. Get dolled up, though I’d skip the heels and opt for boots,” Crystal said.

As I hung up, I thanked my lucky stars for such a good friend. Crystal and I had never wavered in our friendship. There had been a number of years where we didn’t see each other as much as we wanted, but each time, we fell right back in our comfortable pattern. And each time, it had further cemented our bond.

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I took a quick shower, then dressed carefully. I decided on a pair of cobalt leggings with silver snowflakes on them, a pale blue tank dress that almost reached my knees, a dark gray long sweater, and then added a beaded lapis lazuli necklace and silver hoop earrings. I brushed my hair back and slid on a headband that matched my leggings, then re-did my makeup.

As I stood back, eying myself in the mirror, for the first time in several years, I realized that I cared what people might think when they looked at me.

The snow had let up—at least for a while—by the time we reached the Community Center, it was almost seven-fifteen. We were late, but then again, mixers like these didn't have firm start times. We'd stopped to buy a box of brownies at Sassy's Espresso Stand. A drive-thru owned by Sassy Longhopper, a rabbit shifter, the shop sold the best vegan brownies in town. Most rabbit shifters were vegetarians, and while I didn't fancy a lot of vegan options, the brownies were incredible. I was convinced she used magic in baking them.

I wanted coffee, but I'd had enough adrenaline for the day, given the accident.

"So, how bad is your car?"

"Bad enough that I need to buy a new one." I rolled my eyes. "I'll be waiting on two insurance checks, now. At least neither situation was my fault, but I'm scared my insurance company will drop me."

"Yeah, they have a tendency to do that," Crystal said. "I'll be happy to take you out tomorrow morning. What do you want?"

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I need a good SUV with traction. I want a tank, though I don’t want it to be huge.”

“Well, I read Car Reports from last month—the safest SUV on the market is a new brand. It’s the Evergreen Vega. It was rated with one of the highest safety levels ever given to an SUV. It’s pricey, but it’s worth it.” Crystal zipped up her jacket before getting out of the car. “They were right when they said that we were going to get slammed with snow.”

“Will it be safe to drive home?” I was feeling leery, given what had happened.

“Yeah, I had snow tires and chains put on a couple days ago.” Crystal picked up the bag of brownies. “Let’s go.”

I pulled my jacket tighter and shivered as a blast of cold air hit me. “I hope this is worth it.”

“Hey, we’re getting out for the night, and after the day you had, I think you need a little fun.” Crystal winked at me, then sighed. “Let’s try to forget about everything for an hour or so.”

“Sounds good to me,” I said, opening the door to the Midnight Point Community Center.

The place was hopping, even on a snowbound night. At least, hopping for how small the town was. Thirty-five hundred people meant that a crowd was anything over thirty. And there had to be at least forty people at the event. The Midnight Hour Social Club wasn’t just for singles, though. And it didn’t give off country club vibes, or I wouldn’t have entered the doors.

I looked around. I’d been back in Midnight Point for two months now, but I still

hadn't caught up with most of the people I remembered. I caught sight of several people I thought I might remember, but the fact was, those days were long past and Crystal and my aunt were the only ones I'd kept in touch with.

"Okay, you need to be my wing woman, friendship-wise. Is there anybody here I should know?" I whispered.

Crystal laughed. "A couple, but though I've seen several of these faces around town, and in my shop, for the most part? I don't know anybody. Except..." She motioned for me to follow her and headed over to a woman who was sitting at one of the tables near the wall, plate of cookies and a cup of fruit punch in front of her.

"Hey, Bealissa, how are you?"

The woman glanced up. The name Bealissa conjured up images of a fantasy princess, but this woman was wearing what looked like velour track suit, and her hair was pulled back in a long, curling blonde ponytail. She was in that indeterminate age range where she could be anywhere from thirty to fifty, and I sensed some sort of magical energy around her. When she saw Crystal, she broke out in a broad smile.

"Thank gods. I was thinking about heading out. I don't know anybody here, and apparently I underdressed for the evening." Her voice had an odd lilt to it, so that it sounded almost like she was singing.

"No worries," Crystal said. "Nobody's going to care. Do you mind if we sit down?"

Bealissa motioned to the chairs. "Be my guest."

"Thanks," I said, sliding into the chair closest to the wall. "I'm Maisy, by the way."

"Maisy's my BFF. We go back all the way to the academy," Crystal said to Bealissa.

“Maisy just moved back to town.” She then turned to me. “Bealissa runs the Pumpkin Patch, a general store on the outskirts of town. She also hosts the farmer’s market there every Saturday and Sunday, from March through December.”

“Call me Bee,” Bealissa said. “And yes, I own the Pumpkin Patch. I also run an autumn fair there, every year.”

I filed away the information. “I love the name,” I said. “Both yours, and your store’s. The Pumpkin Patch conjures up visions of old country stores where they sell fresh eggs and honey.”

“I do,” Bee said. “All the produce and pastries in my shop are sourced from the surrounding area—from the berry fields over in Whatcom County, to the beehives in Whisper Hollow, to the herbs grown by Hedda, who owns the Herbal Apothecary right here in Midnight Point. I have a few items in my store that I outsource, but I like to keep it local, to support the smaller farmers and artists.”

Crystal pointed at the refreshment table. “Maisy and I will grab something to eat and set out the brownies we brought, then we’ll be right back.”

“Are those brownies from Sassy’s Espresso Stand? Can I have one before you put them out for the vultures to feed?” Bee asked.

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Crystal opened the box and offered her one, then she and I strolled over to the refreshments table. A few couples were dancing, but most were standing around chatting.

“This is about as exciting as it was when we were teens,” I said, lowering my voice.

“Yeah, but hey, it’s a night out,” Crystal said. She set the brownies on the table and we picked up paper plates.

I made sure to grab a brownie before we moved on to the sliced fruit and cheese trays. Chips and dip, arancini, crackers, sliced deli meats and breads, and condiments made up the majority of the food, along with several desserts. For drinks, we had a choice between the fruit punch and sparkling water. The club never did have much of a budget for food.

As I filled my plate, a tall man with dark skin and topaz eyes wandered over. He had a glowering look, but his energy seemed almost gentle. His pupils were slits, like a cat’s.

“How do you do? I don’t think I’ve seen either of you here,” he said.

I smiled. His energy was anything but slimy, and I felt a mood boost standing near him. “I’m Maisy Tripwater. I just moved back to town after being gone for a long time.”

“I’m Crystal Jagger, and I run the Mocha Express, downtown on Clearwater Street. Maisy opened up a shop next to me.” Crystal extended her hand and he shook it.

“Well, that’s exciting,” he said. “I’m Niren Wallace. I’m a doctor—general practice,” he said. “My twin brother works over in Whisper Hollow. He’s a doctor, as well.”

Right then, I knew he was a snake-shifter. A number of them entered the medical fields.

“Really? I’m on the lookout for a new doctor since I moved back to town,” I said. “Do you have a card?”

“Of course.” Niren handed me a card and I dropped it in my purse.

“Thank you. We’d better get back to our friend,” Crystal said. She poured herself a glass of sparkling water and I did the same. We said goodbye to the hot, handsome doctor and headed back to the table.

“He’s yummy looking,” she whispered as we moved out of earshot.

“Yes, but he’s not the star witch I’m looking for,” I said, grinning. Before we approached the table again, I asked, “What’s Bee’s story? Is she a shifter?”

“No, actually. She’s a dryad.”

I blinked. “She’s Fae? What’s she doing here? I didn’t think the Fae mingled with humans...or shifters...or witches.”

“They don’t all that often, but Bealissa is the liaison between the Fae and the city government. She’s on the city council, and helps keep the peace by stopping developers who are threatening to develop over sacred areas. She actually holds a powerful place in Midnight Point, and it’s good to have her on your side. She’s agreed to set aside the issues with thanking the Fae, for the opportunity to keep the wild places in Midnight Point.”

I nodded as we returned to the table.

The Fae were tricky and dangerous to deal with, and they controlled natural forces that even earth witches didn't know about. But it occurred to me that my aunt might like to meet her, if she hadn't already, to ask for some tips on her gardens.

As we ate, watching the crowd, I turned to Bee. "Do you mind if I ask you something?"

She furrowed her brow, then said, "Go ahead."

"Do you ever do consultations on gardens? My aunt is an earth witch and she's always looking for ways to strengthen her garden. I think the soil in the yard is deficient, but she's tried everything, and she still has problems growing some of her favorite flowers and vegetables."

Bee tilted her head, and then I caught the look behind the glamour. I saw the odd tilt to her eyes, the features so chiseled that you could cut diamonds on them. She was mesmerizingly beautiful to a dangerous degree.

"I'll be happy to come over and take a look. I'm always there for someone trying to improve the soil make their plants happy. Here, let me give you my number."

We exchanged numbers, and I was about ready to suggest that Crystal and I leave—nothing much was going on—when the door slammed open and an older woman wandered in. She was carrying a crystal ball with her, cradled in her arm, and she glanced around the room. Her pupils were white and glazed over, but I still had the feeling that she could see everything. Everyone fell silent, moving back.

"Holy crap," Crystal said. "We need to get out of here."

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“Don’t you remember? Skula?The Wandering Eye?” Crystal dragged me out of my chair, but before we could skirt around to the exit, the woman turned toward us.

I suddenly remembered. Skula, a blind oracle, was a spirit in the town. She appeared before important events—usually of dire nature—and she would pick one person to focus on and give her reading. She was never seen other than when something bad was going to happen, and people she delivered her prophecies to had a way of either getting hurt, or disappearing for good.

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She focused in on me, and I could feel the energy swirling around her, caught into a vortex. It was like facing a living tornado. If she was even living. Nobody knew what she was.

I stumbled back against the wall, my heart racing.

“What do you...” My voice drifted off. She wasn’t acknowledging me, just cornering me.

