



# Midlife Demigod Unexpected

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Seriously? I'm forty-five years old and my parents finally tell me I'm adopted. I'm way too old for this.

I ignored it for like six months, but then suddenly weird stuff starts happening around me. And I don't mean menopause stuff. Like I can't hold my liquor anymore and everyone wants to party all the time whenever they're around me. I used to be able to drink a keg and not feel anything more than a light buzz. So, I start digging around, and apparently, I was adopted in Cougar Creek, but when I get to the adoption agency, I'm in for a lot more than I bargained for. My birth mom is a local witch, like what?! And my dad was a God. Bacchus to be exact. Facepalm. Of all the Gods in all the world, my mom had to hook up with the God of alcohol and turning things into gold? My mom's coven takes me in, but the conditions are pretty fierce. I have to use my powers for good. Not evil. At my age, you'd think that decision would be easier to make, but I suddenly feel free of my past life and I'm ready to embrace this new one. Especially if I get to kick butt and avoid night sweats. I'm so going to rock this mid-life crisis.

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# Page 1

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## Chapter 1

I noticed the fiery redhead the minute he walked into my bar. O'Halloran's was a magnet for Irish tourists who had made their way backpacking or camping on the Northwest Pacific Coast Highway. That's how they landed in Cougar Creek, Southern Oregon. Half an hour off the coast and with our very own hot springs, we made a quaint little stop for travelers.

This one didn't look quite like all the rest, though. He was a little taller, a little more perfect, and he didn't look like he was here so much for a good time. He stared grimly at me as he walked directly to me.

"Are you Helen O'Halloran?"

"Helen Davis," I said. "Can I help you?" I crossed my arms and leaned back on one of my feet, staring up at him. At five foot ten I was pretty tall for a woman, but it didn't seem to matter with this guy; he towered over me.

I didn't care. I wasn't about to take any flak from somebody in my own bar.

That's when I noticed the fiddle case in his hand. The fiery red head was a musician.

"I want to play some music," he said.

I was completely taken aback, my eyebrows arching. "Are you any good?" I asked, wondering what type of music he played, because his black T-shirt, jeans vibe didn't come across as an artsy, happy musician.

“I do a mix. It’s good.” He shrugged.

“I’ll let you play one song,” I shrugged.” What the hell. It was Friday night, and we didn’t have any music playing at O’Halloran’s. There weren’t many people in the pub. It was off-season, the weird time in spring in between the winter merry makers and the summer day trippers.

I was exhausted though, and I didn’t want this to get out of hand. A couple of songs in the corner, we’d see how the public took it, but I looked at the clock. It was eleven o’clock already. One of the good things about owning a pub in a small town was that you could shut it whenever you wanted to.

I slipped into the kitchen to check on the food prep. My cook, Jag, was cleaning up when I handed him the last order of the night.

“Cabbage and hash,” I said, slipping the docket over to him. “That’ll be the last order of the night.”

“I thought you were going to have me work until two in the morning or something crazy,” Jag laughed.

“No, we’ll just ply them with alcohol until we send them all stumbling out the front door in an hour,” I said. The strains of the fiddle rose over the clink of Jag’s frying pans. He paused and looked up.

“What’s that?” he asked, looking a bit disgruntled.

“I don’t know. Some kid came in and wanted to play fiddle,” I said. “I didn’t think it mattered.”

“It matters if it keeps customers around longer.” Jag commented.

I smiled at Jag, crossing my arms. “You know, I am trying to run a business here.”

“You also kind of need to rest.” He looked kindly at me.

I could tell what he was saying. I look tired, haggard, and old.

At forty-six, that’s what I thought and felt most of the time anyhow, but I didn’t need some younger man telling me it was the case.

That was annoying.

“I don’t tell you how to run your life,” I said. “You don’t tell me how to run my life. Now make the food and get it out on time. Don’t get distracted by the music.”

I could see his foot tapping under the counter as he checked the order and began dicing some onions.

I turned and went back out into the pub area. I took a deep breath. I loved this pub. I did inherit it from my father when I turned twenty-one and I had spent the last twenty-some odd years running it and keeping an authentic Irish pub open and alive here in Cougar Creek.

I ran my hand along the polished wooden bar.

This was all I had of my dad. All I knew of him and all that mattered. My mom hadn’t known him very well. She had heard about the pub but ignored the entire thing until the day I turn twenty-one and she handed me the deed to this property.

She and I hadn’t gotten along since then. This pub had been my home. I lived upstairs and worked downstairs. Cougar Creek was my neighborhood and the drinks always flowed and we always had a good time. I’d had a long-term relationship at one point

for five years and I moved in with him over on his ranch. I'd driven to the pub to come to work, but, well, I never felt at home. I always sort of liked having my space and running my own business full-time. I had plenty of camaraderie in the evenings with the pub open and plenty of quiet during the day. Hell, I didn't even use my car unless I had a special trip to the coast or to one of the bigger towns. Everything else was walking distance and I liked it that way. This was exactly where I wanted to be, and I had everything I needed.

## Page 2

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I glanced at the clock and back at the kid playing the fiddle. An hour had already passed. I didn't even know what had happened with the time. I glanced in the kitchen. Jag had cleaned up and was standing by the bar, watching the kid play the fiddle.

"He's got to get out of here," Jag said to me.

"What happened?" I asked.

Jag squinted his eyes at me but didn't say anything.

"You've got to get him to stop playing," Jag insisted.

"No problem," I said, walking over to the guy with the fiddle, but as I approached him, he started to play harder, and it blew sparks at me. I glanced back at Jag; he was holding two fingers in the air toward the guy with the fiddle, but the sparks were flying past me and directly at Jag.

"What the fuck?" I asked, grabbing a plate off the table near me and throwing it at the guy with the fiddle. He must have seen it coming, hitting it with laser sparks were flying off his fiddle.

"Watch out!" Jag said, lunging toward me and knocking me out of the way as sparks flew right over my head and a big burst of flame exploded where the bar was.

## Chapter 2

I lay on the floor, my breath knocked out of me. Jag was over the top of me,

protecting me from the flying projectiles of fire. He quickly moved, glancing down into my startled gaze.

“Are you OK?” He did a quick visual scan of my body, looking for traces of injury.

“What the fuck is he doing.” I pushed Jag away as I stood up. The bastard with the fiddle was nowhere to be seen. My entire bar was up in flames, though.

A few sparks had turned into a torrent of fire. I reeled in horror as I watched the walls burning.

“No!” I screamed, running to the sink, grabbing a pitcher and filling it with water. I began splashing it on the burning bar. Jag came up from behind and grabbed me, pulling my arms back from the faucet.

“We have to get out!” he exclaimed. “The top story is going to come down.”

I looked up in dismay at the fire that was making its way along the ceiling. I lived up there, on the second story. This was my home.

“No! no!” I cried. “It can’t.” I was pulling away from him, trying to get his arms off me so I could fight the fire. “Why aren’t you doing anything?” I screamed at him.

“I am doing something!” he cried, shaking me lightly to get my attention. “I’m trying to get you out of here! The roof is going to kill us!”

I stopped, my eyes wide. This was Jag. He’d been my cook for a while. I trusted him.

Jag looked at me calmly, leaning his forehead against mine. “We have to get out of here.”

I took a deep breath and pushed away from him, dashing to the office. “One thing,” I said, grabbing my shirt to turn the doorknob. The metal was searingly hot even through the fabric.

“Come on!” Jag called. “She’s going to come down!”

He ran toward me as I got the door to the office open. I pushed past the desk, opened the bottom drawer, and grabbed out a box as Jag grabbed me around the waist, threw me over his shoulder, and ran out the front door. We were in the park across the street, well away from the burning building when he placed me on the ground and we both stumbled, leaning on each other as we turned back and watched my entire building go up in flames.

Tears pressed near the surface of my eyes, pinching them. I bit my trembling lower lip, sucking in air through my teeth before letting out a choked, hollow groan. The one thing I had in life, the one thing I had made of my life...gone.

The sound of the volunteer fire trucks roared through the quiet Cougar Creek night. I knew every single one of the guys in the fire department. They drank at the bar. There was nothing they wouldn’t do to try and save it. I knew that. The trucks came to a slow stop right in front of us and the fire men jumped out. A couple ran to us, but I waved them away and pointed toward the burning building. In minutes they had their hoses out. Powerful jets of water battled against the flames, but the flames had already won. With nobody in the building, all they were trying to do now was stop the burn from spreading to other buildings on Main Street. I groaned, as I sat down on the grass and placed my head in my hands.

Everything was gone.

“Helen.” Jag pressed his hand against my shoulder. “They’re going to have to check us for smoke inhalation.”



“I’m fine.” The words sounded far from fine as they croaked out of my throat.

“It’s the right thing to do,” he insisted.

## Page 3

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I nodded as he stood up. I reached out my hand and he pulled me to my feet. I almost fell against him sobbing. It was hardly the boss-employee relationship I wanted to develop with him, though. It might be the personal relationship I wanted with him, but we'd been colleagues for way too long. I wasn't going to mess it up now. Especially since he was only in his early thirties.

Cougar Creek didn't have an ambulance, so we went to the back of the fire department's pickup truck and sat on the tailgate they had lowered for us. A blanket was placed around my shoulders while they took my temperature and tested my oxygen levels. The new deputy sheriff in town came over to ask questions.

"Helen Davis," the deputy said, holding out her hand. "I'm Chloe Preston."

I shook her hand firmly. We had met briefly when she had done her initial investigations into the murder of those coast kids, the harpies. She'd been caught up with some other activities since she'd been here and hadn't made coming to O'Halloran's a steady part of her social life.

I didn't mind. I couldn't hold it against people where they drank. Some people were going to take the Waldorf and some people were going to take O'Halloran's. The truth was, the majority of them were staying home and drinking there, which was fine with me too. I didn't need a lot of money. I needed to sell a few drinks every day. When I inherited the pub, it came with a stipend, a safety load of cash. I didn't spend any of it, but it always gave me confidence that I didn't have to try to make a fortune selling drinks. I could make a simple living. I glanced over the deputy's shoulder, looking at the burning shell of my building. Whoever was in charge of this universe, I thanked them I had fire insurance.

“Do you know what happened?” Chloe asked me.

“This vagrant kid came in and set the place on fire,” I said. “I thought he wanted to play some music, but he started a fire while I was talking to my cook, Jag.” I pointed out Jag where he was hovering in the background. “Thank God the place was empty. It was just Jag and me there.”

“Did you get his name? Do you have cameras in the bar?”

“I do,” I said. “But...”

“Oh, right. A lot of good that’s going to do me.”

“Exactly,” I said. “He was angry because I told him to quit playing. It was late and the place was empty. There was him on the dais playing his fiddle. Something happened and it was like time stood still. Then he started firing flames out of his fiddle.”

The deputy cocked her head sideways at me. “Did I hear you correctly?”

“I know it sounds crazy, but Jag can verify exactly what I’m telling you. The flames came out of the fiddle,” I said.

“Jag’s your chef.” Chloe stated the reminder to herself.

“Yes. He’s been my chef for years.” I looked around the street for him. “Where did he go?”

Jag was gone. I looked over to the parking lot across the street where we all parked our cars, and his Mustang was missing.

He'd left the scene.

### Chapter 3

It was about three in the morning when I finally tore myself away from the embers of my building and walked to my car with nothing more than what I had on and the wooden box I'd rescued from the office.

With nowhere else to go, I only had one choice: my mother's house. I could go to the hotel, but it would be more trouble than it was worth. I wasn't keen on seeing my mom in the dark of night, but it wasn't worth avoiding her. She was sure to hear about this. Everybody in Cougar Creek would hear about this. If I didn't go to her house in my time of need, we'd both look bad. That's how small towns worked.

Mom lived a small way out of town by the hot springs. There were some low-lying pastures down by the river. My mom had a nursery set up there. I had grown up in her nursery, running around in the aisles of plants. I still loved it. I loved the smell of the plants and walking through the nursery with a hot cup of tea early on a Saturday morning. I didn't like everything that could come along with it.

I knocked on the door, clutching my box to my chest. At least we were on speaking terms, even if it was only on Mother's Day and Christmas. There was no answer, so I knocked again, harder this time.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," my mother's voice called out across her sprawling ranch house. Mom had inherited the house from her parents, who had bought it from one of the first settlers. Her parents had renovated sections of it and then mom had added her eccentric touches like a room above the garage with all plate glass windows, floor to ceiling, on all four sides. She loved the view from up there. She could see across her nursery, the pastures and the river. Now the house looked like a mishmash of confused architecture. Easily recognizable by all my school friends as the house

where the crazy lady lived.

They never took into account the fact I lived there too.

My mom opened the door, her tie-dyed cotton nightgown shining brightly even in the damn darkness. It radiated from the single, dusty bulb glow of the porch light.

“Mom,” I said, almost choking on the word. I had called her Hilda for years, trying to create some level of separation between me and the woman who had birthed me. It wasn’t that I didn’t like her, I just didn’t want to be caught up in her world. I didn’t want to be a witch in a coven. I didn’t want to defend Cougar Creek cemetery. I wanted to serve drinks.

“The pub,” I said, still in shock as I walked past the unused living room and straight into the kitchen. I sat down at the breakfast nook clutching the box to my chest still. “It burnt down.”

“Completely or almost?” She said the words softly as if wishing they would go away quickly.

I nodded my head dumbly, remembering watching the roof cave in and the upper story fall down on the bottom story. It was a reverberation I had felt deep in my bones and would remember for the rest of my life, my world caving in on itself and disappearing. “Completely,” I murmured.

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“Oh goodness,” Hilda came forward and caught me in a hug.

I leaned against her but stopped myself from crying. My tears wouldn't do anyone any good right now. We needed practical solutions. “I have nowhere else to go.”

“You're my daughter. You always have a room here,” Hilda said. “Do you know what started it?”

My eyebrows knitted into a frown. “Your people,” I said. “One of them shot fire out of his fiddle and burnt up my building.”

My mother's face went pale. “They came after you?” she asked in horror.

“It would appear so,” I said.

Her gaze dropped to the box in my hands. “What happened?” she asked softly.

Hilda's hands balled into fists in her lap. “Can I get you a cup of witches brew?”

“It's three thirty in the morning. I'll take something a little stronger than that,” I said.

My mother gave me a wink. “Coming right up.” She went to the shelf in the cupboard where I knew she kept the good brandy. There was nothing like a warm shot of brandy and a hot cup of tea. I definitely wanted it tonight to help me relax and get some sleep.

“I want to find the bastard,” I said. “I think he was a demon. Fiery red hair and played

a mean fiddle. He put me in a trance, I think.”

“What was his name?” Hilda asked.