“The gateway will open again. Chaos is dancing, and once it finds you, there’s no escape.” Her voice echoed the sound of corn husks in a fallow field, with the wind whistling through the dry stalks. Her words filled the room, echoing from wall to wall. And I was at the center of the bullseye.

“What do you mean—” I started to say, but before I could finish my sentence, she turned and vanished, leaving a trail of mist behind her.

She was gone, and I felt like I’d just been cursed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Cripes,” Crystal said, grabbing my arm and leading me back to the table. Bee quickly handed me my sparkling water and I drank it, shaken.

The gateway will open again. Chaos is dancing, and once it finds you, there’s no escape.

The Wandering Eye had appeared enough that everybody knew she was real, but I'd forgotten all about her during my time away. Children were taught to run if they saw her. In fact, there were several entities who made their home in Midnight Point that I'd managed to push out of my mind.

"What the hell is she talking about?" Crystal asked.

"I don't know, and I really don't want to find out," I said. "I'm nervous enough as it is, with the accident, and now this happens? I should never have come tonight," I added.

Bee turned to me. "When one of the speretas comes calling, it doesn't matter where you're at. They'll find you."

"What's a speretas?" Crystal asked.

"One of the spirit folk—the entities who make their homes in the shadow towns. Every shadow town has its own group, and sometimes they may overlap. That's another reason I'm on the town council. I keep watch for what the speretas are up to." Bee said it like she might rattle off a duty like filing or answering phones.

"Who hires you for that?" I asked.

Bee pressed her lips together and looked away. Finally, she turned back. "My people. We keep an eye on them. And the shadow towns would do well to follow our suit."

I glanced at Crystal. "I gather we don't?"

"I don't know. You should ask your aunt," she said.

I didn't feel like sticking around after that. Everybody was gawking at me, and

though a few people came over to introduce themselves, most people acted like I was Typhoid Mary. Crystal and I left early, after Bee and I exchanged numbers.

“I like her,” I said, fastening my seat belt. “I didn’t think I’d like any of the Fae that much. They can be arrogant assholes, from what I understand.”

“They can,” Crystal said. “Bealissa is mostly a straight-shooter, but I never fully trust her. The Fae are crafty and it’s an innate trait, not simply an affect.” She was trying to keep her voice steady, but I could tell she was rocked by everything that had happened over the past week.

“Right.” I stared out the window, watching the falling snow, thinking about my life and choices. If I had stayed in Midnight Point to begin with, all of this might still have happened. And, if my house hadn’t burned down, maybe something else might have driven me back to Midnight Point.

Crystal pulled into the driveway. “Ask your aunt about Skula, and give me a call tomorrow?”

“I will,” I said, but my mind was a thousand miles away. What had happened frightened me, and I had no clue how to react. “I’ll call you tomorrow, probably in the evening.” Waving, I hurried into the house, shutting out the winter.

Astra was curled up on the sofa, watching a show. Miss P. was stretched out on the back of the sofa above her, and Dahlia was snoozing at her feet, at the end of the sofa. As I entered the house, I didn’t want to interrupt my aunt’s peaceful evening, but I knew I had to talk to her.

“Any chance you could turn off the TV for a little bit?” I asked, shrugging out of my jacket and tossing it on the Ottoman. I sat down in the recliner, leaning down to unzip my boots and pulled them off.

“You’re back early,” Astra said. But then, she took one look at my face and turned off the television, straightening up. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“Something happened at the mixer tonight. I have no idea what it means.”

Auntie paled. “Are you all right? Is Crystal okay?”

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“I think we’re okay. But I’m not sure, after how the evening ended.” I told her what happened. “And at the very end, the Wandering Eye vanished. It has to be important, for her to appear and give me that cryptic message. At least, I think so.”

“First,” Astra said, “don’t panic. The creature brings messages, yes. But they don’t all mean gloom and doom. I admit, this one doesn’t sound incredibly positive, but we’ll get to the heart of it. I promise you that.” She stood, pacing. “The Gateway will open again. Chaos is dancing, and once it finds you, there’s no escape. That was it, correct?”

I nodded. “Yes, in fact I wrote it down as soon as I came out of the shock. I gather the Fae call them speretas. So I learned my first Fae word today, as well. Do you know Bealissa?”

“Vaguely,” Astra said. “I’ve met her before, but it was with a group of witches from the Dark Moon Society. It was several years ago, when she first was appointed to the town Council. There was an uproar, and a few stray idiots protesting. But she’s been a good thing for our town, and I think it helps Fae/human relations.”

“Good, because I like her.”

“I wonder why Skula visited you. I’d expect her to show up at Nightshade’s, or the mayor’s. But this is definitely a message. We need to figure it out though, because I’m pretty sure she was talking about the Covenant of Chaos.”

“I wondered about that, although I seem like an unlikely recipient. Can you check my cords and wards? I do really like to make sure that I’m not being drained or followed

or whatever they can do energetically.”

Astra motioned for me follow her into the kitchen, and then she retrieved her supplies from the ritual room: war water, protection powder, her dagger, and a white pillar candle that smelled like lemongrass and lavender. She set them on the counter, then retrieved a chair from the dining room, sitting it so that she could traverse around it. She motioned for me to take my seat, and then she began to cast a circle.

“Maiden cast the circle strong, keep is free from those at odds.

Mother cast the circle bright, protect us now, the ancient gods.

Old Crone cast the circle wise, calling on the frozen stars.”

She paused as the energy settled around us. Then, once again she held up her dagger she stood facing the north. “Spirits of earth, spirits of might, anchor now this magic rite.”

Turning to the east, she said, “Spirits of air, spirits of flight, cleanse now this magic rite.”

Next, she turned to the south. “Spirits of flame, spirits of fire, infuse the spell so it might spire.”

And lastly, she turned to the west. “Spirits of water, ocean’s daughter, seal the spell with waves and water.”

The energy tumbled around us in waves, first the circle of pure energy, infused by the gods. And then each element added its own power, spiraling around us, creating a sphere so that we were protected. Astra set down her dagger, and turned to me. She held out a small orange-sized crystal ball, flickering with energy from within. She

walked around me, and I could feel her probing my aura, examining it to make sure that there was nothing there that shouldn't be.

"It looks like you're secure. I can see Skula's energy around you, but it hasn't latched on. She's so strong that I'm not surprised to read an imprint. I don't see anything like a curse or anything else, for that matter. I suspect she gave you this message for reason, but you're not under a spell or curse. I'm going to leave the circle up, and press the energy out to surround the house tonight. We don't need anything else happening, especially while we sleep."

Feeling reassured, I stood up and helped her roll the waves of energy out toward the parameters of the yard. It wasn't all that hard.

Astra and Sara had taught me well when I was young.

You placed your hands on the bubble of energy and imagined it expanding, essentially growing it out to the size that you wanted it to be. As we encompassed the entire lot, I suddenly felt calm, my worry draining away.

Magic was like that, it could take away worry, even if for a little while.

After we finished, I decided to raid the refrigerator. I hadn't gotten a chance to eat at the mixer, and I realized I was hungry.

"So, what do you think this all means?" I asked.

"I'm not entirely sure," Astra said. Maybe it's a message that you're supposed to deliver. Remember, we were talking about you joining the Dark Moon Society? Maybe it's a message for Nightshade and the Order of the Moon? I think I'll call her tomorrow and see if she can come visit."

“That’s fine with me, except I have lunch plans. Brenda is coming over around noon. So it needs to be later than two.” I sighed. “I went to the mixer tonight hoping to find a match for Brenda. I sure didn’t expect to end up like this.”

“Sometimes, life throws us into the deep end and we just have to learn to swim.” Astra joined me in raiding the fridge. We pulled out left over fried chicken and pie from the other night, and settled ourselves in the kitchen booth.

“Crystal seems to think that if my house hadn’t burned down, something else would have happened to drive me back home,” I said.

“Remember, shadow towns call those whom they want. And they get rid of the people that they don’t want. Oh, not necessarily through any ominous means, although Whisper Hollow’s really good about making people disappear.”

I snorted. “Whisper Hollow’s like... The shadow town of shadow towns. That’s one of the most dangerous places around.”

“Correct. However, all shadow towns are selective. Midnight Point, Moonshadow Bay, Terameth Lake, and Crescent Falls... All of them call their people to them.”

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I bit into a crispy drumstick, savoring the flavor in my mouth. Astra was right. I could feel it in my bones. Midnight Point needed me. And I needed her.

Morning arrived and Astra was waiting for me as I padded down the stairs. The “snow event” had turned into a full-blown winter storm, and we had accumulated seven inches of snow in the yard so far. That was, seven inches of new snow, bringing us to a total of ten.

“Well, we always seem to get the most snow here in January and February,” I said, yawning as I turned on the espresso machine. Astra had made breakfast—oatmeal with cinnamon and brown sugar and raisins, and sausage on the side. “So this is par for the course.”

“True that. Listen, I already called Nightshade. She asked if we could come over later this afternoon. My car’s good for the drive, so I told her yes.”

“Sounds good to me.” I fitted the portafilter into the machine after tamping down the coffee, then pulled three shots for a steaming hot mocha. “Want some?”

Astra nodded. “That sounds lovely. Triple shot for me, as well. It’s a cold morning out there, and even though I had double-pane windows installed, they only stand up to so much cold weather. I had to turn up the heat again this morning.”

I settled at the table with my oatmeal. “So, if we have the kitchen widened, when do you think it might happen?”

Astra smiled, then. She handed me a bowl filled with oatmeal, and set a platter of

sausage links on the table. I added a little half and half, and a little milk to my porridge, then some butter and stirred it all together. One big bowl of cozy carbs, I thought. Perfect for an icy morning. I took a long sip of my mocha, then settled back as the heat flooded through me.

Miss P. jumped on the table, sniffing at the sausages, and I shooed her down. "I'll feed you later," I said.

"She ate. I fed her at the same time I fed Dahlia. She was knocking against my legs, threatening to topple me. That girl has muscle on her." But Astra laughed.