“He didn’t give his name.”

“I can have Mae do a finder’s spell or something,” Hilda said, placing a hot cup of Witches Brew and the crystal brandy decanter of her mother’s in front of me.

“That’s her name?” I asked.

Hilda nodded. “Mae Hayes. I should’ve had her come down to see you when she first got here. Things have been a little bit crazy, though.”

I shook my head. It wasn’t my mother’s fault I didn’t have any magic talent. She had always wanted me to be in the Coven, but no matter what she tried, I had never exhibited any magic capabilities. Like, none whatsoever. From a young age I was good at doing one thing: pouring drinks. It was almost as if my father had known. When I was given O’Halloran’s, it was like a breath of fresh air, opening those doors and letting in my community.

My mom had Trina. Trina was the one with the magic powers and could be in the coven with my mom. Even Trina’s kids could be in the coven. I was more like a spare tool on the side that wasn’t particularly useful. Unless you need someone to make a pot of tea or pour a drink.

It didn’t mean I didn’t want to be magic though. I had wanted it so badly for most of my life, now it was kind of like a dull memory gnawing at the back of my mind.

“She’s nice,” Hilda said. “You’d like her. She’s sensible and down to earth. Positive all the time too, like you are.”

“You’re shitting me,” I said. “Now you’re telling me my replacement is like me?”

“She’s not your replacement,” Hilda said. “You could never be the Hayes. It’s a bloodline. And well, magic’s a bloodline thing, too.”

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t have had sex with a human,” I said, referring to her infamous one-night stand that had created me back in the early seventies. One of those Normie’s passing through town. Even mom didn’t know much about him. At least that’s what she said.

## Chapter 4

I was exhausted but still didn’t manage to sleep until the sun was peeking up over the edge of the horizon. I drifted into an uncomfortable rest where demons haunted my nightmares and the fires burned under my skin. I woke up groggy and exhausted around noon, surprised to find my mom still in the kitchen.

“What are you doing at home?” I asked. In the entire forty-some-odd years I’d known her, I’d never known her to not get up and go straight to the nursery. She even had pictures of her out there with me as a baby strapped to the front of her chest as she pruned vines and played in the plants. I’d always loved it and when I was younger, I’d thought that one day I would grow to have her skills, her magic, and follow in her footsteps. But I didn’t. Even the simplest spells were beyond my grasp. Spells to clean my room, spells to convince my mother to let me have a dog, none of them worked. Eventually I had given up on being magic. I had accepted the fact that I wasn’t.

I’d started hanging with some of the wrong crowd and it wasn’t until I’d turned twenty-one and inherited the pub that I’d actually decided I was going to make sense of my life. Even if it was running a pub in Cougar Creek. So be it. That was my thing. I’d distanced myself from my mother and she’d gone off and done all of her magic



stuff with Trina. The last place I would expect to find my mother at midday any day of the week was home.

“What are you still doing at home?” I asked.

“You haven’t stayed under my roof in about, oh, I’d say about twenty-five years.” My mom smiled at me. “That’s worth staying home for.”

“Longer than that, I think?” I said.

## Page 5

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“I wanted to make you something to eat.” My mother motioned to the food she had set out and ready to cook. “Do you want an omelet? Pancakes? Fresh fruit?”

“All of the above?” I asked. “Don’t get all nostalgic on me, Mom. It’s not as if you liked cooking for me.”

“I did my best,” she protested. “It’s, well, you know.”

I gave her a quick squeeze. “I understand. You had other things to do.”

“Plants were always my thing,” she said with a shrug. “Plants and magic.”

“I got the message,” I said.

“It was never meant to be something bad for you,” Hilda said. “It’s the same way you love O’Halloran’s. It’s your thing.”

“It’s the only thing I’m good at,” I said. “Serving alcohol and throwing a party,”

“Well, you wear it well,” Hilda said. “Can I get you a drink with breakfast? A coffee?”

I looked at her and chewed my lower lip, wondering if I should tell her what I wanted. What the hell. I wasn’t a kid anymore.

“Bloody Mary?” I asked, with a smile.

“Coming right up,” my mom said. “In fact, I’ll have one as well.”

I raised my eyebrows and my smile widened. “All right then. Shall we have breakfast in the garden?”

With glasses in hand, we stepped out into the yard she had turned into a complete fairy garden oasis. This was her private spot. When she wasn’t at the professional nursery, working on plants that she was going to sell, she was here in the backyard creating a wonderland of miniature fairy gardens that existed on berms and stumps or in the corners of trees. Everything flourished and grew, no matter what season it was, even winter. She had a way of making evergreens and deciduous trees look like sculptures crafted together.

My mother led me down a trail she must’ve newly paved, because I didn’t recognize it. It led through a tiny handmade glen and had a couple of seating areas by a little table. She moved beyond a bamboo wall, and into a spiraling passageway leading to a very small circle at the center, where there were a couple of large comfy chairs and a small table.

I shook my head at it all. “How do you even dream this stuff up? Much less make it.”

“Well,” Hilda said, giving me a sideways grin. “I do use magic to make it, so it’s not like I hand planted all the bamboo or have to deal with watering.”

“That’s right. You cheated,” I teased her.

She grinned back. “Maybe a little bit.”

“Well, it turned out amazing,” I said, settling back in my chair and breathing in the fresh warm air. It was like its own little ecosystem in here. Had I not known we were in southern Oregon, I would’ve thought we were somewhere in Southeast Asia.

“There’s been a lot going on,” my mom said.

“Are you OK?” I asked, suddenly concerned. We might not be close, but she was still my mom. “Did you go to the doctor?”

My mother shook her head like I had said a dirty word. “No, I am perfectly fine, fit as a fiddle,” she said, “but we’ve been having problems in the cemetery.”

I had to consciously stop myself from rolling my eyes. I didn’t want to hear about my mother’s coven. It seemed impolite to say as much though. Instead, I took a deep breath. “What’s going on?” I asked.

“The cemetery’s been breached,” she said.

“What exactly does ‘breached’ mean?” I asked. I knew only members of the coven could go into the cemetery and so I’d never been in. “What exactly is going on?”

“Well, the dark Fae, vampires, and monsters tried to break the seal on the cemetery and bring the dead to life. They got the skeletons to come back and then they made the bodies corporeal. They sent wraiths to gather the nightmares of the dead people and spread them around the population of Cougar Creek, but we stopped them in time.”

“That’s quite the story,” I said, taking a big gulp of my Bloody Mary. It’s not that I didn’t believe her. It was the exact opposite. I knew she was telling the truth. Mostly, I felt helpless and on the outside looking in. “How many are in the coven now?” I asked casually.

My mother looked at me quietly. There was no fooling her. She knew I always felt like an outsider looking in on her life. “Five,” she said. “The situation is so bad the pentacle of time has been enacted.”

“You say that like I know what it means,” I said.

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“It was made over a century ago by the first guardians of Cougar Creek Coven. They got together, one from each of the groups, and they made a blood pact. If the cemetery ever needed protecting, their descendants would all gather together to protect the cemetery.

“It’s bad when something like the pentacle of time is enacted?” I asked.

My mom nodded and I suddenly looked at her a little bit closer. She was aging. Not in a bad way, my mom would always have a youthful, vibrant nature and spark of intelligence about her, but I could tell she was tired.

“Mom, you’re too old to be getting caught up in all of this crap,” I said. “You need to rest. “

“I can’t,” she said. “We finally found out that it’s a portal which will create a doorway for the dark Fae to come into New Attica.”

“The dark Fae were banished from this area,” I said.

My mom let out a light hiss. “They’re trying to start a revolution against the light Fae.”

“That would create another massive war. Why would they want that?” I asked.

“Same reason anyone wants war. Because they’re greedy.”

“The coven would like to come by the pub today, if you don’t mind,” Hilda said.

“There’s no pub anymore,” I said sadly.

“Still, if it’s all the same to you, we’ll come by.” My mom looked at me and I realized she wasn’t actually asking. She was basically letting me know they were going to go by the remains of the pub today. If I wanted to be there, I could.

“Well, it’s your people who did this to me, so I suppose it’s your people who are going to have to figure out how to put it back.” I shrugged. “Hey, can I magic the pub back?”

“Not without raising a lot of questions in the neighborhood,” my mom said.

I pursed my lips wondering how much magic we could get away with before people started asking questions.

## Chapter 5

My mother insisted on driving us to O’Halloran’s, which kind of cracked me up because she said I was too stressed to drive, but it was more stressful with my mother behind the wheel. She was leaning forward, her seat practically pressed right up against the steering while she peered over the edge of the dashboard. Regardless, we made it there in one piece, but it looked like we were already the second group of people there, if not the third or fourth. I had expected to see maybe somebody from the police department, but the fire chief told me they’d already come by and that I needed to go down to the police station when I had a moment to file a report.

After I finished with the fire chief, I ventured over to the conspicuous group where my mother was standing. A number of other women my age were standing with her. Trina was nowhere to be seen, something I was slightly grateful for. It was hard for me, the relationship Trina had with my mom. They had been close since I was a teenager and even though now as an adult, I understood I was my mother’s daughter

and there was never going to be anyone else to take my place in her life, Trina still annoyed me. Every time I saw Trina, I reverted back to when I was a teenager and wanted all of my mother's attention to myself. She was unable to give it, because, not only was she caught up in all of her plans, but she was also training Trina in how to be a witch.

Something I would never be able to do because I had no magic.

"Hi," the tall brunette said to me. "I'm Mae." she smiled warmly and held out her hand.

I nodded, taking a deep breath and gripping her hand firmly. "Nice to meet you, Mae," I said. My issues weren't her fault; she didn't have to put up with them. Regardless of what was going on, it wasn't her fault I wasn't magic. If the stories my mother told this morning were true, these women had been up against a lot already.

"And this is Jane." She pointed to a leggy dark-skinned woman, who I immediately wanted to hate because she was so gorgeous, but I couldn't because she was beaming at me like a shining light.

"Hi, Jane," I said, nodding, and then finally I turn to the third person in the group, a short, curvy Asian lady with another broad smile on her face.

"This is Kartika," my mom introduced the last woman.

I took a step back for a moment and scanned the three of them. They were all looking at me with smiles that were inscrutable. They were planning something.

"What's going on?" I asked, turning to my mother. "I mean, you tell me the three of them wanted to see what was going on down here and fine, they can see it. The building burnt down. A guy did it, and judging by the magic I saw, he's one of your



people.”

“We wanted to walk around the grounds and see if we could get a signature read.” Mae said.

I turned to my mother. “Why do we need further investigation? The guy who did it was playing his fiddle in my pub. If he wasn’t a demon, he was a cambion.”

“Because if you remember, there are different levels of cambions and we want to find out if this one was acting of its own volition or if he was under the control of another,” Hilda explained.

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“I don’t give a shit what its motives were,” I said. “He burnt down my pub.” I turned around and looked at the burning ruins of what had been my home for the last twenty-five years.

I wasn’t going to lie to myself. I wanted to cry. One of the walls was still standing, charred and blackened. The remnants of the bar were there, but the fire had pretty much demolished everything else. Even the roof was actually gone, as if it had burned up into cinders before it even collapsed in on the building. I started walking toward the ruins of the pub. My mom and her friends followed close behind.

“Helen, you can’t go in there,” the fire chief moved toward me and stopped.

“I never stopped you from going into my pub a day in my life,” I said. “You going to try to stop me now, David?”

“No need to get testy with me, Helen,” David said. “It’s not a safe place for you to be walking around. Your shoes could be burnt if the ground’s still hot.”

“I don’t think the ground’s too hot,” Mae said, stepping around the firemen and walking out into the ruins of my smoldering pub. I glanced down at her feet. She was using magic to make sure we had a safe path. Everywhere she stepped the ground became cool without a hint of smoldering. Her magic spread out around her in each direction creating a pathway into the ruins.

I looked over at David. “After I get it rebuilt, the first round is on me.”

I followed Mae into the ruins. The space looked so much smaller once it was all burnt

down; there was nothing to it.

“Is there something specific you’re looking for?” Mae asked.

“Everything,” I said dismally. “But now I guess anything. I mean, there was a sword over the fireplace but I’m sure it burnt.” The stones of the fireplace were still standing so we headed over to it.

Mae stood over by the hearth, looking at the stones and the ground.

“Look,” Kartika pointed toward the side of the fireplace. “I don’t know how it got there, but I think that’s your sword.”

The sword was in perfect condition, only it was pointed end down and stuck in a hearth stone.

Everybody looked at the sword and then over at me.

“It’s your sword,” Kartika said.

“Let’s hope it’s my sword,” I said with a smile, “and I’m able to get it out of the stone.”

I walked over to the handle and gripped it with both my hands, flexing my arms and bending my legs. Once I had a firm grip, I gave a tug, and the sword was shockingly easy to get out of the stone. I stood victorious, holding the recovered sword above my head as the members of the Coven cheered me on.

## Chapter 6

I turned to the ladies with a large smile on my face, holding the sword victoriously

above my head and feeling suddenly incredibly empowered and enriched. Then I saw Jag. I pointed the sword at him. “Where the hell have you been?” I asked.

“I went after the cambion,” he said.

My eyes opened wide as the women of the coven exchanged a look and slipped into the background. I went straight up to Jag. “What do you know about cambions?” I asked.

“We’re not going to do this,” Jag said. “I’m going to tell you and you’re going to accept it. I am a demon.”

“Fuck you,” I said, turning away, but he grabbed my arm and pulled me back.

“I know about cambions because they’re the spawn of my people,” he said. “I recognized him when he came into O’Halloran’s.”

“You’ve worked for me for how long and you didn’t bother to tell me you were a demon?” I snorted.

“I didn’t think it would matter to you.” Jag said.

“Well, it matters to me that you’ve been lying.”

“Did you find the cambion?” Hilda stepped in between Jag and I, interrupting the bickering match.

I took a deep breath. I had to quit taking it so personally Jag had disappeared. I also had to ignore the fact he was a fucking demon. I turned on my mother. “Did you plant him here?” I asked. “At O’Halloran’s?”

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“No,” she said, surprised. “I mean, we had to have a demon working for us ever since we’ve had all the problems with the portals. We only recently put him on payroll.”

“You recruited him to moonlight for you?” I asked. “Poaching my employees. And you didn’t even tell me he was a demon!” The more I thought about it the angrier I became.

“It was no secret he was a demon,” my mom said. “He’s in the national registry if you would ever bother to look for supernaturals near you.”

“Did you plant him here?” I asked.

“Nope. “

I turned on Jag. “Why didn’t you tell me? “

“Demons aren’t exactly the most beloved creatures on the face of the earth,” Jag said. “I didn’t see that it mattered if I was the cook. What do you care what race I am?”