She had come to love Miss P. and lately, had taken to trying to teach her how to stand up and dance. If I tried it, Miss P. would have given me the evil eye, but she seemed to dote on my aunt, and the two had bonded in a way that almost made me jealous. Almost, because Miss P. and I were already best buddies.

"Well, then, you're lying," I said, leaning down to scritch her behind the ears. Miss P. gazed up at me and let out a purr, then pranced away, her tail unfurling like a feathered wand.

Astra opened her tablet and brought up the local news. "Hmm...one of the Henderson boys has gone missing," she said, frowning. "He was last seen three days ago. At first the deputies thought he ran away, but they found his phone and tablet, and his wallet. No kid would ever leave those things behind. At least, no teenager."

I frowned. "Is there anything to indicate what might have happened?"

"No," Astra said. "And even worse, they checked all the security cameras on the ferries for the past three days and there was no sign of him. They film every single person and car that enters the ferry, so if he was in a car, he'd have to be lying down in the back seat."

My stomach twitched. “I don’t think they’re going to find him alive,” I said, glancing up. “I just...I have a really bad feeling about this. I wish we could do something. Are the search parties looking for him? There are a lot of wild places on this island, even though it’s fairly small.”

Midnight Point wasn’t just the name of the town, it was also the name of the whole island. And while the town covered a sizable amount of the island, that still left a lot of forested land. There were also sea caves that flooded during high tide. If he’d been mucking around in one of them, there was a chance he could have drowned.

“It says the search and rescue parties are out in full-force. He might have fallen and hit his head. Hypothermia wouldn’t take long to set in during this storm.” She sighed and moved on to the next article. “Oh, Stuart’s up for reelection this year.”

“Do people like him? I mean, he’s a nice guy, but what’s the general consensus on his performance as sheriff?” Since I had moved back to town, I needed to catch up on local politics. I wasn’t an activist, but I did my best to keep abreast of current events on both a local and national level.

“They do. His approval rating in several polls runs higher than seventy-five percent, which is almost unheard of. But Stuart’s made a name for himself as sheriff. I suspect he may eventually run for governor.” Astra glanced at me. “Fancy yourself a politician’s wife?”

I sputtered, almost spitting out my oatmeal.

“I do not, and I’ll thank you not to start rumors. I told you, he has a girlfriend and I have no designs on becoming the other woman. I like Stuart, but I don’t know if I’d date him, even if he was free. I think we’ll do better as friends.”

Astra handed me the tray of sausages. “Well, you know best. And truth be, I think

you might be more than Stuart could handle. He's a very by-the-book person, and I don't think that he's a wolf shifter who would date far out of the Pack."

"Oh, I think he'll date out of the Pack. He dated me, if you'll remember. But as far as marriage and settling down? Stuart needs a wolf shifter who will wait for her man at the door when he gets home, and who will raise the kids and take care of the house. He's not a chauvinist, but he likes his traditions." I laughed, then. "I can't believe we're even talking about this. It still seems so surreal."

"Sometimes life is like that—one change causes a ripple effect, a cascade of shifts." She paused to eat some of her oatmeal, then said, "I'll stop teasing you about Stuart. I know you and he aren't meant for each other, but I can't help but remember the nights when he'd show up on the doorstep and you'd race out to meet him."

"I thought I loved him," I said, remembering those days. "I thought I knew what love really was. I guess I did, for my age. But I've learned along the way that there are so many kinds of love, and very few of them lead to the altar. In some ways, I don't know if I want to ever get married again. The pain of Dan's death still haunts me...but then I'll think about all the good times we had, and I'll wonder if maybe I can have that again."

I set down my spoon and picked up my latte mug. The mocha had a slightly bitter taste to it, enough to give me a nice jolt, but then the sugar hit and the peppermint, and smoothed it out.

"Why didn't you ever get married?" I asked. "Haven't you ever met anybody you wanted to marry, here in Midnight Point?"

"Well, there have been a couple of men who caught my eye, but then I found out they were married, or confirmed bachelors. One was a teacher at the Midnight Manor Academy, but after we went on a couple dates, I realized that he was gay."

“Was he looking for a beard?” I asked.

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She shook her head. “I’m convinced that he didn’t even know his sexual orientation. You’d think someone who’s witchblood would be more self-aware, but apparently, he wasn’t ready to face his reality. I got out before I got hurt. He later went on to marry the love of his life—a man who owns a small neighborhood grocery store, and I went to their tenth anniversary party last year.”

“Well, I’m glad he found his match,” I said. Love was love was love, and love between any consenting adults made me happy, as long as they didn’t hurt anybody else in the process. I had always been a hopeless romantic, reading romances from the time I was in middle school. The world seemed a bleak and scary place, and love made it so much more bearable.

“I am too,” Astra said. “I like to think that when he dated me, he found his way to his true self. We were great friends, and we had fun, but there was no chemistry there, and I like to think that, after dating me, he finally realized what he’d been running from and began to seek out who he really was. If I helped him on his journey, then I’m glad. I wasn’t heartbroken—I knew we weren’t a match. But we did have some fun times together, though never with more than a kiss here or there.”

“Well, I’m done with breakfast,” I said. “I’ll wash dishes this morning. I’ve been slacking off a bit lately.”

“I don’t mind,” Astra said. “Oh, by the way, I put some chicken in to marinate. All we need to do is bread it and fry it. I figure that, along with a green salad and some rolls might make for a nice lunch for you and Brenda.”

I hugged her. “Thanks. Now scoot. I’ll clean the kitchen, then maybe I’ll chill until

she gets here. Oh,” I added, stopping her before she left the room. “What should I wear to meet Nightshade later today?”

“Something nice. It doesn’t have to be fancy, but when you meet the high priestess, it’s better to show up in clean, mended clothing. Don’t wear flowing sleeves, in case she decides to light a bunch of candles.” She laughed, then waved as she headed out the door. “I’ll be in the greenhouse, if you need me.”

I turned back to the sink full of dishes and began to rinse them and stack them in the dishwasher. Outside, the snow continued to fall.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Brenda arrived at eleven-forty-five. She paid the cab and slogged through the snow, up the walkway, which was covered again. I caught sight of her through the window and let her in.

“Hey,” I said, reaching to take her coat. “How are you doing?”

“Not bad. Still a little shaken from yesterday, but doing better.” She looked around. “What a cozy home.”

“My aunt’s done a lot over the years to make it that way. I grew up here, from the time I was seven. My aunt and her sister raised me, after my parents died. So, my aunt is making chicken tenders, salad and rolls for lunch. Will that be okay?”

Brenda nodded. “That sounds wonderful. Do you have any tea?”

“I think so.” We entered the kitchen, where Astra was starting to cook the chicken. The rolls were in the oven. My stomach rumbled. Even after the big breakfast, the smell of yeast and baking bread always triggered my appetite.

“Astra, this is Brenda. Brenda, my aunt—Astra.”

Astra gave her a wave with the tongs.

“Do we have tea?” I foraged in the cupboard. I knew my aunt occasionally drank herbal tisanes, but as for actual tea, I wasn’t sure.

“We do. It’s in the box with the hyacinths on it,” Astra said.

I poked around and finally found the lovely little box Astra was talking about. I opened it to find a stack of black tea in sealed bags. I glanced over at Brenda.

“How strong do you want it? One teabag? Two?”

“One, please, with a little milk and sugar.”

I found a large china cup with red and white stripes on it, placed the teabag in it, then carried it over to the table. After that, I plugged in the electric kettle, found the creamer, and placed it and the sugar bowl on the table.

Then, I poured myself a glass of sparkling water, added ice, and then topped it off with lemon coffee syrup, for a make-shift Italian soda. The kettle began to steam and I poured water into the tea cup, then turned it off and stood beside Brenda, who had scooted into the booth.

“This won’t really work for lunch, so let’s go into the dining room,” I said. “Follow me, please.” I led her into the dining room, where we sat at the table. “My aunt’s going to renovate—we’ll have a bigger kitchen by the end of the summer, I predict. I love the breakfast nook, but it really is too cramped. I’ve decided to stay here with her for...well...I don’t know how long.”

“It really is a cozy home. You’ve seen my house. It’s about as far from cozy as you can get. So, let’s discuss that creature in my house. Do you think it’s Edgar?”

“I think it could be. How long has it been around?” I asked.

“Off and on, since Edgar died.” She paused, then a light bulb went off and she stiffened. “Oh good heavens, I just realized something.”

“What is it?”

“The activity picked up every time that I decided to try dating again. I’d get distracted by it and wipe my profile off of the dating apps. Except this time, it wasn’t a dating app. I came to you. Maybe that’s why I’ve been having nightmares about you—maybe Edgar’s threatening you because you’re helping me.” Brenda leaned forward, tapping the table with her perfectly manicured nails. “I know I’m right.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:40 am

A little bell rang. “You hit the nail on the head. I think... Yes. That snake creature that showed up here? I’ll bet it was Edgar and he managed to hitchhike a ride home with me that night. When we patched the break in the grid, he was sent back to your house. That means, he’s doubly dangerous. Not only can he affect the physical world, he can move around. Andthatmakes him a Haunt. Haunts are dangerous.”

“Yes, they are,” Brenda said. “I grew up in Whisper Hollow. I know all too much about Haunts.” She sighed. “What do we do? He’ll ruin any relationship I manage to get into. If I even manage to find someone.”

“Well, we have to exorcise him,” I said. “We’ll get rid of him.”

“Are you trained to do that?” she asked.

I’d done several house clearings over the years, and I’d dealt with spirits off and on, but I wasn’t confident in my ability to take on the bigger nasties and come out without something going awry.

“Well, I’m not entirely sure. But my aunt’s good at it, and maybe she’d be willing to help out?—”

“Maybe I’d be willing to help out on what?” Astra asked, entering the dining room, a platter of chicken tenders in one hand, and a basket of rolls in the other. “Can you set the table, please?”

I jumped up. “I’ll be right back.”

Gathering the plates, silverware, and the salad, I managed to balance all of them and return to the table without any accidents. We sorted out the dishes and settled in for lunch.

“We think Brenda’s late husband is haunting her,” I said.

“I thought back to every time I’ve started to look at dating again. Each time, something happens—never anything good—that totally disrupts my plans. Ghostly activity, appliances breaking down so that I have to focus on home repair, the car’s brakes going—I was in an accident a couple years back, and it could have been deadly. I was lucky that the other driver was able to get out of the way. I spun into a tree, but hit on the backside of the car, on the passenger side. Luckily, I was able to get out and away before the fire started.”

“You didn’t tell me that,” I said. “I can’t imagine how scary the accident yesterday must have been for you.”

Brenda nodded. “I do have some PTSD over it, and yesterday didn’t help. That’s one reason I let them take me to the hospital. I wanted to make certain everything was okay.”

“If Edgar is trying to stop you from dating, then he’s angry at you...or he loved you so much that?—”

“Angry would be correct,” Brenda said. “He didn’t want me when he had me, but he didn’t want me to be happy with anybody else. He refused to get a divorce, even though I asked him a couple times. I would have left, but he frightened me. And then, our people don’t condone divorce. He hadn’t outright hit me, so I didn’t have a case for the council. And now, I have the house, I have the money, and he’s...dead.”

Astra set down her fork and closed her eyes. “I can feel him poking around. He’s

trying to break through the wards, to hear what we're talking about. But he can't."

"This time. I think he was the snake creature," I said. "Brenda's had several nightmares about me being in danger."

"You're trying to help me," Brenda said. "Now that we're talking about this, I can see Edgar trying to hurt you."

"We wondered if you might be able to help me exorcise Edgar," I said, turning to Astra. "I'm afraid that I'm not strong enough."

"I disagree, but I can help, this time. But I think you need to develop these abilities on your own," my aunt said. "You're going to need them, and I can't always be there. So I want you to sign up for some remedial classes at Midnight Manor Academy. They have continuing adult education."

"Whatever you say," I said. "So, what do we do first?"

"First?" Astra said. "First, we enjoy lunch. Then, we'll strategize and take care of your ex for good."

After lunch, Brenda left, heading back to her hotel. I brought up the Midnight Manor website and clicked on the section for continuing education, and scrolled through the offerings. Astra had given me a list of what I should take. The school worked on a semester system, and the new semester had started, but there were still a couple of days to enroll.

I found a basic exorcism class, along with a class on cryptozoology that sounded interesting, and a class on advanced protection. That was all the credit load I could handle, along with running my business, so I added them to the cart—so to speak—and hit checkout.

Unlike regular classes, I didn't need to be enrolled to take them.

I entered my credit card information, printed out the receipt and the schedule, and stared at the page. I'd basically signed away any free time I had. My first class was next week, and I'd have classes every Monday, Wednesday and Friday evenings.

"Are you almost ready to go? Nightshade will be waiting and the last thing we want is to be late. One thing you need to know about her: if we have a meeting, be there on time. She doesn't tolerate tardiness, and it's a good way to get assigned to the grunt chores of the coven. It doesn't matter what seniority level you're at. I spent an entire month being in charge of tending the compost for the Dark Moon Society's herb garden two years ago, and that wasn't my idea of fun, even though I'm an earth witch."

"When are meetings? I signed up for three classes, each one meets one day a week. Or evening, rather." If I joined the Society, I didn't want to get stuck with mucking around in decaying vegetable matter.

"Saturday nights, except on the week of the Full Moon, then we meet that night. But the academy understands, and with continuing education classes, it's not like you'll get kicked out of school." Astra had changed into a nice pantsuit, rather than her jeans and T-shirt. "Go dress, and hurry up. We don't want to be late."

"What should I wear?" I had no clue what one wore when meeting a high priestess.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:40 am

“Something on the order of what you were wearing last night—the leggings, tunic outfit.”

“That’s doable.” I hurried to my room, where I decided that last night’s dress was still clean enough to wear again, though I’d put on clean leggings. I brushed my hair back into a pony tail, and touched up my makeup, then slid into a pair of knee high snow boots. They weren’t Uggs, but they had the same look. As I returned to the living room, Astra gave me an approving nod.

“That works. Grab your purse and let’s go.”

As we headed out to the car, I caught my breath. The world was crystal white. Everywhere, the blanket of white cloaked dirt and grime, and the entire world seemed to sparkle.

Nightshade lived on the opposite side of town, so we took it nice and easy, and tried to avoid the side streets until we couldn’t. The high priestess lived on a slope, but Astra had snow tires and we managed to plow our way up the hill, sliding a little, until we were at the top. It was a slow incline, thank gods. If it had been any steeper, even snow tires wouldn’t have been enough.

“How long till we get back to rain and gloom?” Astra asked. “This is pretty but I think we’ve had more than our share.”

“It’s supposed to taper off tonight and by late next week, we’ll be back to regular temperatures and rain. But with this much snow, it could take a while to fully melt.” I’d been checking my weather app quite a bit over the past few days.

“There, ahead—that’s Nightshade’s house.”

Nightshade lived in a Victorian house which brought to mind gazebos and garden parties and colorful rooms filled with nicknacks. Only Nightshade’s house was painted a leaf green on the outside, blending in with the surrounding trees. She lived on a heavily wooded lot, offering her privacy from her neighbors.

“The garden’s around back,” Astra said.

“Well, it’s a beautiful place, at least from the outside,” I said. “She’s taken really good care of the place, it looks like.”

“She does. No cobwebs and spooky corners for her, I’ll tell you that. The inside’s been renovated—well, you’ll see. Just don’t expect tiny rooms and velveteen settees.”

We parked in the driveway, and there was a stone path leading from the drive to the main sidewalk. Both were coated with snow, but it was obvious that they’d been shoveled at some point that morning. We passed beneath the branches of a large oak that grew up next to the side of the house. It shaded the drive, the stone path leading to the main walkway, and the side yard. Beneath the oak, a cluster of ferns rose, almost waist high, and I could easily imagine crocuses and tulips and daffodils peeking out, come spring.

Beside the steep staircase leading up to the porch, a long ramp with a gentle grade stretched out. Both steps and ramp had guard rails, and the steps were snow-free, as was the ramp.

“How does she keep them free of snow? Does she shovel every five minutes?” I noticed that as the snow met the wood, it melted, vanishing into thin trickles of water.

“They’re heated. It could be radiant heat like we have in the house, perhaps.

Nightshade has a lot of clients that come visit her. She needs to have easy access for them to enter her home.”

Astra rang the bell and, within seconds, a woman answered the door. She must have been in her late thirties, and she was wearing an apron over a flowered dress.

“We’re here to see Nightshade. She’s expecting us,” Astra started to say.

“Oh yes, Ms. Svensson, please come in.” She stood back, escorting us in and taking our coats before we could say another word. “Ms. Evergreen is waiting in the living room, please go ahead.”

“Thank you, Irena.” As Astra led us toward the right, the maid—I assumed she was the maid—hung up our jackets.

The foyer led into a massive room. Astra was right, the house had been renovated far from the original, because most Victorian homes had tiny, cramped rooms.

The room we entered was the size of three rooms, at minimum, and it was clean, tidy, and polished. The floor was marble, with an outer perimeter polished black, and the inner pattern a shade that reminded me of a dirty gold or a gold-olive.

The sofa and chairs were black leather and green microfiber, the inset shelves some sort of ebony wood, and the accents were dark steel and glass. All in all, it felt like we were in a professional conservatory, with the myriad plants scattered around the room. The diffused light came from both the ceiling chandelier, and inset side lights that glimmered with a warm, comforting glow, yet were still bright enough to read by.

One thing was abundantly clear to me: Nightshade had money, exquisite taste, and the place reeked of magic and power.

“Please sit down,” Irena said, entering the room. “May I offer you something to drink? Lemonade? Coffee? Tea?”

“I’ll have coffee, thank you. Espresso, if you have it.”

“Of course. How many shots and would you like milk or cream with that?”

“Three shots, a little cream, and one sugar, please.”

“Very good. And for you, Ms. Svensson?” She never missed a beat, turning smoothly to my aunt. She had her role down pat, that much was for sure.

“Raspberry tea,” Astra said.

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Once again, Irena left the room. I was about to ask Astra what sort of business Nightshade ran, when the high priestess entered the room. Even if I hadn't known whose house we were in, I would have been able to pinpoint Nightshade solely on the magic that emanated from her. She was a woman who controlled her element, and she controlled the room.

"Astra, thank you for coming," Nightshade said. Although she was a little older, her witchblood heritage took away any sense of frailty.

Nightshade was wearing a pair of olive knit palazzo pants, with a white button down shirt, and a black lace shawl. She had on a chunky necklace that I guessed was olivine and moss agate, and matching earrings. A large cocktail ring—topaz—graced her middle finger, and her sleek silver hair was pulled back into a tidy chignon. Her makeup was neutral, but it was obvious she wasn't bare-faced, and she walked with the grace of someone who had seen a lot of years with a crown on her head. While she might not wear a literal crown, she was witchblood nobility.

"Thank you for inviting us," Astra said. "I'd like to present my niece, Maisy Tripwater."

Nightshade regarded me quietly for a moment, then extended her hand. "I'm so pleased to meet you, Maisy. Your aunt's told me a lot about you. All good, of course," she added with a smile.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm pleased to meet you, too." I wasn't at all sure how to address her. I'd never met a high priestess before, except in the academy, and during my school years, we addressed our teachers with the term "professor."

“You can call me Nightshade,” she said, picking up on my uncertainty. “Your aunt tells me that you’re interested in joining the Dark Moon Society?”

I nodded. “Yes, I am. And my friend Crystal is also interested.”

“We do have room for several more participants. However, there are rules that you should be aware of, and once you pledge in service, you’ll be held to those rules. This isn’t like joining a regular coven. You’ll be in service to the Crown Magika, and they don’t suffer disloyalty...or stupidity. I assume you’re in good standing on the rolls?”