“It would’ve been nice to know you’re a supernatural,” I said.

“I’m a supernatural,” Jag deadpanned.

I sighed. “OK, fine. Did you get the cambion or not?”

“He was in hiding, but I reported him to Thrain. He’s not our problem anymore and he won’t be coming back.” Jag explained.

“He burnt down my pub,” I said. “I’m not done with him. “I don’t give a shit who Thrain is or for that matter who you are. I intend to get justice for my pub, so I’m going to find him.”

“Don’t you think you might want to focus on maybe rebuilding the pub?” my mother asked.

I couldn’t explain it though. There was a burning inside my body, itching to have a fight with the guy who had made such a mess of my pub. “I don’t simply want to rebuild it. I wanted to slay the jerk who had burnt it down and rebuild the foundations on his ashes.”

“That’s a little intense,” Kartika giggled off to the side. I glanced around, shaking my head, and trying to rid myself of the energy that had come over me.

“Wow. I don’t know what that was,” I said. “I felt like a vengeful warrior.”

“Well, you looked a bit like Xena warrior princess from here,” Mae said with a smile. I looked at the sword in my hand, which had a slight glow around the edge.

“What’s going on?” I asked. Everyone else stared at the hilt of the sword and the glow around my hand. Energy poured through my body, and I felt like I could wield the sword for a hundred hours in battle.

“You have powers,” Hilda said, her voice squeaked in delight. “My daughter, you have powers. We found them.”

“I think she has more than powers,” Kartika said.

“What do you mean?” Jane asked.

“Look.” Kartika pointed toward the pendant hanging from Mae’s neck. I’d heard them talking about it. My mom had explained it earlier, but I didn’t quite understand what it was. The pentacle had a stone on each point and one stone in the middle. As we all stared at it, it glowed. The center stone glowed purple and green, the next one fluorescent green, then red, turquoise, orange, and finally the last one lit up glowing gold.

“We fulfilled the Pentacle of Time,” Mae said, her voice hushed.

A blaze of energy seared through me and as I looked at the other women, I could tell they were feeling the same rush of power moving through their bodies.

“Can you feel that?” Jane whispered. “Bianca and Chloe aren’t even here, and I can feel their energy merging with mine and surging through me.”

“The Pentacle of Time is complete,” Kartika clapped her hands in excitement.

“It can’t be,” I said.

“It is you,” Jane smiled, reaching out to clasp my hand.

“It can’t be me for a lot of reasons. One is I have no magic and second, you have a witch.”

“Maybe you’re not a witch,” Jane said. “The pentacle works with one being from each species and the light and dark Fae get their own, but I’d have to be a different species and all we know is I’m half witch with no magic.”

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I tried desperately to ignore the golden light glowing around both my hands. I had waited too long for this moment. There were too many hopes and dreams vested in this happening.

Me. Magic.

I squeezed my eyes tight shut.

“I completely disagree,” Jane said. “Look at your hand. If that isn’t magic, I don’t know what is.”

Opening my eyes, I let out a gasping cry. “It’s real!”

“You have magic,” Hilda smiled.

I held up my hands to her, the light casting a warm glow on all of us. “You can’t remember who my father is?” I asked. “Because the sword belonged to my father and that’s where I got the magic from. I must be getting it from him.”

“Not only that, but if you’re part of the Pentacle of Time, he must be related to the original covenant.” Kartika pointed out. “If it was your mother’s line, it would be her to light up the pentacle.”

“Which also means my father is dead,” I said with recognition. “If he was alive, he would be the next in line for the Pentacle of Time.”

Sheriff Tom waddled up to us. “I know you spoke to Chloe last night Helen, but I



wanted to come by and offer you my condolences that your pub burnt down. We're going to do everything in our power to find the no-good son of a bitch who did this. I want you to know, I sure feel bad that none of us will get to have your pub for a little while."

"That's sweet of you, Sheriff. Thank you so much," I said, holding my arm behind my back so he wouldn't pay attention to the sword glowing in my hand. Kartika slipped in behind me, removing the sword from my hand deftly while I carried on chatting with the Sheriff.

"I'm going to need you to come down to the police station and file a report and sign it with the ladies down there. If you wouldn't mind coming with me, it'll help you out. You can start getting your insurance rolling a lot faster. Chloe and Bianca will take good care of you."

At the mention of their names, I glanced over at Mae. I knew she was the High Priestess of the coven, the leader of the group. She gave me a single nod to let me know she was fine with it.

The whole thing was strange. I didn't know what had happened, but we were all connected now. I could feel our mutually bound energy. It was easy for me to take permission from Mae. I'd been such an independent person barely listening to my mother for most of my life, it felt strange how easily I slid into it now. It felt right felt like the normal thing to do.

"OK Sheriff, I'll come with you."

"I'm coming too," Jag said.

"I'm sure that's not necessary." I shook my head, glaring at him.

“It may not be necessary to you,” Jag said, “but it is to me.”

“Stalker,” I threw the word over my shoulder at him as I walked with the Sheriff towards the police station.

## Chapter 7

Jag slipped in front of us and held the door to the police station for both Sheriff Tom and me.

“I don’t need an escort,” I smirked at him.

“This is my penance,” he said. “It’s partially my fault.”

“Well, it’s a lot your fault,” I said. “If you knew what he was when you saw him, why did you even let him stay in the pub?”

“I don’t know. I thought you’d invited him in or something,” Jag said. “It wasn’t my jurisdiction to tell you what to do in your pub.”

“Well, you could offer suggestions when it seems pertinent,” I said testily.

The truth was, I didn’t want him to come with me because I was about to see the two other members of the Coven. Bianca, I knew pretty well. She was a local also. There had been a couple of grades between us in school, but when each class only had twenty people in it, you tended to know everybody within five years of your age in both directions.

I walked up to the counter and gave Bianca a small wave.

“Are you here to fill out the form?” she asked.

“Indeed,” I said.

“There’s quite a bit of it, so you might as well make yourself comfortable. Come and sit down. I think I’m going to need Chloe to come over too so we can take a statement.” Bianca waved a manicured hand towards her colleague.

Chloe walked up to me. Her shoulder length brown hair was pulled back into a functional ponytail. “How are you holding up?”

“It’s been kind of a mess,” I said, “but you know if we can get the insurance done and get the place rebuilt, maybe we can pretend like this never happened.”

Chloe looked at me thoughtfully. She definitely wasn’t buying it. “It’s hard when you lose everything like so suddenly. I know you lived above the pub. It can’t be easy to have lost everything. If you need clothes or anything, just let me know. I mean, you’re a bit taller than me, but some of my shirts might fit you.”

I looked at her with surprise and couldn’t stop myself from smiling. “That’s really sweet of you,” I said. “You never know, I might have to take you up on it. My only other option right now is my mother’s wardrobe.”

“You know, I never realized Hilda had a daughter,” Chloe said thoughtfully. “It was a complete surprise when you started staying at her place after the pub burnt down.

“Yeah, that’s my relationship with my mother all right,” I said. “It’s like we don’t even exist to each other.”

“Not quite,” Bianca said. “She’s mentioned family before. I just assumed you’d moved away.”

“Well, you’ve been here what, three weeks now?” I asked Chloe.” So, I guess her time for not talking about me hasn’t run out yet, because Chloe’s never heard of me.”

Bianca’s phone buzzed with a text. She glanced over at it, then picked it up and read it closely. Her eyes widened as she looked up at me. “You’re the sixth,” she said.

“The sixth what?” Jag asked.

“She’s the sixth? “Chloe asked her face breaking out into a big grin. “That’s wonderful news. We found the sixth.”

“I didn’t necessarily agree to be the sixth,” I said. “You have to realize I don’t have any magic.”

Bianca’s phone buzzed again, and she glanced down before stepping up and saying, “They told us to not pay attention to you when you say you don’t have any magic. It will come. It came for all of us.”

“Did you know you were magic?” I asked.

“No, it was completely unexpected for all of us. Somehow, it’s almost like we’ve been in hiding as a group, but like, separately.”

“My guess is we were separate so it would be hard to put us back together,” Chloe said. “I don’t understand why. Now we’re together, we should be able to defend the cemetery better. You would think the people who put the Pentacle of Time in place would’ve made sure our families would’ve stayed close. What’s been puzzling me is why they didn’t. Why were we blown to all corners, and some never told we were

supernatural?”

“The jury still out on me,” I said. “On whether I’m magic or not. I know I had a golden glow around my hands earlier, but I don’t know what that means.”

“Are you a witch like your mom?” Chloe asked.

“I’ve never shown any talent for witchery,” I said. “In fact, it’s like the exact opposite. I suck at magic. Like I can’t even do it, That’s how bad I suck.”

“We can all help each other. I know your mom and Trina helped me,” Chloe said. “We all had to come to terms with the changes in our life and how they’ve come about. None of us expected to be werewolves or vampires or witches, so whatever you are, even if you’re not a witch, you know we are here to help you come to terms with it. We’re all going through a change in our lives now and we’ve come together for a reason. I think it’s more than simply protecting the cemetery. I think it’s because we all sort of needed each other.”

I blinked rapidly at her words, not wanting to show her exactly how much they touched me. I turned to Bianca instead, her red hair bobbing in agreement with Chloe. “Where are these papers I’m filling out?” I said gruffly.

## Chapter 8

The sun was heading slowly over the horizon as Jag, and I walked back toward the ruins of the pub. He’d stayed with me at the police station as I made the entire report and filled out all the forms. It had been kind of a pain in the butt and by the time we were done, I was exhausted, too tired to argue with him about where he should be or what he should be doing. If he suddenly wanted to tag along with me, fine.

We went back and looked for remnants from the fire.

“What are you going to do with the sword?” he asked.

I raised my eyebrows. I’d never paid much attention to the sword before, it had always just been a fixture of the pub. “I don’t know who it belongs to.”

“It was in your pub. It belongs to you,” he said.

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“Maybe, but I never felt that way about it. I always felt like I was just the steward,” I said. “It all comes from somewhere else. I inherited the whole thing lock stock and barrel from my father, a man I never knew.”

“Have you ever thought maybe that’s a good thing?” Jag asked.

“No,” I said. “I never considered that at all, because basically if a man fathered me, even if he’s the devil himself, I should know what my ancestry is and what’s in my blood.”

“You think knowing is going to make a difference?” Jag asked. “I mean, you are who you are already by now. Do you think knowing who your dad is going to change that?”

“It might fill in some of the puzzle pieces.” I pointed out. “I mean seriously. How am I going to know until I know?”

“What clues do you have right now as to who he is?” Jag asked.

“Well, the pub didn’t come with any further information. It was just a plot of ground purchased in my name. The building was built in my name. It looks like everything done was being done by me. The only problem is, I wasn’t even conceived. If you look at the paperwork it was purchased in my name before I was born.”

Jag raised his eyebrows. “That’s a strong bit of magic to be able to do something like that.”

“You’re telling me,” I said. “I’ve been around magic my whole life. My mom can do amazing things even though I can’t do shit, but even my mom couldn’t predict my gender or birthday.”

“What if he didn’t predict it? What if he magically backdated it?”

“That would be more reasonable,” I said. “To be honest, as much as I want to know, I haven’t spent a lot of time delving into it. I looked at all the paperwork and he’d done it in such a way, he made it clear he didn’t want anything to do with me. I’m not the kind of girl who chases after a guy.”

“Well, there’s no reason why a woman like you should ever chase after a guy anyhow,” Jag said.

I whipped around and looked at him, a bit surprised. “Are you flirting with me?” I asked.

“Flirting? No, I don’t think that was flirting,” he said. “I was stating a fact. Flirting would be like, I don’t know, if I made it personal somehow. “

“Well, if you just said you think I’m pretty amazing, which is not what you said. If it was, though, it’d be personal, in my opinion.” I said.

“It’s no surprise I think you’re amazing,” Jag said with a shrug. “Why would that be a surprise? Everybody thinks you’re amazing.”

I chewed on my lip for a second, not wanting to say anything, not wanting to speak. I wanted to make out with him. We were walking through Cougar Creek and the sun was setting. The air was brisk and cold. I wanted him to pull me into his arms and heat me up.



That wasn't what he was doing.

He wasn't coming onto me. He wasn't flirting with me. It was as clear as day, and I should take it at face value. I couldn't be chasing after younger men. If he wanted me, he would come to me. If not, his loss.

The sun set behind the mountains as we arrived at the blackened remains of my pub. My heart felt as blackened as the ruins. It hurt to look at it. It had been less than twenty-four hours. It wasn't long enough to get over the loss of, well, everything.

"You managed to save a couple of things?" Jag asked.

"A sword and a box," I said. "The box is the one I grabbed right before we got out of the building. The sword saved itself. We found it in the stones of the fireplace."

The breeze lifted his hair, showing the sunset in his dark eyes. "What is inside the box?"

"I've never been able to open it," I said. I looked at my hand. It was glowing gold in the evening light.

"You might want to try it out now you've got magic going on." His smile was warm and lifted my spirits.

"I don't understand why I've never had magic powers before. Suddenly one day my pub disappears, I've got magic powers and all I have left is a sword and a box." I mused.

"What's there to figure out? It just is," shrugged Jag.

"I don't know if the magic came because the pub burnt down or if my magic came

and then the pub burnt down,” I explained.

“The pub burnt down before you got your magic, “Jag said. “I was standing right next to you when it happened. Maybe it was a sacrifice.”

“Yes, but beings are attracted to magic, right?” I asked. “I remember that much from what my mother taught me. What if the cambion was coming to me because my magic was coming out?”

### Chapter 9

“I think you better start spilling the beans.” I placed a cup of Witch’s Brew tea in front of my mother.

It was late at night, and I had insisted we go home alone that evening because I wanted to talk. I had questions about this newfound coven and there were other things that needed to be sorted as well. For example, my heritage.

“Do you have any idea who he was?” I asked.

My mom bit her lower lip and shook her head slowly.

“Well, how did you meet him?” I asked.

“There was the annual festival at the Hot Springs on Samhain. He showed up. They were building O’Halloran’s at the time, and I remember seeing him over at the worksite earlier in the day as I walked by. I had thought he was applying for a job or coming to stay. He was young, tall, blonde hair, almost like a god. He was gorgeous. Later down at the Hot Springs... Well, it was a party. We were drinking and hanging out in the hot springs and...”

“I get the idea,” I held my hand up to stop her before she burned stories in my brain that I wouldn’t be able to unhear.

“Well, clearly he wasn’t some random guy,” my mom said. “He wasn’t coming to look for a job building O’Halloran’s like I thought. He was supervising the

construction of it. Once he figured out who you were, he left it to you. Signed, sealed, delivered.”