I nodded. “I think so. I’ve never had much to do with that side of the witchblood community.”

“Her mother was on the rolls. Her father...well, he was adopted, but the Aseer tested him when he was younger and he was definitely one-hundred percent witchblood. She couldn’t pinpoint his bloodline, but he was of magical stock.”

“Well, adoption is a good thing, and as long as he was certified witchblood by the Aseer, there’s no problem. We don’t base things on name, as much as abilities.” She glanced over at Astra. “Honesty, now. How is she on her magic?”

“Lacking a bit, but that should even out. She attended the academy when she was young, and she’s signed up for adult continuing classes.” My aunt glanced at me, smiling. “Midnight Point called her home for a reason, though we’re not sure why. But...we do need to talk to you about something else. Maisy was visited by the Wandering Eye last night, and given a message. I have the feeling that it’s not only for her, but perhaps for the Dark Moon Society.”

Nightshade let out long sigh. “Something is coming, I can feel it. That’s one reason we need the society to be at full strength. What was the message?”

I took a deep breath. “She said, The gateway will open again. Chaos is dancing, and once it finds you, there’s no escape. I have no idea what she was talking about, but it felt important.”

Nightshade sat back, staring at me. “It was a message for you, but also for the Dark Moon Society,” she said. “And it proves to me that you should become a member. Your friend too—she was there with you, wasn’t she? When the Wandering Eye came through.”

“Yes, she was.”

The high priestess continued to stare at me. Finally, she said, “The Covenant of Chaos has reemerged in Moonshadow Bay, but that’s not the only place. We—the Order of the Moon—have long felt the rumblings and warnings that they are rising to power again, and we’re going to be on the front lines, trying to push them back. A spiritual war is on the horizon, and it’s time to strengthen the ranks and prepare for what we’re facing.”

And with that, I realized that I was not only joining the ranks of a prestigious organization that went back thousands of years, but I was signing up to help protect the populace from magical attack, to be a magical warrior in what could very well be a deadly assault.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

After that, everything else on the agenda seemed to fade in importance. But if I’d learned one thing over the years, it was that even though something huge was looming, the smaller steps along the way were equally as important. Even if you got cancer, you could still be hit by a bus if you stepped off the curb one second too soon, and then the big “C” faded to nothing.

“So, Maisy, why don’t you tell Nightshade about Brenda’s case. She might have some good advice for you.” Astra gave me a nudge.

I was still feeling a little star-struck. It wasn’t every day that I met the high priestess who was affiliated with the Crown. True, the Order of the Moon was only one organization under the Court Magika’s jurisdiction, but Nightshade still carried an enormous amount of clout compared to the average member of the witchblood community.

“I’m not sure she’s interested,” I started to say.

“Once you become a member, everybody will be interested. Go ahead,” Nightshade said.

I told her what had happened and our supposition that Edgar was responsible, and how he had interfered every time Brenda tried to get close to another man.

“You’re correct in that he’s a Haunt,” Nightshade said. “You’ll need to send him over to the Veil.”

She reached for my hands and I offered them to her. Her skin was warm and tingly, and I felt a low vibration as she held my fingers in hers. It was like a bass voice, so low you could feel it more than hear it. I kept quiet, waiting for her to speak.

After a few moments, she took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “All right. You have the ability to take this on, and it will teach you much. But you must focus, and you have to believe you can do this. Belief goes a long way. It won’t engineer your success, but it will help shore up your magic.”

“How do you suggest I approach him? Do I use a standard exorcism rite?” I was honestly clueless. I’d cleared houses, but I’d never actually exorcised a spirit before. I

wasn't clear on the procedure.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:41 am

“I suggest you use a spirit trap,” Nightshade said. “I can give you the components.”

I thought for a moment. I hadn’t thought about spirit traps in years—but yes, that might actually work!

Excited, I said, “That’s a fantastic idea. I’ve never used one and didn’t even think about it.”

“I’ll get you the components and we’ll go over the spell.” Nightshade excused herself. I felt my spirits lift. With one simple sentence, she’d given me the answer to Brenda’s problem. While it wouldn’t bring her a mate, it would clear the way.

On the way home, I texted Brenda. i’m pretty sure i can take care of edgar. i’ll explain later but how about if i come over tonight and we go after him?

A moment later, she texted back. really? i’d love to get rid of him. tonight at seven will work, if you’re up to it.

i’m ready. let’s get him out of your life. at least we’ll pave the way for you to find someone and he won’t be able to interfere.

I glanced at Astra. “I’m going to go over to Brenda’s tonight.”

“You’re going to fashion the spirit trap?”

I nodded. Nightshade had given me specific instructions. “It’s not nearly as difficult as I thought it would be. I should be able to handle it.”

“What did you think of her?” Astra asked.

I thought for a moment before answering. “She’s not somebody I’d ever want to tangle with, in terms of arguments. But I like her, and she seems fair.”

“You’ll find that most of the high priestesses who work with the Order of the Moon are like that. Strong willed, but willing to listen. Take no prisoners, but fair. They have to be stern, because they help guide the magical community in the direction that Queen Heliesa deems appropriate.”

“Have you ever met the queen?”

Astra paused, then added, “Yes, I have. She listens to her advisors, yet in the end she consults her own conscience. There have been a few members of the royal family in the past that weren’t as trustworthy. And there were some who had to be almost draconian, given the time periods.”

I thought back to history. There was a time when witches and Otherkin had to hide, because they were hunted out and targeted for execution. We fought back, eventually gaining enough trust that the witch-hunters were banned. Vampires, however, still had to fight for their rights, and there were still hate groups against all types of Otherkin. Unfortunately, the real enemies were bigotry and willful ignorance, and that affected so many groups of people.

“I’m glad I live now, but we can’t ever stop being watchful. It remains the same for other ethnicities, and for women. There will always be a subset of power hungry men who want to rule everyone else, and they consider suppression a weapon.” I shook my head. “I don’t understand the mindset.”

“Neither do I, dear. Neither do I,” Astra said, easing into our driveway. “Here, you jump out. I need to drop off a basket to a friend. She’s down on her luck, and some of

us in the who are in my garden club have taken to making sure she's got food and a bit of spare change."

"I didn't know that," I said, opening the door and unbuckling my seat belt. "Garden club, huh?"

Astra nodded, shivering as a blast of cold air rushed into the car. "Yes, we're all earth witches. I'll see you later."

As she inched out of the driveway, avoiding a skid onto the icy road, I watched my aunt leave. There was still so much I didn't know about her life now, but I was looking forward to finding out.

All afternoon, I spent familiarizing myself with the spell components. Nightshade had given me a lodestone—it was one of the fraction that were naturally magnetic.

Legend had it that magnetic lodestones had been buried at the site of lightning strikes. While lodestones were primarily protective, if you found one that was magnetic and you set a binding spell on it, it could be used to trap spirits. Then you could hand it over to a witch who would guide them through the Veil, and see that they got there.

I followed Nightshade's instructions, creating a binding spell that would fold itself into the stone, and as I was charging it, I realized how much I missed practicing regular magic. Oh, I cast my share of spells, and I worked with magic on my clients, to find them a match, but this—this was different. It was actually fun.

I held the stone in my hand and breathed the binding spell into it, sighing as the energy settled into the lodestone. The rock vibrated in my hand. It was ready, and it would be like honey was to ants—hard to pass up and impossible to get out of once you were stuck in it.

“You are a beauty,” I whispered.

Yes, it is...

I jumped. There it was again, the voice I had been hearing. I decided it was time to find out who had been talking to me. I was still in circle, so I settled down, crossed my legs, and opened my third eye.

“Who are you? I know you’re there, and I want to know who’s been talking to me.”

A beat. Then another. No one answered, but I felt a warm, radiant energy begin to sweep around me. I opened my eyes. A pinkish mist surrounded me, flecked with shimmering flakes of gold. It was inviting, warm and sensuous, and yet it was caring and gentle.

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“Who are you?” I whispered, keeping my voice low.

You know who I am, the woman’s voice whispered back.

“Aphrodite,” I said. I was right, I knew it from my inner heart to my outer core.

I am the essence of love and passion, she said. And I come to you now, when you stand at the crossroads. You stand between worlds. You must either choose my path, or to walk on your own. If you come into my service, the road may not always be easy, but it will always be paved with love. Do you choose to follow me?

I thought about it. I’d never thought of having a patron goddess before, of pledging to the gods. But Aphrodite was the heart of what I worked for—to help people bring love into their lives. It made so much sense.

“What do you require, my Lady?”

You work with me and only with me, unless I give you permission. I will do what I can to protect you and further your magic. And you in turn, pay homage to me. This is the moment, Maisy. Will you walk this earth as my priestess?

And right then, I knew that I was destined to belong to her. Aphrodite embodied everything I stood for. I caught my breath, held it for a moment, then let it rush out in one big breath.

“I will. I choose to walk your path, Lady.” I wasn’t sure what to do next, but I figured she’d tell me, and I wasn’t disappointed.

Then gather to you the tools of our trade...you will need a crystal ball and a deck of cards dedicated only to me. An apple wand, which you will make by hand, and an athame whose hilt is silver as the night sky. A necklace, to honor me—you will wear it at all times.

“What kind of necklace?”

You will know it when you see it, Aphrodite said. And then, she added, Pledge to me when the moon is next full. Until then, know I am watching over you.

Before I could answer, as quickly as it had come, the mist departed and I was alone again. Only, I wasn't alone in my heart. And never again, would I be isolated and totally lonely.

As I turned around, I caught sight of something on my desk that hadn't been there before.

It was a gorgeous shell—a conch shell that was the size of a cantaloupe. The spiral curves were a warm peachy color, with a perfectly shaped spire that reminded me of a Ram Thai Crown Dancer headdress, laid on its side. The little bumps along the curving ridges made me think of jewels on the headdresses.

I picked up the shell and magic tingled through my fingers. As I brought it to my ear, I heard the swirl of ocean waves, and a light breeze sprang up, bringing with it the scent of seaweed and brine. It calmed my worries, sending a wave of peace through me, and I could feel Aphrodite's energy behind it.

Use this whenever you need to reconnect with yourself and with me. Make certain it's part of your pledging ritual.

I silently assented. I had to hurry. The full moon was tomorrow, and I could feel

Aphrodite there, ready to claim me for her own.

Astra arrived home and I immediately told her what had gone down with Aphrodite. “I need someone to oversee my pledging ritual and it has to be tomorrow. Can you do it?”

Astra didn’t hesitate. “Of course,” she said, sitting down. “First, you need to invite Crystal to be here. I’m not certain why, but she’s a necessary part of the ritual. It can be just the three of us, but she’s necessary. Second...you need a new dress for this. Sexy and comfortable, but it needs to represent Aphrodite, so something in a pastel pink or seafoam would be perfect. Or peach. Third, the necklace. You must have it before the ritual.”

“So, I have to go shopping tomorrow. I hope I can find something that looks good on me.” I wasn’t used to wearing revealing clothing. When Dan had been alive, I’d been far less self-conscious.

“Yes, you do. And you’ll find something. I know it.” Astra glanced at the clock. “Why don’t I make a light dinner before Brenda gets here?”

“Thanks,” I said. “A sandwich or soup would be great.”

As my aunt headed into the kitchen, I let out a long breath. Everything was changing so much that I wasn’t sure what to expect next. All I knew was that the next few days would change my life in numerous ways, and I hoped those changes would be for the best.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Astra drove me over to Brenda’s, since my car was out of action. We followed Brenda, who stopped at our house before heading home from the hotel.

“Are you coming in?” I wanted her there, in case I messed up.

“Nightshade wants you to tackle this yourself, but I’ll come in. I won’t take the lead on anything.” She glanced at me quickly, then back at the road. “I know you’re scared, but you can do this. You’ll be fine.”

“I hope so. I hope I can keep us all safe.” I stared out the window, wondering how life had suddenly become so complicated. “Being an adult isn’t all it’s cracked up to be, is it?”

She laughed. “No, it’s not. And it doesn’t get any easier as you get older. We can eat candy for breakfast if we want, but then we feel the consequences from that. Nothing’s ever free in life, not even when it’s given freely. There will always be ramifications to whatever you choose to do. That’s why there’s no such thing as the perfect crime. There will always be something left behind...it may take a skilled detective to find it, and it may not be found right away, but there will always be something that leaves a crack.”

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“Well, as a species, we’re all flawed. Perfection is stagnation. There’s no where left to go, except downhill.” I shrugged. “Good gods, I never thought I’d be pledging to Aphrodite as a priestess. I don’t look like one—I’m not in perfect shape. I may have an hourglass figure, but it’s overly plump in some areas.”

“You’re curvaceous and beautiful. And that’s part of being a woman. Unless you want to devote your life to diet and the gym, you’ll never be model-thin. And even if you were to live in the gym, that doesn’t guarantee the ‘perfect figure.’ Some women are naturally thin and fit, but most? Not really. I suppose what I’m trying to say is that, as long as you take care of your health, as long as you treat yourself with respect, then isn’t it better to love yourself than constantly berate what you think your flaws are? And the most important piece: if Aphrodite thinks you’re good enough to be her priestess, then that should be enough.”

“Well, I can’t argue those points,” I said, shaking away my thoughts. “I don’t know when I started doubting myself, Astra. When I was with Dan, I felt beautiful and capable and confident. He was always proud of me, he was always supportive.”

Astra slowed down. The roads were icy and, while it had stopped snowing, the temperature was hovering at around thirty.

“Do you blame yourself for his death?”

I didn’t want to answer that, but finally said, “In some ways. The night he was hit by a drunk driver, was our fifth anniversary. We were going to celebrate at home, but I’d forgotten to buy the champagne. I shouldn’t have even mentioned it. He wouldn’t have missed it. But I apologized for forgetting, and he said he’d pick some up at the

grocery store. I told him not to bother, but he insisted. He never made it home. So...in a sense, I do blame myself. If I'd kept my mouth shut..."

"Don't what—if yourself into a depression, love. Was it an accident? No, but it was due to someone deciding to drive while they were drunk. It wasn't the fact that you forgot to go shopping. Neither you nor Dan are to blame, so don't hold a grudge against him, either."

I jerked my head around. "How did you know?" I asked, breathing softly. Truth was, I was angry at him, as well.

"Because when things like this happen, we need someone to blame. Put your blame squarely where it belongs: the person who chose to drink and drive."

"But the guy's dead—I can't yell at him. I can't beat him up. I was so grateful that I wouldn't have to see him get a slap on the wrist for killing my husband. So many people walk away with light sentences. But it also meant I couldn't confront him. I couldn't tell him how angry I was with him. I couldn't scream at him."

Hearing the words pour out of me, I realized that I had so much anger left inside that it was eating me up.

"You don't have to forgive him—the driver—but you have to walk away from it. You have to find a way to let it be in the past. Or you'll never be free of that anger and it will eat you up from the inside. We can work on it, sweetheart." Astra turned the corner, following the GPS coordinates. "But for now, let's focus on the task at hand."

I pressed my lips together, realizing how much energy I had invested in my anger at the man who killed Dan. I could never forgive him... But could I really let go? Astra was right in that it would eat up my energy. And that I was feeding the memory of

someone I hated. Maybe I could talk to his spirit. Maybe I could get the apology I needed.

But she was also right in that this wasn't the time to focus on it. I fiddled in my purse, finally finding my stash of miniature Peppermint Patties—my favorite candy. I unwrapped one and popped it in my mouth as Astra pulled into Brenda's driveway.

"She has a lovely house," Astra said.

"Yeah, but it's so not her. She needs to redecorate, but I think Edgar has been preventing her from going through with the plans. He decorated the house, from ceiling to floor, and she hates it but she never can quite manage the energy to change things. Maybe by exorcising him, she'll be able to move on." I paused, then added, "In some ways, we're running parallel lives. Only she hated her ex, and I loved mine. But we're both controlled by them, even after their deaths."

"You're right. And as long as you let that continue, you'll never be free." Astra parked the car and turned to me. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah, I think so," I said. And, as I gathered my bag 'o tricks, I realized that I was ready for more than just the exorcism.

Brenda met us at the door and led us into the living room.

Astra glanced around, then let out a laugh. "Yeah, you have unwelcome company, all right."

"I know. Since we found out about him, he's been up to even more problematic behavior. I can't turn around without something going on—the lights flicker off and on, my hairbrush floated through the air the other day. Shadows creep along the walls where they shouldn't. I walked into the kitchen this morning to see a column of mist

spiraling near the fridge. It vanished, but when I opened the fridge, every thing in there had gone bad.” She shook her head in disgust. “I’m done with this joker.”

“Well, then, let’s get busy.” As I began to unpack my magical tool kit, one of the windows flew open and a gust of wind rushed in.

Brenda hurried over to close it. “See what I mean? He knows you’re here. I’ll be he knows what we’re going to do, as well.” She grumbled and shouted, “Edgar! Knock the fuck off! I’m tired of this. I’m done with you. You were a prick in life, and you’re even worse in death!”

As if in answer to her words, a picture on the wall crashed to the ground, the glass shattering. I jumped, but Brenda was over it. Done. She put her hands on her hips and once again, addressed the ghost.

“Look, fuck off! Go to the Veil. Go do whatever it is spirits are supposed to do?—”

This time, Edgar wasn’t so subtle. One of the pokers by the fireplace flew up and started spinning, heading directly for Brenda. She stared at it, too shocked to move, but Astra—who was closer than I was—managed to grab Brenda by the arm and drag her out of the way.

Brenda sputtered, but Astra shut her up.

“Stop! The last thing we need is to antagonize him. Let us do the work, and keep quiet. You can scream at his tombstone.” My aunt, when she was riled, was a formidable woman.

Brenda backed down immediately. “I’m sorry.”

“Let us work.” Astra motioned to the sofa. “Go sit down.”

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Cowed, Brenda followed her instructions.

I arranged my dagger, my crystal ball, the loadstone trap, some Purification water, a protection charm Astra had made for after we exorcised Edgar's ass up and out of here, along with my crystal tipped wand, and a copper wound pyramid, on the table. Then—eying the living room for potential threats—I picked up my dagger.

“I'm going to start,” I said. “Which means, don't step out of the circle I cast, and please don't interrupt me unless it's an emergency.” I turned to my aunt. “What are you going to do?”

“I'll play guard,” she said. “If I sense he's up to something dangerous, I'll tell you.” She glanced at Brenda. “If you have to go to the bathroom, go now, because we won't have time once she casts the circle.”

Brenda nodded, a contrite smile on her face. “I'll behave. I'm good. Let's get this underway please.”

I took a deep breath and, starting in the north, began turning in a circle, with my dagger held out to carve the channel of energy.

“In the name of the Maiden,

of fresh tilled ground,

I cast this Circle, once around.

In the name of the Mother,

Of abundance found,

I cast this Circle, twice around.

In the name of the Crone,

Where wisdom abounds,

I cast this Circle, thrice around.”

As I drew a pentacle in the air, a hush settled over the room. Though I could still feel Edgar’s presence, it had faded, as though muted. I took another breath, and turned to the North. I held my athame high in salute.

“Spirits of the North, spirits of the Earth. You who are stone and bone and crystal. You who are leaf and branch and tree. You who are the womb of birth, and the cradle of death, come to this space and be with us. Bring your foundation, your strength, and your grounding, and let nothing unwelcome enter within.”

A ring of power—heavy and steady as the planet—rose up to encircle us with its might. As it settled in, I turned to the east and, again, held my dagger up, saluting the elements.