“I have the box,” I said.

“Are you going to open it?” Hilda asked.

“Well, it was addressed in the paperwork on the pub as ‘open in case we lost the pub.’ and I know we have insurance and can rebuild it, but I’d say it’s pretty lost for right now.” I looked to my mom for approval.

“I would agree with you,” Hilda said. “Who knows. It might be able to give you a better idea of who your father is than I can.”

I looked at her, shaking my head “Do you realize how pathetic that sounds?”

“It was the early seventies. Give me a break,” Hilda said.

I grabbed the box from the side table in the spare room where I’d been sleeping. It had been in my possession since I’d inherited the pub. The same lawyer who’d given me the deed to the property had also given me the box and explained that in the event I lost the property I had permission to open the box, but under no circumstances should I open it for any other reason, or I would forfeit the pub completely. I had kept it carefully and followed the rules which had been made clear and easy to understand.

Even now, I stared at it, wondering if it was the right thing to do. Did this constitute the loss of the pub, or should I still find a way to wait a little longer to open it?

As I watched, my hands began to glow with a golden light.

“This is bullshit. I’m completely opening the box,” I said.

Only I didn't know how.

The box was smooth on all edges, a solid cuboid. You would think it was a block rather than a box. If the guy hadn't told me, it was a box I never would've known. The guy himself had been a bit strange, with very pale white skin. I should've figured it out then. The lawyer was an elemental. My father was from the supernatural world.

"Use your magic," Hilda said. "It's probably some sort of a signature to your light."

My hand shook a little bit. "I don't know how to use magic."

"Of course, you do," Hilda said. "You've been using it your whole life, just in different ways. Like when you cheer someone up, you're channeling a little bright energy toward them. Take that energy field and channel it through your hands, because your hands are clearly the points emitting magic."

I raised my eyebrows quizzically at her, completely unsure of if what she was saying even made sense to me. "Hold the box in your hands," she said. "And think good thoughts about your father."

I looked up at her sharply. "Why do I have to do that?"

"If he put the seal on the box, it was done with some level of emotion you have to connect with him," my mom said. "He would've used his emotional signature, so you must match it. The matching vibration will unlock the box and it will come apart. It's called a saving box. Fae make these, but he definitely wasn't fae. He didn't have those pointy ears."

I stared at her blankly for a moment. Her world sounded so weird when I listened to it, as if I were a Normie, which is what I'd practically been my whole life. An outsider looking in. Now it was my turn. I closed my eyes and laid my hands on the

box, heat rising from them.

The gold light shone off my hands and emanated into the air around the box. It was doing more, though. I could feel it seeping into the box. It was like the gold light was an extension of my own energy. I could feel it where it was probing inside the box, almost looking for a latch of some sort.

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“It’s not opening,” I complained to my mother.

“Magic doesn’t always happen quickly. It takes a bit of time. Be patient and stay focused. Visualize what you want to do. You want the box to open, so if you keep visualizing it opening, it will soon open.”

Part of me wanted to argue with her and let her know I was a grown ass woman, and I didn’t need such basic explanations.

“Do you remember how to practice?” Hilda said calmly. “You’ve been doing it your whole life.”

“No, I did it for about three years until I realized I wasn’t magic, Mom,” I said. “Why do you think it’s going to suddenly work now?”

“Because I can see the magic in you, and something has happened. Touching that sword has put you in touch with who you are and it’s time to fulfill your purpose now.”

I looked back down at the box. I had to open it. I closed my eyes, the word “open” reverberating repeatedly in my head as I closed my eyes.

“Now visualize the box opening of its own accord,” Hilda said.

Keeping my eyes closed, I felt the light of my hands squeeze through the invisible cracks in the box. The lid of the box slowly moved in the air. I could feel it, but I didn’t dare look down.

“Open your eyes,” my mother whispered.

The lid of the box levitated. I tilted my head to look around it to see what was inside the box. I didn’t know what I was expecting. I had thought so many things over the last twenty-five years about what could possibly be in that box. A letter? Maybe an explanation? A photograph? Something tangible that would help to explain who and what I was.

I wasn’t expecting what I saw.

Nestled at the bottom of the box in fine cloth with little golden branches all around it like a delicate nest was a single golden egg.

## Chapter 10

I stared at the golden egg with no idea of what to do. My hands were glowing. I glanced at my mom. “Can I touch it?”

She tilted her head to the side, staring at the egg thoughtfully.

“Don’t touch it,” she said. “He couldn’t have known you would touch the sword first and find your magic or maybe he did. I didn’t want to tell you buy gold magic is quite rare.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It means your father was probably a demigod,” Hilda looked intrepid telling me. “Don’t get the wrong idea, I could be wrong, but it’s starting to make sense. The gold magic, his looks...it wouldn’t surprise me if he was a demigod.”

“Demigod of what though?” I stared down at the golden egg thoughtfully. “I mean



what if its monsters or demons or something horrid.”

“It doesn’t matter what your father was,” Hilda said. “You aren’t horrid. Now as for the egg, don’t touch it. I think we need to research it a bit more.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said thoughtfully, replacing the lid on the box and waving my hands over it, sealing it.

“It’s time we started doing some research,” Hilda said.

I looked over at the massive tomes of ancient books on the bookshelves. I’d been wondering my whole life what was in those books. When it turned out I wasn’t magic, they had been closed to me. Now it was time to open them.

“Where do we start?” I asked, standing up and moving to the bookshelf.

My mother pulled her phone out of her pocket and held it up to me. “Let’s use the Internet. It’ll be a lot faster.”

I lowered my chin, stopping myself before I rolled my eyes. How was it I could be a perfectly capable forty-something woman, but whenever I was around my mom, I wanted to roll my eyes and stomp my foot like I was a teenager. When did that feeling end?

“I’ll go and make some tea,” I said, going over to the cabinet where the Witch’s Brews were kept.

“I’ll have a lavender and rose,” Hilda said. “With a hint of green tea.”

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I smiled. There was something comforting about the strange mixtures of tea my mother drank. Her habits were ingrained in me also. I always felt better when I had a cup of Witch's Brew.

By the time I returned with two steaming cups of tea to the living room, my mother was curled up in the corner of the couch, her bare feet tucked up under her, zipping through her phone with her fingers, which were glowing with the pale green light.

"What's with your digits?" I asked.

"Once the Internet came around, I found I could treat it like a vine, and it would respond to my magic even though I was primarily agriculture." She paused, looking up at me and tilting her head to the side. "You know, I was always surprised you didn't have more agrarian magic. There was always something a little earthy about you, like the way you grew your own hops and made your own brew at the pub. Maybe it's a clue of some sort. I don't know. It didn't pan out the way I thought it would. I thought you would inherit my magic, but clearly, you've inherited something else, and it must be from your father."

"What did you find?" I asked, not wanting her to continue with the vein of how I failed her by not being an agrarian magician. My love of growing had stemmed from my mother's affinity with plants. At least, that was what I had always thought. I had a beautiful garden now behind the pub, before the fires had blown it away. I had grown Hops in strings in the pasture back there. that was why O'Halloran's was special. We'd made our own microbrew from soil to table. The inaugural version had used Hilda's Hops. I wasn't sure I was ready to change my perspective.

“Well, I looked up King Midas,” my mom said. “Because of the golden egg. I’m not sure where the sword comes in though. There is no mention of one that I can find.”

“When I touch things, they don’t turn to gold,” I said.

“It was a bit of a dead end after he killed his daughters with his powers. In order to reverse them he went back to losing everything or losing all of his powers.” My mother’s gaze scanned the screen as data flowed across the internet to her. “I think that’s how the story kind of goes.”

“What about the Fae?” I asked. “The fae are Celtic and he gave me an Irish pub.”

“The challenge is the puzzle we’re trying to piece together,” Hilda scratched her head. “Our puzzle pieces right now are a golden egg, a sword, and an Irish pub.

“Sounds like the start of a bad joke,” I smiled. “Where do the Grecians, you know, King Midas fit in?”

“King Midas lived in Crete. I think he was a Cretan instead of a Grecian,” Hilda explained

“You make it hard for me to not roll my eyes,” I warned her.

“You make it difficult for me to not explain the obvious,” Hilda responded.

“OK. Let’s narrow it down to Ireland based on the Irish pub,” I said. “I wish I knew what he could be. I mean, despite his lack of pointy ears could he be Dark Fae?”

“I’ve never heard of Dark Fae having gold magic.” Hilda looked up. “The name O’Halloran, what does it mean?”

“I looked it up online. It means stranger,” I explained. “Or someone from across the sea.”

“Well, he had an accent, but I didn’t think much about it,” Hilda said.

“It’s pretty clear what you were thinking about when you met him,” I said. “The question remains. Did he choose the word O’Halloran because he was a stranger here or because he was a stranger to Ireland?”

“If he was a stranger to here, he could be anybody,” Hilda said.

“Anybody Irish,” I pointed out. “It’s an Irish pub. Did he have an Irish accent?”

Hilda looked thoughtfully at me. “He had an accent. I would have been too young and inexperienced to know if it was Irish or not.”

I chewed on my lower lip. “Well, it makes sense if he left me an Irish pub that he’s Irish.”

## Chapter 11

I decided to spend some time up at The Estate to see if they could help me with my powers. I could feel the golden light around my hands and coursing through my veins, but I didn’t know exactly what to do with it. I could hold it in my hands and shake it off my hands, but when I tried to throw it at things, it kind of fell forward and plopped on the ground.

Super anti-climactic.

When I arrived at The Estate, Mae was there. Instead of handing me a cup of Witch’s Brew, she ushered me into the backyard. It was at the top of the hill and looked down

over the cemetery. There was a constant rumbling down there. I could hear it now. My mother told me it had been going on for a couple of months now, but I hadn't realized. I hadn't been able to see the wards around the cemetery that kept it safe from intruding eyes and from non-magic people understanding what was going on here. I'd looked at the cemetery a million times as a normie and never seen a thing. As I looked down at the cemetery now, though, I could feel the rumbling of the earth under my feet. I looked around at the other witches in the coven.

"Something's coming," I said.

"That's why we need your help," they said. "We know something's coming; we simply don't know how to stop it."

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“You think because I’m Hilda’s daughter, I’ll know how to stop it?” I asked.

“No, we think because you are the sixth part of the coven that the group of us together will have some sparkling change, which will make a difference,” Bianca said, waving her fingers in the air.

“The truth is,” Jane said. “We don’t know what’s going to happen. We only know the Pentacle of Time was calling us all together, so each one of us has to work on our magic powers. “

“And you’re psychic,” I asked.

“That’s right,” Jane said, smiling.

“She won’t read your mind,” Bianca and Chloe said together, laughing.

“At least this is what she tells us,” Kartika said with a grin.

I loved the warmth and feeling among the ladies, how they took everything in their stride and supported each other. I hadn’t felt this way since I’d been with my group of friends in high school, where we always knew we had each other’s back no matter what. I chewed a bit on my lower lip. I had spent a lot of my life trying to avoid the people my mother associated with. Mostly because I assumed they were supernaturals, and because they were supernaturals, I assumed they wouldn’t want to have anything to do with me, a supernatural with no magic powers.

However, this group was different in so many ways. Not only because I was now

supernatural so they could accept me; it was different because these were women I could hang out with. These were my people. They were the kind of people I would like to hang out with even if we weren't supernatural and bound together by the Pentacle of Time.

These were good people.

Even though we had all grown up separate from each other, our shared life experience was amazingly similar. It didn't matter if they'd come from the big city or were recently single or long divorced or never had a relationship. I could totally relate to these women and everything they'd been through.

The biggest thing we shared is that we were all newly discovering our magic powers.

I guess I had a little bit of the upper hand. From what I'd heard them talk about, none of them had even known the supernatural world existed. I'd known it existed, but I'd felt excluded for so many years, like my entire life, so I wasn't sure how to come around with being okay with it now. As I looked at the women and I looked down at the cemetery, I realized I didn't have a choice.

These women needed my help.

As I listened to the keening wail that rose from the cemetery, I could feel the energetic chaos that was trying to explode out of it. There was only one thing to do. I had to stand with these women as best I could. I needed to learn to wield my magic a little better.

I turned to Bianca.

"I don't think I'm going to have any of your skills," I said.

“Not unless you can suddenly turn into some sort of an animal,” she said.

Matheus walked forward in his faun form. Growing up around supernaturals and seeing them all the time still didn’t make me think it was normal to see a faun walking in the backyard. It wasn’t like that was a normal part of my mother’s world. Yes, she had sprites who helped her in the garden, but grown men walking around with goat legs was a whole different level of weird. I looked at Bianca, who didn’t seem to mind one bit. In fact, if I was someone who made bets, I would say she was pretty thrilled by it.

“Well, what we know so far is her father comes from Ireland,” Bianca said. “You told us O’Halloran means stranger. We’ll assume the word stranger meant that he was a stranger here and he was Irish, so he was giving clues.”

“He could’ve made it a little bit easier. He could have left me a letter,” I smirked. “I keep coming back to the idea that my dad was Fae. Though that would put three fae in the coven.” I motioned to where the two women stood whispering.

They looked a little startled when I called them out, but Kartika nodded. “You could be Fae. Ireland is residence of the Dark Fae. They also live in Eastern Europe and in Indonesia. I don’t know if a Dark Fae would leave you a golden egg or make golden light in your hand. That’s something quite a bit different.”

“Why don’t you see if you can manipulate any of the elements?” Mae said. “That’s usually the sign of a fae of some sort. Kartika is good with rocks and water and Jane is good with the air.”

I looked at her with a question. “What exactly does ‘do something with the elements’ mean?”

“You have to close your eyes and focus on it,” Jane said. “Focus on moving the



crystals or the water or the air. It's probably best if you focus on one element at a time."

"And I think focusing on small amounts is also a good idea," Mae said.

"We'll get her some samples of everything," Bianca said, moving quickly out of the yard. A few moments later she had returned with a collection of cups. There was liquid in one, rocks in another, and one with some soil in it.

"We can make a fire," Bianca said.

"I don't know if a fire is exactly what I want. If fire is my element, you'd think I would've been able to control the fire that destroyed my pub."

"I can't help but think there's something in the hops," Jane said. "She has a love for growing things and her father left her a pub. Maybe it's genetic from more than just her mom's side. What if we look up Irish people who grow things?"

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“Why don’t we see if she has any plant skills?” Mae asked.

“That’s one thing I definitely don’t have. Not like my mom does,” I said. “Or didn’t have before. Of all the skills, if I had any, that one would be because of my mother.” I looked around at them quietly, not asking for pity but wanting them to know a little bit about me. “If there’s one magic skill I’ve tried out, it is how to grow plants.”