“Spirits of the East, spirits of the Wind. You who are our breath, and wind and storm. You who are the gentle breeze, the spiraling autumn leaves caught in the dance, you who are the gales of winter. You who are the breath of life, and the clarity of insight, come to this space and be with us. Bring new beginnings, focus and thought, and understanding, and let nothing unwelcome enter within.”

A whirl of air spun around us, then flowed into the circle. I turned to the south and, once again, saluted the elements.

“Spirits of the South, spirits of the Flames. You who are the warmth of our blood, the heat of our pulse, the passion of our hearts. You who are sensuality and passion, drive and desire, health and creativity. You who are vitality and strength, come to this space and be with us. Bring the creative spirit, and let nothing unwelcome enter within.”

The room began to heat up, the energy of the southern watchtower flowing in to infuse the circle with its strength and vitality. I turned to the west.

“Spirits of the West, spirits of the Ocean Mother. You who are the lifeblood of our world, you who are our tears and our joys. You who are depths of our psyches, the heart of our emotions, the cradle of our intuition and our compassion. You who are the creative depths, the opening of the third eye, come to this space and be with us. Bring understanding and heart, and the spirit of Magic, and let nothing unwelcome enter within.”

As the magic settled around us, I joined Brenda on the sofa. I picked up the lodestone and handed it to her. “Hold this and focus all the joy you can into it. Imagine how you’ll feel when you meet the man of your dreams.”

“About that—” she started to say, but I shook my head.

“Just do it, please.”

She gave me a silent nod and took the lodestone in hand, cupped her fingers around it and closed her eyes. I could feel the shift in her energy and then, there was a little ping that I felt more than heard. The spirit trap was ready.

I walked to the edge of the circle, knelt down, and rolled the stone outside of the protective barrier. “Hey, Edgar. Can you feel how happy Brenda is? That stone’s going to bring her happiness and there’s nothing you can do to stop it.” I turned and motioned for Brenda to join me, stopping her before she came too close to the circle’s edge. “Right? You’re ready to move on, aren’t you?” I gave her a nod and she picked up on it.

“Right...Right! Do you hear me, Edgar? I’m ready to move on and that stone’s going to help me do so. I’m so happy that I’m leaving you behind?—”

She barely got the words out when a dark mist descended near the stone. It was Edgar, and he was angry. He blasted the circle with his energy but we were safe inside, though a couple chairs went toppling over and a lamp crashed into the bubble of magic the circle created, then bounced off.

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“There’s nothing you can do, Edgar!” I egged him on, trying to make him angry.

“She’s right—she’s helping me and you’re not going to be able to do a thing!” Brenda was shouting now. “You low-life piece of crap! You’ll never be able to hurt me again?—”

Her threat must have been the last straw, because the mist dove for the lodestone. There was a moment where Edgar froze and tried to pull away, but the magnetic properties of the stone had hold of him and, as we watched, he went swirling into the lodestone, and—in a matter of seconds—the air cleared.

I waited for a moment, watching.

“You did it,” Astra said, coming up behind me. “He wasn’t particularly strong, as Haunts go, but he was strong enough to cause harm, and that’s too strong.”

“Do you think he’s really trapped? He’s not hiding, is he?” I asked.

“What do your instincts say?” Astra asked.

I closed my eyes and took another breath. As it whistled out between my teeth, I could see the stone in my mind. Edgar was trapped inside.

“He’s there,” I said, relaxing. “Now, I need to find someone who can push him through the Veil, and he’ll be gone for good. But he won’t bother you again,” I said, turning to Brenda. “And now, we can get on with finding you a mate.”

“That’s what I was trying to tell you earlier,” Brenda said, blushing. “When I was at the hospital, I met someone. I’m going out with him tomorrow night, but we’ve been texting. He might be perfect.”

I stared at her. “But...I’m supposed to find you a star witch.”

“He is!” she said. “He’s a star witch, and he’s single. He said that he’s been feeling that someone would come into his life in an unexpected way. I met him at the hospital. He sprained his ankle, and was there getting it looked at. His name is Jamison Wanderson, and I can’t tell you how right this feels.”

“Jamison Wanderson? That’s who I was going to talk to you about!” I laughed. “I can’t believe it. I feel like I’ve wasted your deposit?—”

“Of course you haven’t. For one thing, I wouldn’t have gone to the hospital if I hadn’t been in the car with you. So, you’re still responsible for us meeting. And you just said you were planning on fixing us up for a date! Also, you cleared my house—that’s worth more than my deposit. You exorcised Edgar, and you’ve cleared the way for me to move on. I’m going to redecorate the hell out of this house, I’ll tell you that.”

She seemed so happy that there wasn’t much I could say, except, “Hey, invite me to the wedding.”

Brenda laughed. “I’ll pay you your commission if we end up getting married. I don’t care how the job gets done, as long as I find my Happily Ever After. And...I really think I have, Maisy. I feel it in the depths of my heart.”

There wasn’t much I could say to that.

Before I opened the circle, Astra and I cleared the rest of the house of residue energy, and then we saged it and blessed it. We took the lodestone with us. Astra promised

me she'd find someone to get rid of Edgar. Then—after saying goodnight to Brenda—we headed back to our house.

“I’m so confused,” I said. “I’m not sure what happened.”

“I think you’ll find that in Midnight Point, things run as they will. Don’t question how the job get done, how the sausage gets made... Now, let me drop off Edgar here, and then let’s go out for dinner. We have a lot to celebrate.”

When I thought about it, we really did. We were healthy, Brenda’s ex was taken care of, she’d actually met a star witch and seemed ecstatic, and I was about to pledge to Aphrodite. Life was changing, and I decided to roll with it rather than fight it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Next morning, I stood outside Ellie’s Elegant Designs, wondering what I’d find inside, and whether it would be appropriate for my pledging ritual. I knew that Ellie’s shop was size-inclusive, so I wasn’t worried about finding something that would fit, but I wasn’t sure I should wear. But I shouldn’t have worried.

As I walked into the shop, the first thing that caught my eye was a gorgeous seafoam colored dress with a halter top and a skirt draped like a Grecian gown. I didn’t usually wear dresses like that, but something about it enchanted me.

“That dress, do you have it in a size twelve?” I asked.

“I believe we do.” The woman behind the counter came around to shake my hand. “Hi, I’m Ellie Masters. I don’t think I’ve seen you around town.” She was around my age, but she was tall and willowy, with long chocolate colored hair and dark eyes.

“My name is Maisy Tripwater. I run Married At First Bite, a matchmaking service

over on Clearwater Street. I also offer tarot and psychic readings, and house clearings.” I picked up the dress. The material was smooth and gentle against my skin. “I moved back to town a couple months ago. I was born here.”

“Really?” She leaned against the counter. “I drove through a few years back and I couldn’t get the town out of my mind. Before I knew it, I sold my store in Port Angeles and had moved here. I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to make the business thrive here, but I was pleasantly surprised. Now, you’re looking for a size twelve?” she asked.

I nodded, handing her the dress. It was a size eight and no way in hell would I fit in it.

She sorted through the hangers and pulled out the same dress in a larger size. “I try to be size inclusive,” she said. “I used to weigh a lot more and I could never find clothes I liked. While I lost weight—medical reasons—I won’t ever forget how invisible I felt. I won’t do that to any woman.”

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I took the dress and entered the dressing room. I slipped out of my jeans and sweater, and eyed the gown, feeling doubtful. But I'd come this far, so I might as well give it a try. I slid it over my head and then slowly turned to face the mirror.

All I could do was gasp. The dress might have been made for me. It fit perfectly, accentuating my bust and waist, flowing smoothly over my hips to fall just above my knee.

"How is it?" Ellie called out.

"It's..." I slowly opened the dressing room door and stepped out. "What do you think?"

She smiled, and it was as genuine as they came. "Perfect. You look so good. Do you like it?"

I nodded, speechless. After a moment I found my tongue. "I love it. Absolutely love it. It's perfect for what I need." I thought for a moment, then said, "What else have you got? I mean, I want this one, but I could use some new clothes. I've been living in jeans the past couple of years, and that's not me."

"What kind of style do you like?" Ellie asked.

"Comfortable but pretty, a little more fitted on the bust...I like loose leg trousers and flowing skirts." I wasn't even sure of what my style was, but that felt accurate.

"Okay, wait here. I'll bring you some things to try on."

Half an hour later, I had made a new friend, and I left the store with three dresses, two skirts, four tank tops, two silk blouses, and two pair of palazzo pants. I also had bought a couple pair of gauchos, a tweed blazer, and a new robe. I handed her my credit card and waved goodbye to over six hundred dollars, but I left happy, and with her number.

As I exited the store, I caught sight of an antique store across the street. Curious—there was a brass Grecian statue in the window—I pushed through the doors. Inside, the shop was packed with jewelry, bric-a-brac, antique chairs, collectable plates, all sorts of things you'd expect to see in a vintage store.

I waved to the owner, who was talking to another customer, and began to browse at the counter. The jewelry was behind glass, which made sense, and I leaned down to get a better look. Suddenly, something caught my attention. It was a pendant.

As I looked closer, I saw that it was a round pendant embossed with a basket of golden apples. The silver round was crusted with pave diamonds, and it looked to be in perfect condition. I patiently waited until the shopkeeper bagged the other customer's goods and turned to me.

"I'd like to see that pendant, please." I pointed to it. "What's it made of? Is it plated or..."

"Oh, Aphrodite's apples," the man said.

I jerked my head up. "Aphrodite?"

"Yes, or that's what the person who sold it to me called it. She said that apples are sacred to Aphrodite, and that her grandmother had been dedicated to the goddess. She'd been going to keep it, but something pushed her to bring it in and sell it. I asked if she was sure—I mean, what a sentimental piece of jewelry, but she said that she

knew in her heart she had to sell it.

The man handed me the pendant. It felt warm in my hand.

“The metals are sterling silver, for the main pendant, and then the apples are made of fourteen carat gold. The pave diamonds are natural, not lab created.”