“Maybe try again one more time,” Mae said.

“OK,” I said. I turned to the cup Bianca had put a bit of soil in and I held my hand over it. I glanced over at Jane.

“Close your eyes,” she said, “and focus on the magic energy inside your body. Feel a little pulling together in your heart center then feel it moving out to the edge of your hand.”

Even as she spoke the words, I could feel energy moving through my body. It came to the edge of my hands, and it was tingling along every particle of my being. My hands tingled as the energy triggered a warm glow. I moved my hand forward over the cup. The strangest thing happened as my energy came over it.

Something in the soil was responding to my power.

As it grew more intense within me, I could feel an equal and opposite intensity coming from the cup below, pulling at the center of my palm like a single thread of golden light. I stared at it in awe as it nestled into the soil and within seconds we watched as a plant began to grow. It was the most miraculous experience I’d ever

had. Tears formed in my eyes as I gasped, my hand shaking.

“I can do it,” I murmured. “I can do it.”

All the years of ignoring the supernatural world and drowning it out and pretending it didn't exist and wanted nothing to do with it because it couldn't have anything to do with me were suddenly wiped out as I watched the tiny plant poked its head out of the dirt and raised two little baby green leaves up in the air, called forth by my magic.

## Chapter 12

Hours later as I sat outside on the hillside alone under the stars, staring out across the cemetery, I couldn't help but think of all those years the power had lain dormant within me. The ability to make plants grow. I was sure that wasn't all I could do, but for now, it was enough. We had tried out a variety of other magic throughout the evening. Air magic, water magic, crystal magic, but none of it had connected other than the earth magic.

The air moved in a rugged scent like embers burning on the fire on a hot summer night.

Jag had arrived.

I had known he was hot in the attractive sense, since the second I met him, but now there was something about him that drew me to him, it made me want him. I didn't know if it was me or if it was because the magic now coursing through my body was making me a little more exuberant than normal, but I definitely wanted him. When he sat down next to me, I had to take a deep breath and push away the desire inside me to touch him, stroke his skin, and feel his touch. Jag and I had always been friends, my ability to grow plants and his demonic ability to turn things into burning embers notwithstanding, we were still friends. He sat down next to me on the hill, his knees

bent, his arms wrapped around his knees. He stared out at the cemetery. “There’s a lot of death and destruction going on in there,” he said. “Do you guys think you have enough fire power to take care of it?”

“I have no idea,” I said. “I’m still trying to understand how I’ve had magic powers for forty plus years, but I didn’t get to use them until just now.”

“At least you get to hang out with a group of people who are pretty cool,” Jag said. “That’s not half bad.”

“Ever since I was a kid, I knew my mom was magic and she was special. I was always waiting for the day I would have that special thing, too. It never came though. There was nothing special about me. Except my pub. O’Halloran’s. I poured all of me into that pub,” I smiled as my eyes misted over. But then O’Halloran’s burned to the ground, and I ended up with this.” I held my hands out, golden balls glowing in each hand. “I don’t even know what to do with them,” I whispered.

“I know what you mean,” Jag said. “I come from Undirheim, the Underworld. It’s made up of Valkyrie and demons. We’re meant to guard portals but there are more demons than there are portals. It gets a little intense sometimes. There’s always fighting and bickering going on. When I first came here, I was amazed to find it wasn’t how you ran things. I had to get used to human life quickly. I found that I loved it. I’ve loved living in Cougar Creek and working at your bar. I really want you to build the pub back and go back to work there,” Jag said with a laugh. “My friends are jealous I’m the guardian of the Cougar Creek portal. Though that’s not what it’s called down there,”

“I’m sure it’s something charming in demon tongue,” I said with a side grin.

“I found once I got here what I enjoyed was the camaraderie. It’s like you say. You were shunned by the supernatural world and so you never had that bond, but you

created it here for us and you know the people who work at the pub. It's why everybody wants the pub to be back in business again. Not because they need their jobs, but because you're a center of the community."

I looked at him quietly for a moment. "So, you were a supernatural craving the human world and I was a human craving the supernatural world," I said.

"Meeting halfway in between," he said with a smile, his hand reaching over and touching my cheek.

I leaned into his hand, loving the warmth of his touch, the feel of him against my skin. Swallowing hard, I looked up, nibbling slightly on my lower lip. This wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I came out here to assess my powers quietly alone.

I stood up abruptly, staring down at him for the brief second.

He leapt to his feet as well. "Did I do something wrong? If so, I'm sorry."

"I don't even know how old you are," I said. "I don't know anything real about you. I mean, I have all your Social Security details, but now I realize all of it is falsified."

"I just signed on to guard the portal," Jag said. "I'm the guy you've had cooking in your kitchen for the last ten years."

"Somehow that's supposed to make you familiar to me, but in so many ways it still makes you completely alien, someone I don't even recognize," I said, looking up at him as he towered above me. I sucked in a breath at the pained look that crossed his face.

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“Jag,” I said with a sigh. “It’s not you. It’s me. It’s...you’re a demon.”

“I know it’s me. I’m a demon, and I understand it’s new territory to have a demon in your life. Still, it isn’t like you’re exactly human either.”

“Not as inhuman as a demon,” I said. “At least I was born in this realm.”

“We know you were born in this realm, but we don’t know if you’re of this realm. You could be half from earth and half from beyond the rift.”

“That’s not the point,” I said, folding my arms across my chest.

“The point is you’re not interested,” Jag said with a nod. “I understand. I’ve been around the human world enough to know. I get it. I learned a lot from humans. Come on.” He motioned me toward the house. “Let’s get you back in The Estate and get you some Witch’s Brew.”

## Chapter 13

I stayed at The Estate into the evening but wanted to go speak with my mother. I didn’t trust myself walking out with Jag, so when Chloe headed for the front door, I made my move with her.

“You going to be all right getting home?” Chloe asked.

“Yes Deputy,” I intoned with a smirk as I got in my car. “Don’t worry. The biggest threat to me is in the car behind me.”

“I heard you,” Jag said.

“I meant it,” I said. “Keep your distance.”

I got behind the wheel and headed to my mom’s house. I knew Jag would follow me until I got safely in the house. I didn’t mind. It was quite a gentlemanly custom and pleasantly surprising for what I imagined a demon would behave like.

When I walked into Mom’s house, she was awake and in the living room with her tarot deck out.

“What are you doing?” I raised my eyebrows at the beautiful, weathered deck that had seen so many spreads over the years.

“I was doing a tarot reading on Jag and you,” she said unabashedly.

“My friendship with Jag is none of your business.” I put my hands on my hips. “I’ll thank you to keep your tarot out of it.”

“I was just having a little look. There’s no harm in it,” Hilda said.

“Don’t you have anything better to do with your time? Like maybe try to figure out what species my father was?”

“Don’t you want to see the reading about Jag?” Hilda asked.

I stood there for a moment with my hands on my hips, not wanting to give in but being irrevocably drawn toward the tarot deck. I had always enjoyed the beautiful cards and the wild spreads my mother had done, until we realized I wasn’t going to have magic powers and I became considerably less welcoming of anything to do with the magic world.

Now the three-card spread she had in front of her was drawing me in and I found myself leaning over to look down and see what the cards said about me and Jag. I knew they were served in order of past present and future and they would've been set up facing my mother. I moved by her side, looking over her shoulder. She pointed to the past card.

“This one fell right out of the deck. The World. You both have had a lot of experience in the world prior to coming together. The present is the Knight of Cups which I think is pretty obvious from the way he is behaving toward you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Seriously, Mom? I’m in my mid-forties and you act like a boy at school has a crush on me.”

“But it’s the future I did the cards for, because I have an uncomfortable feeling about your new beau, and there it is. The cards never lie. The hangman.” She stretched out her knobby finger, tapping the worn surface of the card right in the hanging man’s belly.

“He’s going to die?” I asked.

“You’ve forgotten everything you ever learned,” Hilda grumbled.

“Read the cards in order. It shows the past there was a sense of completion and wholeness as the world is a circle encompassing all things. It means you completed a cycle, and you will start another cycle now. The current cycle is the Knight of Cups. This is a male suitor coming for you and you can definitely believe Jag is going to be looking for a romantic entanglement with you.”

Which was going to end up being the hangman.



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“He’s not going to die, but he’s going to hang upside down in a tree?” I dug far back into the recesses of my brain. “Stagnation?”

My mother looked at me with a smile. “Precisely right. It doesn’t talk about just that, though. It’s about a man making a sacrifice.”

“He’s going to sacrifice himself for me?” I asked. “I don’t like the sound of that, especially when things are looking so bad up there in the cemetery.”

“The hangman shows two things,” Hilda continued unperturbed by the rising disturbances in the cemetery and more focused on my love life. “It talks about staying still until the moment is right to make the sacrifice and the sacrifices will propel the forward momentum.”

“I don’t think I like the idea of a sacrifice at all.” I pushed back.

“Just know at the end of the day, there might be some things beyond your control,” Hilda said.

“Well, if my experience in life is anything to go by,” I pointed out, “then everything pretty much is out of my control.”

“Well, mostly it’s because you don’t exercise enough control of your life over the little things,” Hilda said.

“Thanks,” I said. “Exactly what I need right now.” My sarcastic tone did not go unnoticed. “I only came back to check on you before I go up to The Estate for the

night.”

“Why is it so necessary for you to stay up there?” Hilda asked.

“It’s just for this time. I don’t have to stay up there, but I think it’ll be good for us. If we’re going to work together to defeat whatever’s creeping out of the cemetery, there’s only one way to do it and that’s for all of us to be as close as possible together.”

“Well, I think as long as you’re going you should take the box with the golden egg in it,” Hilda said. “I was doing some research on the Internet today and I found an article where it talks about a golden egg in Ireland.

“Isn’t it the story of the goose who laid the golden egg? The one the giant owned, and Jack went up the beanstalk and stole? Is that an Irish myth?” I asked.

“Not that I know of,” my mom said. “The Irish had giants in their myths but not Jack and the Beanstalk.”

“What else did the article say?” I asked.

“It says the Dagda turned a turnip into a golden egg.” Mom said.

“That’s useful.” I was frustrated. “You going to be okay for the night?” I asked as I went to grab the box from the bedroom I had been using.

She started laughing. “I’ve lived my life here in Cougar Creek all these years. I don’t need you looking after me now.”

“I know. I guess I’m getting a little soft in my old age,” I said.

“When you’re as old as me, then you can talk about old age,” Hilda chuckled. “I’d give anything to be fifty years old again.”

“Hey, I’m not fifty yet,” I frowned at her.

“You’ll look like it if you keep frowning,” she said with a sideways grin.

“Not nice,” I retorted.

“You know I’ve been thinking a lot about this box, and I wanted you to consider that maybe the egg is a key,” Hilda added thoughtfully.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, sometimes eggs can come apart and maybe it comes apart and reforms into something, like a key. I don’t know, but that’s what I saw on the internet today. Maybe you should practice with the egg to see if you can get it to transform.” She shrugged.

I took the box and chewed on my lower lip a bit. I wasn’t sure about the egg being a key, but I guess she had a point. I could try to apply my magic to the egg and see what happened.

## Chapter 14

The next few days passed in a bit of a blur up at The Estate. Jane was living down at the warehouse with Toern at the Sunrise Doggie Daycare. Chloe lived in her own house elsewhere in Cougar Creek. Bianca and Mae were staying in the main house and Kartika and Frank were staying in a cabin on the premises. I had spoken to Mae earlier in the day and she had given me the extra bedroom in the main house to stay in. I had moved in there and we had decided to start working on training. Because I

had been left a sword, they figured I had to have some sword skills.

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Apparently, Kartika and Chloe both had some fight training, specifically in martial arts and with sword work. Only Chloe made it out to practice though. She had worked to get her black belt when she was on the police force.

There was a large flat part of the driveway stretching out into a gravel yard. This was where Chloe took me for sword practice.

“Shouldn’t we be wearing padding or doing our work on a mat or something?” I asked her. She handed me the sword and took a stand opposite me.

“I found you learn quicker the faster you go down on the ground,” she said. “If it leaves a few scrapes. You’ll remember it more quickly.”

“Yes,” I said as she nailed me with her elbow, rushing forward.

“Hey, not cool,” I protested.

“Neither is your enemy,” she said. “They’re going to try to hit you every chance they get. Particularly when you’re not looking. They’re not necessarily going to take their sword to you. First thing you’ve got to learn when you’re fighting in the supernatural world is they will use absolutely every single little advantage they have against you. In this case it was the advantage of surprise. You came here thinking we were having a lesson in sword play, so I pushed you to the ground with my shoulder, which is something you weren’t expecting. You always have to think about that with the enemy. Always think about what they’re not expecting and then do it. Of course, to do that you have to know what they’re expecting.”

“I’m expecting you to teach me how to use the sword,” I said with a growl, pulling myself up off the gravel and wiping the small pebbles out of my skin. I pulled the sword down and pointed it directly at her, waving it around in the air and then bringing it down in a slice in front of where she was standing.

She looked at me, impressed with the moves I made.

“For years my mother drove me the next town over to take martial art lessons,” I said. “You’re not the only one who knows a thing or two about weapons, but I’m happy to spar with you,” I grinned, holding the sword up against her.

We came together in a clash of swords. I wasn’t surprised by Chloe’s strength. She had an athletic build that gave itself to sword fighting and fast movement. At least as fast as two middle-aged women were going to get. There was no denying we were a little slower than our younger male counterparts, who were fortunately not watching us spar, but I was still proud of the work we were doing. I could only be as good as I possibly was and not worry about what other people were doing.

I was winded after about an hour. The energy moving through my system gave me a new life, a new focus. I felt like bags had been lifted off my shoulders. I felt lighter and more agile, more capable.

And, I still didn’t know what I was.

We moved out to the back terrace when we were done, and Mae brought us each a cup of cold Witch’s Brew. It was thoroughly refreshing, with a hint of Rosemary and lavender in it and topped with a high note of lime. It gave me a little bit of extra zing as I sat there catching my breath.

“I had no idea I could even move like that,” I said.

“It has something to do with you finding that sword,” Mae said. “Somehow the sword has ignited your superpowers.

“Here here,” I said, raising my glass in a bit of a toast.

“None too soon,” Kartika said. “The rumbling at the cemetery is getting worse. I was down there early with Frank, and we were trying to see if this new ward idea we had worked. Spoiler alert: it didn’t. We brought in the formation of the crystals wrapped in wire. It should’ve sparked all of the wards to be a little stronger, but it didn’t have any effect on them. Not a single one. It’s unheard of. It means the power of the Styx is getting stronger.”

“The power of what?” I asked. “Isn’t like a band from the Seventies?”.

“I don’t know anything about a band from the Seventies,” Kartika said, “but the Styx river flows underneath a lot of different places, including Cougar Creek. It carries the souls of the dead to the underworld, but something’s happened. When they started blocking off all the portals, it created a backlog of the dead souls, so now they’re all left in a rotting mass in the River Styx and, well, she’s pissed.”

“And that’s our problem because?” I asked.

“Because Cougar Creek is closed. The demigods want it closed for a reason. We let the demigods keep it closed, but then it’s actually affected one of the demigod’s rivers.

“The demigods don’t give Styx any attention. She’s a bit pissed she’s been sidelined and polluted so she wants to make her mark and her plan is to do so here in Cougar Creek,” Mae said.

“Wait a minute,” I held my hand up. “Isn’t Styx a God? Aren’t they like...gone from

Earth?”

“This Styx is a demigod,” Kartika explained, “who has taken the name of the God who is their ancestor.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Alrighty then.”

“We found out,” Jane continued, “that they saw Cougar Creek as weak because it didn’t have the keeper of the portal in place. So, they came here thinking they could take it over, but instead they brought together probably one of the strongest covens of all time. The Cougar Creek coven.”

“How can you be certain they were so strong?” I asked. “None of us have even done very much magic.”

“We’ve withstood five different attacks from them.” Bianca pointed out.

“If we’re up against a demigod, shouldn’t we call the DGC?” I asked.



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“There’s no point calling the demigods,” Mae shook her head. “We haven’t even given the Pentacle of Time a chance to fully develop. I think it’s only fair now the six of us are together that we try to clear out the problems happening in the cemetery.”

“The problem is,” I said, “we’ve got a demigod who wants the portal open and then we’ve got a whole lot of demigods who want the portal closed. Which one are you going to answer to?”

“The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few,” Mae said.

I looked down at the cemetery. I could hear the grumbling, moaning and high-pitched keening of the dead souls growing more and more restless by the day.

“Maybe it’s time I took a closer look,” I stood up, downed my Witch’s Brew, and placed the glass on the table. “Who’s with me?”

### Chapter 15

Jag was instantly by my side the minute I stood up, even though I hadn’t even realized he’d been nearby. Then I realized most of the guys from the coven were out in the backyard.

“I want to go to the cemetery,” I said to Jag.

“I’ll go with you, but we should take some of them too,” Jag said. “They have a better idea of what’s going on in there.”

“Bianca and I will take you down there,” Mae said. “Jag is more than welcome to come.”

“We’ll want to look at all four quadrants,” Bianca pointed out. “The Celtic martyrs in the southwest corner were three daughters of the original Hayes who ran this district. She ran The Estate and set up the Pentacle of Time. Her daughters died during a big uproar in the cemetery. It’s probably why she set up the Pentacle of Time. Didn’t want to see anyone else have their children die.”

Urgh. I didn’t have kids, but I couldn’t imagine losing all three of them in some supernatural battle.

“There is also Fae Glen where the Fae are buried. Beyond that are the crypts that go into the cliff,” Kartika explained. “Then there’s the lion’s quadrant in the Northeast.”

“Okay,” I said tracking what was where. “Then that just leaves the southeast.”

“Don’t forget the lion,” Kartika said.

“There’s a lion statue, but what’s over here?” I asked, pointing toward the southeast corner of the cemetery.

“The last section is just kind of the swamp, in the southeast corner,” Mae said. “It catches the run-off from the mountains and has a soggy spot that is always pooling water. It’s not very good for dead bodies. A bunch of them sank into the marsh that has gotten worse recently.”

“Like a river?” I asked, raising my eyebrows.

Mae and Bianca nodded and looked at me.

“We’re starting to connect the dots now,” Bianca said.

“We thought it was in a cavern down below.” Mae added. “It’s not the only place where Kartika has seen it before. She saw it under Lake Tahoe and then again when she was out in her bunker underneath the Pacific Ocean just off the coast. She saw it there, too. We were assuming it was somewhere by Undirheim.” Mae closed her eyes, leaned her head back, and took a deep breath.

I immediately felt empathy. The weight of the world rested on her shoulders. She was like every other middle-aged woman out there. Kids were grown, relationships over, and she was looking at getting a new lease of life. Unfortunately for us, the new lease of life came with a whole lot of baggage and burdens. Nothing, absolutely nothing, came easily and certainly not for free, especially not when you were middle-aged.

“We’re figuring this out together,” I said, reaching out my hand and gripping hers quickly and quietly. “It’s going to be OK.”

My life hadn’t exactly been difficult. I’d been given a means to be my own boss and pay my own way since I was twenty-one. I’d been able to stay in one place and live comfortably and never have anybody tell me what to do. I could take vacations when I wanted to where I wanted to, but I never felt like going anywhere. I was happy in Cougar Creek. This was my home.

It impressed me the others had moved here. They’d made an effort to come and see what it was like to live in Cougar Creek, even though none of them had any experience with the supernatural world. In that way I was different from all of them. I looked at Mae and smiled. “It’s all going to be fine,” I said. “We’ll figure this out together.”

When we got down to the entrance of the cemetery the sun was high and warm. I stood at the gate, listening to the keening of the zombies and watching the ground as

it undulated.

“Are you sure that is safe?” I asked.

“Probably not,” Bianca said, walking past me and into the cemetery.

I hurried to catch up with her on the pathway, even though it was difficult to walk on the moving earth.

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“I’ll stabilize the pathway,” Mae said, falling behind as she began to chant a spell. In moments the walkway became still, but everywhere else it was rolling as if the earth itself was water.

Then I saw the bones and the skulls and body parts sticking halfway out of the ground.

“Make sure you stay on the path,” Bianca said. “It’s too dangerous to step off the path at all. One of those hands can grab you.”

“How do you control the pathways?” I asked.

“Right now, we are using all of our magic to create these pathways to separate the Zombies from each other.” Jane said.

“Zombies?” I frowned. As I said the word, Bianca startled us with a loud howl. Something tugged at my leg. I screamed when I looked down and saw a bloody, boney hand gripping onto my pant leg.

“We’re not going any farther,” Jag said, gripping my hand and pulling me back.

“Don’t think–” I tried to argue.

“I insist,” Jag said forcefully, pulling me behind him as I looked to my left and screamed.

A dozen zombies were walking toward us out of the glen of the Fae.

“Get behind me,” Jag said, his hands bursting into flames.

He waved the fire at some of the zombies causing them to pull back.

“I don’t need to hide behind you,” I said. “I can fight too.” I held up my hands, but they only let out a little drops of gold light, which fell flat on the ground...

Which made the zombie stop and turn and look at me.

Mae started muttering a spell underneath her breath as I stood there like an idiot, not doing a single thing in the face of zombies coming toward us.

Jag was completely right. There was no reason why we should be in here, not right now.

“We need to get out of here,” I said. “We’re not equipped for this. I’m not equipped for this.”

Mae looked at me, Bianca, and Jag. She nodded her head. “You’re right. We need a larger force to combat them. I hadn’t realized It had gotten this bad.”

“It’s bad,” I said, my voice catching in my throat as I swallowed hard. The zombies were terrifying, flesh hanging off of their bodies, their bones protruding, muscles exposed. I could see them everywhere I shouldn’t see them. My stomach cramped and I wanted to throw up.

“Come on,” Jag said, reaching his hand around mine and pulling me from where I stood frozen watching the zombies lumbering toward us.

Chapter 16

My heart was still racing by the time we got to the house.

“There’s no way,” I said. “There’s no way we’re going to survive this. How are we supposed to stop that? It’s a zombie invasion!”

“We don’t actually know,” Mae said as she walked in front of me up the stairs and into The Estate. We all convened in the red room. The guys had stayed out at the cemetery to keep an eye on things while the rest of us were here trying to figure out the problem.

“Do we even have an approach?” I asked.

“Not just yet,” Mae said. “We’ve been mostly waiting for the sixth member of the coven to show up so we could try to assess the capabilities of our group.”

“So here we are.” I folded my arms across my chest. “The sixth member and we’re no smarter for it.”

“We have a high priestess, a werewolf, two Fae, a light fae and a dark fae, a vampire, and you,” Mae said. “The only thing we can relate it to is the original Hayes. When she lost her daughters, she created the blood pact and brought together all of our ancestors and Chloe’s maker to form the blood bond into the coven.”

“We think there’s something in the cemetery triggering the pentacle to call us forward,” Jane added. “So, somehow the six of us should be the solution; all of our power together.”

“If we can figure it out,” Bianca leaned forward. “So far, we’ve been able to do one thing at a time. Each one of us had a challenge to overcome.”

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“But I somewhat failed my challenge,” Kartika said. “I was supposed to poison Morel, but I couldn’t do it.”

“Nobody said you were supposed to poison Morel,” Chloe shook her head. “It was your idea.”

I gazed at Kartika thoughtfully. “Have you been in touch with him since?”

“I don’t think they left it on quite good terms,” Jane said.

“There’s even more reason why she should call him back and tell him something crazy,” I said.

Chloe looked at me, her head cocked to the side. “You mean like totally gaslighting?”

“Yeah, but the opposite of a gaslight,” I pointed out. “Like say everything is your fault and you’re so sorry and you know you want to work things out.”

“She’s going to have to show she’s for real and not bullshitting him.” Chloe pursed her lips as she tapped a pencil against them.

“But he knows that she knows that he’s a douche,” Bianca said. “How do you propose we get around all that?”

“Easy,” Chloe responded. “He’s a narcissistic, douche bag and a demigod trying to bring about the end of the world by fucking up our portal. He’s all about himself. He’ll totally go for it if you pander to his ego.”



“I couldn’t agree more.” I nodded.

Bianca grinned. “Great. I’m glad we’ve got that figured out. Now you’re part of the Coven,” she turned to me, “can we get something a little stronger than Witch’s Brew?”

I shook my head and smiled. “Not until the insurance gets taken care of and the pub is rebuilt. Though I’m sure it’ll happen lickety-split if my mom has anything to say about it.”

“Well, if she doesn’t get things moving, let us know,” Mae said. “I’m sure we can help out.”

“Wait, I think we need to back up a second,” Kartika said. “You’re proposing I call Morel and tell him I want to come over to the Dark Fae. Should I also let him know we have the six members of the Pentacle of Time?”

“Sounds right,” Chloe nodded.

“Ok, but what’s the main thing we’re trying to achieve here?” Kartika asked.

“I see where you’re headed,” I nodded. “You want to give him a call to action. We want to preemptively get him out of whatever bunker he’s in trying to come up with a big plan to take over Cougar Creek. If we reach out to him, why don’t we do exactly the opposite of what he’s thinking? Why don’t we invite him to Cougar Creek?”

They all looked at me like I was crazy.

Nobody said a word. There was dead silence in the room with each member of the coven weighing the idea in their own perspective. It was a pretty cocky plan, and I didn’t know quite what to follow it up with, but I still felt like if we were going for

the element of surprise, this would be the last thing Morel would expect.

“It’s not a half bad plan,” Mae finally said. “I don’t know what we’d do with him once we get him here.”

“I was wondering the same thing, but I figure we’re six smart women.” I grinned and motioned to the room. “We’ve got to be able to figure out a plan,”

“Do we want him to come with Styx or without? If you want him to come with Styx, then either way you’ve got to sell them on the fact you want to join with him.” Mae pointed out.

Kartika pulled a small hematite rectangular stone out of her pocket and held it up. “It’s the key stone, but if he gets the sense any of you are here it’s not going to go over well.”

“I think some of us should stay in the room to watch from the side to get a different perspective,” Mae said. “Let’s have Helen stay because she hasn’t seen him before and may have a new perspective.”

I didn’t want to tell them what I wanted to be doing was researching golden eggs in Ireland and trying to figure out who my father was. At this stage I wasn’t trying to figure out exactly where I came from, I was simply trying to understand my powers a little bit better.

My gaze jerked toward Mae. “My mother did not put me in the blood pact. Why am I in the blood pact if she’s not in the blood pact? It must be on my father’s side. He must’ve known he needed to leave a descendant here.”

I recalled my father must’ve known there was a Pentacle of Time. A massive realization slowly dawned on me, and my stomach clenched. “My father was not

from this world,” I said. “He’s either a monster, a demigod, a demon, or even a Fae. We already have two Fae in the coven so that means my father was either a demon, demigod, or monster.

“Hey, I think I have something.” Kartika lifted her head from the crystals, and it was only then I realized she had made a connection. Mae put out her hand to me and we both stepped back into the shadows, while everyone else in the room retreated to the kitchen.

Mae and I watched the screen as a devilishly handsome dark man’s face smiled out toward us.

### Chapter 17

I stared at the screen silently. It felt like all the power was being sucked out of the room by the man there. He combined it with his own power and commanded the space. I instantly didn't like him though. He was a little too confident the way he looked out of the screen. It was as if he was smiling at Kartika and expecting her to come crawling back. They had told me the stories of how he was betrothed to her and how she had rejected him, but I could tell by the look in his eye he was expecting her to return.

Bile rose in my throat, but this was part of the deal. We had to try and solve the problem of the cemetery and playing to this asshole's tune was going to be part of the deal.

"There you are my precious darling." His smile almost made him look sincere, but he was a dark Fae of ill repute and one I didn't have a good feeling about. I certainly didn't like the way he looked at Kartika.

"Where is Styx?" Kartika asked.

"No need to be jealous of her." Morel smiled warmly at her. "May I come visit you tonight?"

Even from where I was standing in the shadows, I could feel Frank bristle in the kitchen. I guess gargoyles had hypersensitive hearing as well. There was no way Frank was on board with this idea of Morel meeting with Kartika. I knew Kartika and Frank were a thing, and it was a dangerous game she was playing trying to entice

Morel.

Morel seemed amenable to the situation though, smiling at her and appearing quite warm.

“How are things going over there?” Morel asked her. His face had taken on a demeanor of concern.

I wasn't buying it.

Kartika seemed enchanted enough to be convincing. “We have been doing a lot,” she said. “Have you been able to get the river fixed for the Lady Styx?”

Suddenly it wasn't quite what I had expected. I had expected to stay in the shadows and hide in the corner and not be noticed by anybody, but Morel had a way of seeing past the obvious. While he and Kartika were doing their dance, he was seeing beyond her. The only problem was, Mae and I were beyond Kartika.

“There's a sense of something new at The Estate,” Morel leaned forward as if peering in the corners of the red room.

“You never explained how you got me off The Estate,” Kartika said.

“Styx can make portals,” Morel said, waving his hand dismissively, like it wasn't such an amazing gift at all. The only person I knew who could make portals was Doctor Strange and he wasn't real. I stared at Morel, trying to figure him out, but too late I realized my mistake.