I didn’t want to give it back—it felt perfect in my hand. “How much?”

He looked at me, tilting his head. “That’s why she brought it in, isn’t it? You’re meant to have this.”

“I think so,” I said, rubbing it with my fingers. The metal tingled in my fingers. This had been dedicated to Aphrodite before, and it would be again.

“I’ll charge you what I paid her. Two hundred dollars.”

“Deal,” I said. I knew better than look a gift horse in the mouth. If Aphrodite had wanted me to find this for free, she would have found a way. I paid the man, and he threw in a silver chain. I tucked the pendant in my purse and, thanking the shopkeeper, headed out to find some lunch.

Promptly at eight PM, Crystal, Astra, and I gathered together in the living room. Miss P. and Dahlia were stowed away in my bedroom so they wouldn’t catch themselves on fire with the candles that were glowing. I preferred battery operated candles, but Astra insisted on beeswax for this ritual.

I was wearing my dress, and the necklace was on the table, next to the conch shell. I wasn’t sure what was going to happen, but whatever it was, I felt ready to face it. Even though I was anxious, the fact that I’d found the dress and the necklaceso easily made me confident that I was headed in the right direction.

“Why did you ask me to join you? I’m honored, but curious,” Crystal said.

Astra smiled. “I’m not sure, but you need to be here. I’m grateful you could join us.”

I had braided my hair in a loose side braid, weaving ribbons and roses into it. My makeup felt spot-on, and the dress was so light, it was like wearing next to nothing.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I said. “I don’t know any more than Astra does as to why you need to be here, but I’m glad my best friend is by my side.”

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Crystal reached out and squeezed my hand. “It’s exciting. Aphrodite seems like the perfect choice for you and I can’t believe we didn’t think of this before.”

“I suppose I never thought of myself as the type of woman who could be priestess for a love goddess. I’m not your typical glamour girl, after all.”

“Don’t start that again,” Astra said.

“I won’t,” I said. “I have to admit, when I found the dress this morning and put it on, I saw myself in a way I never have. Even when I was with Dan, he made me feel beautiful, but I didn’t feel that way when I looked in the mirror on my own. Today, I looked in that mirror at the store and I truly felt beautiful. On my own, without anybody else shoring me up. I felt almost...Divine.”

“That’s good, because you’re about to pledge yourself to an ancient goddess, and she is divine.” Astra glanced at the clock on the wall. “Why don’t we get underway? Are you ready?”

I nodded. I was barefoot, and I was wearing a wreath that my aunt had made. It was woven from white silk flowers and ivy, with seashells dangling from it. Crystal was wearing a pale pink gown, a simple satin chemise. And Astra was dressed in her ritual regalia that she wore for summer solstice. It was a long floral dress, with a golden belt.

Astra stood at the center of the room, and held out her dagger. She cast the circle, and the energy flowed from the end of her blade, carving a circle into the space. It was powerful, and protective, and it felt familiar and comforting, as though we were

weaving magic from ages past.

As she incanted the chants calling forth the Great Mother, I realized that this was my life. This magic, this energy, weaving the ancient powers with others of my kind. This was what I was meant to do.

Astra summoned each element, and the power grew, giving us foundation with the earth, clearing out any old threads with air, bringing passion with fire, and joy with water. Soon, we were layers deep in the ritual.

“This afternoon, I sat down and opened myself to the powers that be. And that’s how I wrote your pledge. Aphrodite was there with every word. I could feel her sitting on my shoulder, dictating to me. Maisy Ellen Tripwater, stand forward, bringing with you your whole heart and absolute truth.”

I stepped out from behind the coffee table and walked over to face my aunt. Her eyes were silver, and I realized she wasn’t the one speaking to me. I could feel Aphrodite in every corner of the room, watching and waiting for my answers.

“Maisy Ellen Tripwater, are you ready to take the mantle of Aphrodite on your shoulders? To wear her power in your aura day and night? To give to her your whole heart and magical self?”

I swallowed hard. Oaths like this were binding, and lasted a lifetime. Once this ritual was over, I would belong to Aphrodite, priestess and mouthpiece. Every move I made, she would be aware of, and I represented her in the world.

“I’m ready.”

“Do you pledge to uphold Aphrodite’s honor, to honor love in this world, and to aid those seeking its joy? Do you pledge to hold love as the highest power in your life,

and to never use it against another?”

I nodded, feeling exposed, as though she could see into every inch of my soul. “I do so pledge.”

“Do you pledge to act as Aphrodite’s priestess, and to honor that office, as long as she holds you in service?”

And here we were. Once I answered this, it was for life. Becoming a priestess was never an idle proposition, nor was it to be entered into as a whim. Those who dabbled with the gods soon learned their folly and paid for it dearly.

“I pledge myself to Aphrodite, as her priestess and servant. I pledge myself to the power of love, and I promise to hold myself in honor and to never disgrace the office of priestess. To the end of my life, I make this pledge, as long as Aphrodite will have me.”

Astra held out her hand, she was holding a small razor blade. “Give me your hand, for this is a pledge to be bound by blood.”

I held out my hand and Astra took it, slicing the tip of my finger with the corner of the blade. As drops of blood began to spill out she held it over the candle, letting my life force fall into the burning wax.

I felt a sudden rush, a connection that I had never known before in my life as Aphrodite herself kissed my forehead. It was as though she was standing directly in front of me, and had leaned forward to pressed her lips against my brow.

“By soul, by heart, by body, by mind and spirit, by my words and actions, by blood, I am yours and yours alone,” I whispered.

The energy peaked, and went rushing up through the ceiling and down again. The candle flared and burned away the blood.

Astra picked up the necklace and held it up, over the candle.

“I hereby charge this necklace and consecrate it in the name of Aphrodite, to be worn by her priestess Maisy. May it represent their bond as long as their bond shall last. By earth and air, but fire and water, by the spirit of magic, I do so consecrate this necklace.” She then draped it over my neck and it felt absolutely perfect as it snuggled between my breasts.

“As of this moment, Maisy Ellen Tripwater, you stand as a priestess of Aphrodite. Never forget your duties, and the honor bestowed upon you. So mote it be.”

“So mote it be,” Crystal and I both intoned.

And there it was. The ritual was done and I was officially a priestess of Aphrodite.

As we gathered in the kitchen after the ritual for a dinner of cheese and deli meat, crackers, chips, and sugar cookies so delicate that they melted in our mouths, I tried to sort out how I felt. It was hard—there were so many things running through my mind. But I did know that this felt like the first of many steps in my new life, and I knew I’d other changes were in the offing.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 7:41 am

“Nightshade wants to see both of you next week,” Astra said. “She’s going to set up the ritual to bring you into the Dark Moon Society.”

Crystal smiled. “I’m glad I’m being included.”

“Well, some things aren’t so much fun—you remember going after Marcus. But overall, we make a difference to the town, even though a lot of people don’t realize how much we do,” my aunt said.

I silently ate my way through several pieces of cheese along with a number of crackers.

“Are you okay?” Crystal asked.

I nodded. “I was thinking about how much has changed. I think Dan would have been happy to see me move on. I wish I’d been able to say goodbye to him. Just once. Even a whisper of a hello.”

As I spoke, Crystal stiffened and pointed. In the corner, a light mist was sparkling. I stared at it, waiting. Then, a handsome man stepped out of it and I let out a cry.

“Dan!”

He strode over to me and I felt his presence as he gave me a ghostly hug. I couldn’t feel his arms, but I relived the way I had felt in his arms.

Don’t cry. Don’t mourn. We had a lifetime of love in our five years, he whispered.

“But how... How are you here?” I stared into his eyes, wanting to embrace him and drag him back from the Veil.

It’s a gift, from Aphrodite, he said. I don’t have much time, but please, know that I loved you more than life itself. I will always love you, but you need to move on, Maisy. You need to love and be loved. Love is your superpower now, and you need to open up and let it flow into your own life, as well as help others find it.

I was crying in earnest now. “I miss you so much!”

I miss you too, but I’m with you every day, my sweet. I’m with you no matter how alone you feel. Always remember that. I have to go but, don’t hold on to anger. I’ve let go of so much since I crossed over. I’ll be with you, but I no longer belong in your world, not the way you do. I’ll meet you when it’s your time, if you want, and I’ll watch over you until then. But go, be happy, find love, and help love find its way in the world.

Then, without another word, he began to fade. I cried out, reaching for him, but he vanished, and I was back in the kitchen again, holding my stomach as I began to cry.

Astra and Crystal took my hands, giving me strength.

“He said it’s time to let go, but what if I’m not ready?”

But you are ready. This time, it was Aphrodite. I could hear her clearly. You’re strong enough to move on. Let Dan rest in the past, and cherish the time you had with him. But you are still of this world, and you will make your mark in it. You aren’t leaving him behind, because he’s already gone ahead.

I let out a long breath and accepted the tissue my aunt handed me. While I wanted to cry, I could feel the changes working inside. Aphrodite was right: I was moving on in life. Dan had already moved on. I wasn’t leaving him behind—he was a long ways

ahead, waiting for me in the future. And until then, I had duties to fulfill, and a life to lead, and people to love, and a place in my community. I was here to facilitate love in the world, and to do so, I had to feel whole.

I wiped my eyes and turned to my aunt and Crystal. “I guess I’m ready.”

“For what?” Astra asked.

I slowly removed my wedding rings and laid them on the altar. My finger felt bare, and I felt frightened for a moment, but then, I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“For whatever the future is about to bring my way,” I said. “It’s going to be quite a ride.”

For a moment they were silent, then they raised their glasses.

“Well, hopefully it will be a fun one,” Crystal said.

“Cheers to that.” I matched their toast, raising my glass of sparkling cider. “And here’s to Aphrodite, and to love. And to bringing people together who need love in their lives.”

As we went back to our meal, I felt a stir of excitement inside. I felt alive again, ready to face whatever was waiting for me. I felt...loved.