“You have her,” he said with a surprised grin.” You have found the last member of the coven. I'm surprised you didn't tell me immediately,” he paused but then waved away his perturbation. “But never mind. All that matters now is we know we have

her.”

“The coven has her,” Kartika said.

“Don’t you realize we want the same things?” Morel said. “We want the portals working and flowing. We want Undirheim to get the souls they’re not getting now, so we have to work together to make it happen.”

“The only problem is that your way of doing it means there’s a zombie apocalypse and all the humans die too,” I said.

“Helen,” Mae said, grabbing my wrist and trying to pull me back.

I shrugged her off. “What does it matter? He knows I’m here now. We might as well talk face-to-face. He’s the one trying to destroy the cemetery.”

I walked forward, going straight up against the crystal screen. I could feel Kartika swallowing hard next to me. She was tough, but she didn’t like to see her friends in danger. Me moving in front of Morel was definitely inviting danger.

I wasn’t afraid though.

There was a deep heat, a golden glow inside my chest making me feel proud, solid, and capable. I simply walked up to him, understanding he had something going on with some demigod, but it didn’t worry me in the slightest.

“You can’t have our portal,” I said fiercely, staring him down.

He turned towards me a cold smile pulling at his thin lips. “And the sixth one arrives,” he said majestically. “And do you, my dear, know what you are, because I have known your sisters in the coven do not a clue as to what they are.”

“There’s no shame in figuring things out as you go along,” I said. “It’s better than hiding in the shadows and trying to use other people to your advantage. At least we’re trying to figure out our own advantages.”

“And you are staying at The Estate also?” Morel asked.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “Trying to plan a midnight rendezvous?” I snickered. “You’re not my type. I like my guys with a bit of...let me think...kindness, respect, you know the simple things in life.”

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“Silence,” he said, a deep voice coming out of his throat as he broiled in irritation.

Good. This was what I liked to see in somebody, watching them lose control and not being clear about how to keep it.

“Does this bother you?” I asked. “I know you’re bothering people here, and rather than creating the zombie apocalypse, why don’t we try and talk this thing out? There’s no need for bloodshed. We understand Styx has a problem with the river, and we don’t mind helping.”

Morel started to laugh. “If we wanted your help, we’d ask for it. We have no interest in the coven’s help in unless you plan on helping us open the river and punishing the demigods for everything they’ve done.”

“There has to be some negotiation point,” I said. “You can’t just decide that everyone has to die.”

“I don’t remember asking you for permission for anything we choose to do,” Morel said. “A pleasure to meet you. We will see you soon.” The communication was disconnected.

I looked over Kartika and then at Mae.

“What does he mean he’ll see you soon?” I asked. “I don’t remember saying I actually wanted to see him. How are the wards on this place?”

“The wards are good. We upgraded them recently. I guess we’ll find out exactly how



good they are in the coming days.”

“Or hours,” Kartika said, her eyes wide.

## Chapter 18

We spent the evening baking the old-fashioned way, not the way Trina did it, which was whipping her hands around and bringing all the ingredients into the perfect concoction. We used the measuring cups and spoons and did it that way. It was fun and relaxing, especially when we added a couple of glasses of wine as we went. I couldn't complain about the company. They asked me a couple of questions about my dad, but I didn't know what to say. I didn't have a dead dad fixation. I didn't feel like I needed to know who he was other than to try to figure out how I fit into the coven. It was more about understanding my power and being able to wield it. Kartika came up to me with a cup of Witch's Brew after we'd gotten the muffins in the oven.

“Have you heard from your dad lately?” I asked.

“I'm going to assume you mean the king of the Dark Fae,” Kartika said with a grin.

“Yep, that one. I assume your other dad is a normal, nice human guy who working as an insurance salesman.” I inhaled the aromatic steam of the Witch's Brew.

“Close. He was a broker for real estate. He was kind of like an insurance salesman. They just sell dreams instead of fear.”

“That's how I look at it,” I said with a chuckle.

“I came to the realization I didn't need my dad anymore,” Kartika said. “It's a strange process because they'll always be a part of you, even my birth father.”

“The king of the Fae,” I interjected, because I thought it had kind of a nice ring to it.

“Right?” Kartika chuckled and raised her glass in toast. “The king of the Fae. My home was with my children. I need to know where my children are and what they’re doing, so as soon as we get all this stuff sorted, I’d like to visit the Crown Academy. Have you ever gone there?” she asked.

No,” I said. “I wasn’t allowed to go there because I didn’t have any magical powers,” I said with a laugh. I held up my hands with their golden glow. “Look at me now.”

“I feel like I missed out on a lot too. For totally different reasons, but it is what it is and I’m not sure what could be done about it now. It’s kind of like we have to take this moment and make the best of it,” Kartika said.

“It’s always like that in life, right?” I nodded in agreement. “There’s some moments when you’re a little more aware of it and this is one of those times. I am only interested in being happy on a day-to-day basis and taking care of the people who take care of me.”

“Exactly. My father has no real interest in me as a person,” Kartika shrugged. “He’s only interested in my lineage. So, once we get this stuff sorted out here, I’m going to go and talk to my sons and make sure they want a part of this life he’s mapped out for them. I’m sure right now they’re having all the fun in the world. When they finish with the Academy, though, and their all-expenses paid trip to hang out with some hot Fae girls ends and they find they have arranged marriages and no control over their lives, they may not be so enchanted.”

“It may be less enchanting faster if we don’t get this cemetery under control,” I pointed out.

“It’s the problem our entire world hinges on; the cemetery not collapsing.” Kartika

sighed.

“Right. There is that.” I took a sip of my Witch’s Brew, which had a hint of lemon grass and vanilla. The strangest mix ever, but somehow it merged together to make the taste of a summer tea cake. “Do you think your father could help with any idea of who or what I am?”

“Maybe if it had anything to do with the Dark Fae, but if he had something to do with O’Halloran’s pub, he would’ve told us by now. I don’t think he has anything to do with it whatsoever.”

“OK, but your dad’s the Dark Fae king. It’s a little different than ‘I’m going to call my dad, he’s a mechanic.’ You know what I mean? We’ve got Dark Fae problems, so calling the Dark Fae king makes sense. Don’t worry about whether he’s your dad or not, it just helps to make a connection to him,” I said.

“We’re not going to be able to simply reach out to him. We’re going to have to talk to everybody and make sure we all agree to reach out to him.” Kartika explained.

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“I agree. I think it makes sense. I don’t want to do anything without the coven’s agreement. We’re all in this together,” I said.

My cell phone rang. It hadn’t been seeing much action since the pub had been shut down. Jag had been with us almost constantly at The Estate, so I glanced at the unknown number curiously.

“Hello?” I asked, answering it.

“Good afternoon, Miss Davis.” A crisp voice came across the line. “This is Azalea from the Verbaten Insurance company. I wanted to let you know your claim is going through.

All of the money to repair the pub will be deposited into your bank account as of tomorrow morning. We are wiring it today.”

My mouth opened and my eyes went wide. “What the fuck?”

“Ma’am?” Azalea asked.

“I haven’t even filed my insurance papers yet,” I said.

“They were automatically filed on your behalf,” Azalea said.

“By what mechanism?” I asked. “I’m the only owner of the pub. Who else has a right to file an insurance claim?”

“It’s part of the foundation of the building,” Azalea said. “If anything goes wrong with the pub, it triggers a back-office function to handle all the administrative tasks.”

“Okay, so the pub is magic, but who the hell set it up?” I asked. “That’s what I would like to know.”

“Your father did,” Azalea said, “when he set up the account. It’s never been needed, but we monitor the property. It’s part of your portfolio.”

“My portfolio?” I asked. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Well, you have a castle in Ireland also,” Azalea said. “I’m looking through your files now. There’s a couple of other things. This was not disclosed to you at any point?”

“What the fuck? I don’t even actually know who you are and yet you know about my life,” I sighed.

“I explained, I’m Azalea and a nereid.”

“You’re a Nereid,” I said, my brain working overtime on supernatural hierarchy. “So, You work for the demigods doing their corporate administrative work. I’m not new to the supernatural world. I’ve got that much. In all your paperwork, you must have the details...Who is my father?”

“Why, your father is the Dagda,” Azalea said. “One of the gods of Ireland. It doesn’t matter, though, because all the gods are gone. They had to leave, and this was the setup he left.

“The gods have been gone from this world for thousands of years,” I said. “I was conceived forty some odd years ago.”

“Sometimes the gods can come through for special events and they can spend a brief amount of time here. He must’ve had a very good reason for coming here and leaving you O’Halloran’s,” Azalea said. “So, do you have any questions on the property repairs?”

I laughed. “You realize it is more than repairs, right? The whole thing has to be rebuilt. It’s completely burned to the ground.”

“Yes,” Azalea said. “I’ve read the report. The contracting company will be there in the morning. They have already been paid and the materials have already been delivered.”

“If they’ve already been paid, why are you giving me insurance money?” I asked.

“The insurance money in your account is for you. It should make things easier in this difficult time while you don’t have a house,” she said.

I hung up the phone, dumbfounded. I’d never heard I heard of anything so well taken care of. It was definitely a gift of the gods. But even more than that...I stared over at Kartika.

“I’m a demigod,” I murmured.

## Chapter 19

“My father is the Dagda.” I told my mom when she arrived at The Estate later in the day. Hilda, Trina, and Trina’s kids had all shown up to check on the cemetery and provide reinforcements. When my mom got there, we grabbed cups of Witch’s Brew and headed in front of the fireplace in the red room. This was important news to share.

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“The Dagda?” she asked in awe. “The Irish agrarian god?”.

“Yes. You sure know how to pick them,” I said. It was still hard to believe I was a demigod, and I still had no idea everything that entailed.

“His need to protect the coven means he must’ve been part of the original blood pact. How could they have gotten a god?” I asked.

“The right place at the right time?” Hilda suggested. “We don’t know how the gods work but they are known to visit Earth particularly when they are summoned. Maybe they summoned him.”

“The original blood coven could have invoked him as their deity?” I asked. “Isn’t that normally how gods make it across? Somebody invokes them?”

“Yes, they get drawn in. If they get a summons they have to respond to the summons, but they must’ve been making a pretty large sacrifice to confirm the summons,” Hilda said.

“So, he was summoned by the coven. He clearly played with them a while and became part of the blood coven until he had to leave.” I mused. “Somehow, he came back a hundred years later to conceive me so I would be here at this moment to help with everything going on now. How is that possible?”

Hilda shrugged. “He is a god. Not even the demigod corporation knows how the gods work.”

“Fair enough,” I sighed. “It still doesn’t exactly tell me what powers I have, but at least it gives us something to go off.”

“I’m already on it,” Anita said, sitting in the corner with her phone, reviewing various Internet sites no doubt. “The Dagda was an agrarian, druid-type God.”

Hilda smiled. “Of course, he was.” Clearly, she was remembering him. If I had known him, I might’ve been a little grossed, but as far as I was concerned, he was some one night stand my mother had in her past. He had done what he needed to do to take care of me and to fulfill his responsibilities to the Cougar Creek Coven, but that was all. And it was enough. He wasn’t a bad guy. I could tell by the way he took care of me. He also wasn’t coming back, so there was no point in deluding myself about it.

“What were his powers?” I asked.

“He had a staff, a harp, and a cauldron,” Anita said, reading from her phone.

“Like the one in the altar room?” I asked.

“Doesn’t look like it,” Anita said, holding forward her phone where a large black cauldron boiled with gold.

“Right, well, it’s all lost in myth, but ours is small and silver. Big difference,” I said. “Also, we have a sword. What is that about?”

“OK, but we’ve got a sword,” Anita said.

“Maybe the sword meant something to him?” Jane asked, turning to Hilda. “Did he mention anything about it to you?”



Hilda shook her head. "I have no memory of it."

"It's kind of weird you have no memory of it don't you think?" Anita put her phone down.

Jane walked over to my mom and placed her hands on her head.

"Do you think he could've wiped your memories?" I asked.

"Maybe we could take a look at it?" Jane asked.

Hilda pulled herself away staring at Jane in horror. "There is no way I'm letting you in on the memories of my night with her dad."

"I don't think anyone wants to see that either, Mom," I said. "But maybe we can take a look at things around that time in your life. Maybe there is a way we can control what we see of your memories?"

"Well, if you can confine it to the daytime hours, you should be pretty good," Hilda said. "I'm willing to do it because I think you need it. If there's memories in there, I should have them back by now anyhow."

"Please make yourself comfortable on the couch. I'll take care of it," Jane said.

"I'm happily settled down onto the couch," Hilda shrugged.

"Alright, then pay attention to me," Jane said. "I will get this done in no time."

"You do know the spell, right?" Hilda asked.

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Mae stepped forward. “Of course, she does. We will work it together. It’ll be done by all of us. It’ll be safe.”

We all gathered in a circle to surround Hilda, who was laying on the couch in the red room in front of the roaring fireplace. She looked quite at ease, relaxed and ready for the information she was about to discover about her own life.

I stood by her feet so I could get the best view of her face and make sure she was in comfort the whole time.

“Are you okay, Mom?” I asked, feeling suddenly aware that she was aging and someone, my own father, had probably tampered with her memories.

“Yep,” my mom said.

“I’m going to talk to you through this,” Jane said. “We’re going to do the spell first and then will ask you questions about that time.”

“Understood,” Hilda said. “Let’s get this underway.”

“Shalain memoram Tamalus. Shalain memoram Tamalus. Shalain memoram Tamalus.” The coven gathered around, chanting

My mother said the words also under her breath. As part of the coven, it could only be helpful to have her magic connected with ours.

She took a deep gasp and then went completely quiet for a moment. I leaned forward,

about to shake her awake, but Mae grabbed my hand.

“This is normal,” she said. “Just give her a minute.”

It was so hard, but I did it, waiting to see what would happen.

My mother’s eyes opened. She had the vague stare of someone in a trance.

“We want to know about the Dagda,” Jane said, her voice calm.

“Oh, he was magnificent,” my mother said.

My skin blushed a little bit, but it wasn’t my business. This was my father she was talking about.

“He was tall, fair, and fantastic. He was so purposeful you know he wasn’t like these other boys who puff around not knowing what they want. He knew what he wanted, and he wanted me. It felt very good.”

“There were other witches here then, but they didn’t catch his attention. Only I did. I could tell by looking at him he wasn’t going to stay. He clearly wasn’t of this world. I knew it was going to be a quick visit, but I was willing. He told me everything. He told me his name was Dagda. He told me he was here to fulfill the blood promise he had made to the Cougar Creek Coven. He was sorrowful about it as if there was something wrong. He had made the agreement and there was no way out. In fact, he told me he was sorry.”

Her gaze flew to me.

“Sorry?” I whispered.

Mae shook her head, holding a finger to her mouth so we could continue to listen to Hilda's story.

"He actually asked my permission to impregnate me and asked me to take care of you. I told him of course I would, you would be my child. You would be loved and cared for until such a time that you were needed."

Her eyes were sorrowful. "I can't remember anything else. I think that is all I know."

"He was sorry he made me?" A snort came out of my mouth. I didn't know what to think. Why would he consciously, as a god, know he was impregnating a woman and then apologize for it beforehand?

"Maybe he didn't want her to have to bring you up on her own," Chloe said thoughtfully. All the members of the coven were standing around my mom. Bianca and Chloe were looking at me, and Jane was watching my mom. Mae tapped me on the shoulder.

"It doesn't matter," she said kindly. "You're here now. You're one of us and we're all in this together. Whatever this is. Whether it's going to be a problem in the future or not I don't know. I mean it's already a big enough problem now but whatever it is, we will face it together."

I completely agreed with her. We were in it now. There was no chance of getting out. I was a member of the blood coven; it was obvious by my conception and birth. Whatever lay in store for me also lay in store for everybody in the group, no matter what that was.

## Chapter 20

"You any closer to figuring out how it works?" Jag asked as he walked into the

kitchen of The Estate. It was two in the morning, and I was huddled by the kitchen table with the golden egg in my hand. My hands were glowing gold, and I was trying to exert any of my powers on the egg that I possibly could, but I wasn't having much luck.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

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“Came to check on you.” He tilted his head to the side. “I figured you’d be awake.”

“I tried searching up everything on the Internet to do with a golden egg and Dagda. Do you know what I found?” I asked. “One stupid reference about Dagda turning a turnip into a golden egg. So, what if I’m doing all of this freaking work and I’m trying to figure out what this thing is, and it turns out it’s not something cool like a key like my mom thinks. Maybe it’s just a turnip.”

“Whoa, girl,” Jag said, holding up his hands with a disarming smile. “We’re trying to solve one problem at a time. So, you did some research on the golden egg and didn’t find anything useful to do with the Dagda, right?” he asked.

“Exactly. I’ve been sitting here since midnight trying to figure out different ways this could possibly unlock something. I’ve gone over it with a fine-tooth comb, looking for a tiny hole. I’ve gone over it with my fingers, looking for a tiny ridge. I’ve literally been looking at these tiny little dots right here, it’s like a beauty mark. It doesn’t do anything. It’s just a speck on a golden egg for some stupid reason.”

“At least we know your dad’s not Jack, stealing all the eggs from a giant.” Jag pointed out.

“No, but that’s a small comfort,” I said. “We can’t figure out the one thing he did give me.”

“He gave you a lot,” he said. “Considering he gave you a pub, a sword, and a golden egg.”

“I don’t even know if the sword was his,” I said. “The stories say he had a harp, a staff and a cauldron. It says he turned a turnip into a golden egg, and it doesn’t say anything about a sword.”

“Maybe you’re not looking hard enough,” Jag said.

Mae had placed the sword on the mantle and in some strange way, it looked perfectly normal. We both stared at it.

“What if it’s always supposed to have been there?” I asked. “What if it belonged to one of the original members of the coven?”

“Do we even know who they are?” Jag asked.

“We know they were all ancestors of ours. We know whose Mae’s ancestor was. She was the original Hayes, the mother of the Celtic martyrs. Bianca’s ancestors we also know, were her great grandparents. We don’t know about Jane’s or Kartika’s ancestors. Chloe’s, we know.” I laid it out for him.

“Maybe we should do some research on some of the original members of the Coven. It shouldn’t be too hard to trace genealogy back,” Jag said.

“This wasn’t exactly what I had in mind,” I said. “All I want to do is get my pub fixed. I don’t want to figure out who all their ancestors were and why they did all this crazy shit they did around here.”

“I understand,” Jag said, “but you’re kind of in it now and there’s not any way to get out of it. You’ve got to go through it to get out of it, and honestly, I think you’re always going to be here.”

“I always want to be here. Cougar Creek is my home. This is where one day I

imagine I'll be buried, in that cemetery. Well, I never thought I would before, but now I'm supernatural. Then again, if the cemetery's going to have zombies, maybe not."

"I think that's the thing we have to stop." Jag pushed a hand through his hair. "It's getting worse. I was down there this morning and there are zombies actually walking around inside the cemetery. It's not even safe to go inside the wards now."

"What's actually keeping them inside though?" I asked. "I mean, the wards are weak, and we still don't have a human sacrifice inside the crypt." Suddenly my mind had a brilliant idea.

"We don't need to research the original Coven. We need to ask Toern. He was here. He was one of the ones the vampire did a number on. I bet he knows exactly who the original members of the coven were and what they were doing. The more we find out, the more suspicious I get. It's not like that vampire that made Chloe was a very nice guy. And it's not like my dad should say sorry before he impregnates my mother, right? Unless he was sorry, he had to do it because we have an impossible task ahead of us and he knew we were all going to be destroyed by zombies."

"I think talking to Toern is a great idea. When it's not two in the morning we can maybe get Jane to bring him over and we can sit down and talk to him," Jag said, "but for now, maybe it's time you went to sleep. I'm going to stay down here keep an eye on the fire."

"Of course, you are," I said with a smile. Then I couldn't help myself. As I stood, I walked over to him, leaned down and gave him a quick kiss on the lips. At least, that was my plan. I felt like it and I wanted to, and I didn't mean anything by it. I knew he was a demon, and I knew a demon and a demigod weren't going to work.

I wanted to give him a quick kiss but when I leaned over, he reached forward and



grabbed the small of my back and pulled me towards him. He explored my mouth with slow lingering kisses that took my breath away.

I gasped and pulled away from him. “Sorry,” I said. “Sorry. I didn’t mean...I’m under a lot of stress and for some reason I do crazy things when under a lot of stress, but like I said, I didn’t mean it.”

Jag looked up at me, his eyes dark, his mouth grim. “Of course,” he said. “Sorry.” He stood up abruptly. “I’m going to go do a perimeter of the cemetery. I’ll go check in with Branson and the other guys.”

“I’m sorry,” I said again.

He passed quietly out the door and turned to look at me his head tilt to the side. “You know there’s nothing more unflattering than having someone kiss you and then apologize for it. You may regret the kiss, I guess, but I will always cherish it.”

And with that he was gone.

Chapter 21

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm*

I went to Jag's house in the middle of the night. It wasn't well thought out. It wasn't something I had planned to do, but I couldn't stop myself. I was headed to check on the pub, and then all of a sudden, I wasn't. Jag lived in an apartment in town above the candy shop.

In all the years I'd known him, I'd never been to his place, but I knew exactly where it was. Now I stood there knocking on the door with my heart racing, I wondered what I would do if he rejected me. Everything was in such turmoil right now. I needed him. I needed something solid, and right now, the only thing in my life that seemed to be exactly the same as the way I left it before the pub burnt down was Jag. Solid, dependable even if he was a demon, Jag.

He opened the door. His eyebrows shot up as he realized it was me. He put down the bowl of cereal he was eating and opened the door wide.

"Come on in," he said. Suddenly my nerves were faltering. He was wearing nothing but a bath towel. My skin immediately heated up; I could only imagine I was turning red as a beet.

"You couldn't have answered the door in clothes?" I asked?

"Is it making you uncomfortable?" Jag asked, putting his hand on his towel. "I can take it off."

"No!" I exclaimed. "I actually came here to talk to you." It was a total lie, but I didn't know how much he knew that.

By the slight smile that played on the corner of his mouth, he probably knew it before I did.

“Helen,” he said softly, stepping toward me.

I felt like a deer in the headlights, like I was about to receive my first kiss. I watched goosebumps rise across his flesh as he stepped within inches of me; his cool, refreshing soap smell clean from the shower filled my nostrils. I was immediately damp between my legs, and I wanted to reach forward and touch the rising goosebumps across his skin. My gaze fixed on his bare chest, which was now less than a foot from me.

He reached out and raised my chin with his fingers. “Your name means beautiful one,” he said.

I wanted to say I was past my prime. I wanted to say I was middle-aged. I wanted to say something self-deprecating, but not only was that insulting to myself, but it would be insulting to him, the guy who thought I was beautiful enough to want to kiss me.

I closed my eyes as his molten lips softly pressed against mine. It was almost as if he was afraid to break me, afraid to burn me, afraid to touch me. But that was exactly what I wanted. I wanted every part of him to burn me up, to free me of the pressures we were facing, to hold me close and help me forget just for a moment what we were up against in the cemetery.

I pulled my mouth from his. “Maybe we shouldn’t.”

He kissed me harshly, pulling me inside and shutting the door. “We’ll see about that,” he said, leaning down to bite my neck. I arched my head back, a whimper escaping my throat. I needed this. I needed this so much. My hands pressed flat palms against his chest and slowly I trailed my fingernails down his hard pecs and across his six

pack. He let out a tiny gasp and a shiver. I didn't go near his towel, even though I could feel his manhood pressing up against it. I was sure this was going to be one night of respite. I wanted to enjoy every second of it and make it last as long as possible.

He pulled me down onto his lap and then circled me protectively in his arms, bringing his mouth down on mine. His tongue gently tasted my lips before they sought out the languishing kisses that I had longed to give him. He pulled back, his lips lingering on mine before he sent a trail of kisses along my jawline and down to my décolletage.

His other hand was undoing the buttons on the front of my shirt. It has been a while since I'd been undressed by a man, and this wasn't just any man. This was Jag. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't fantasized about him a time or two after a night of work, but I never thought I'd touch him. His warm flesh on my fingers as I ran my hands down his hard chest was more amazing than I had even imagined.

"I want you," he said, pulling me back to his lap as I tried to move away. My heart was racing, and my temperature heated. I fell into his arms and into his kisses, letting his lips wantonly rove over mine.

"We can't just get down on the floor and do it," I murmured against his mouth.

I ran my hands along his shoulder as he covered my breasts with kisses and suddenly, I could feel his body heating up, his skin almost burning mine. I jumped off his lap.

"What are you doing?" I asked. He looked at me, confused and a bit concerned.

"Was it too much?" he asked.

I took another deep gasp of breath as I rubbed my hands down my thighs, nodding.

“Yeah, it was a little too much. You can control the temperature of your body?” I asked.

He looked at me, lowering his chin, his eyes boring into mine. “Yes. Yes, I can,” he said.

“I’d like to feel that, just a little different,” I said, moving back toward him. I straddled him, licking his lower lip gently with my tongue as I wound my fingers in the soft curls around the nape of his neck.

My whole body was consumed by a crazy rush of power and energy unlike anything I’d ever felt before.

“Oh my God,” I said, opening my eyes to see that my hands behind his head were glowing gold and creating a halo behind him.

He twisted to the side, grabbing my hands and pulling them down in front of him.

“You are so magical,” he said, smiling at me as he covered my shoulders and breasts with kisses.

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He stood up, moving his hand underneath my ass as he carried me forward.

“Do you know how many nights I’ve watched you move around the bar and all I wanted to do was grab you and push you up against the bar and give you everything I’ve got?” he asked.

“No,” I said breathlessly as he twisted around and placed my ass on the edge of his countertop. His mouth claimed mine, making it his own, holding it within his as his hands pushed buttons through the buttonholes at the top of my jeans. I shimmied out of them with his help, leaving myself exposed and open to the young man and allowing myself to be vulnerable and naked in front of him.

I was at that age where it didn’t matter. I really wanted Jag and I wanted him to know me exactly as I was, however, I was. He’d been around me long enough that if he didn’t want me, he sure would’ve said so before now, but he had given me only the smallest indication he was attracted to me. As I sat there on his counter, my hands behind me, and my body bare naked in front of him, I smiled. I wanted him too.

“God, woman,” he smiled. “You are such a demigod.”

“Demigoddess,” I said. “Is that a thing?”

“Let’s have it be a thing just between me and you.” He murmured.

“You can call me demigoddess and I’ll call you demon,” I whispered huskily. “Just bring me that warm shaft.” I could feel my juices flowing wet and ready to welcome him inside. I watched as he took off his pants, His swollen manhood came between

us. He shook his head with a slight grin on his face, knowing exactly how it the sight of his large demon prick would make me feel.

I groaned as he went down on his knees. I couldn't tell if it was out of anticipation for his tongue or disappointment I would have to wait for his cock. Whatever he was bringing me, I knew I was here for it. This was going to be perfect. He showered my thighs with kisses and covered my mound with gentle small licks until he arrived at the center of my rose, my protected womanhood. His tongue caressed me, slender and warm, lapping the nectar from inside me. His tongue reached up and found my clitoris. He pressed his tongue against it hard and then sucked cool air around in, bringing cool shivers through my body. Then his tongue was back warm and hard, circling my clitoris. I pushed my hips forward on the counter, unable to focus on anything except the sensation of his tongue moving in tightly wound circles against my clitoris.

My fingers scraped against the hard stone of the countertop as my back arched. He looked up at me, his eyes flashing with flames.

“You have the sweetest pussy I’ve ever tasted,” he growled.

I groaned. This daemonic young man was giving me a heart attack. My heart was racing so fast, and I was holding my breath as he buried his face again between my legs. My whole body shook and trembled as a wave of ecstasy exploded through me.

“Oh my God, do that again,” I said. “That exact same thing only again.”

“As you command,” he grinned, lowering his mouth back down to my clitoris and licking and sucking it, turning in small circles as he licked the petals of my sacred flower until it was swollen, and my body was spasming again. I gripped onto his shoulders as he raised his head, his eyes still flashing with flames of desire, his face wet with my juices.

“I can do this all night long,” he said, giving me a sly grin.

“I need your cock,” I moaned, tucking my feet under his armpits and nudging him to stand. His massive cock arched between us, but I wasn’t waiting. I thrust my hips up as he stepped toward me, and I rose to envelope his cock.

“Oh my God!” I said as he thrust himself inside me. I pulled myself off him, falling back. “It’s burning!”

“Is it too hot?” he asked, pulling back and touching his cock.

I motioned toward him. “No, no. Bring it back. I just wasn’t ready for it,” I said. “I forgot.”

“How could you forget that my body is hot? We were just talking about it a few minutes ago.”

“It doesn’t feel like only a few minutes ago,” I laughed. “It feels like it was a lifetime ago. Come bring me what I want,” I spread my legs and slid my hand down my thighs. “Bring it back.”

“I got you,” he said with a chuckle, stepping toward me. “Is this what you want?” He put his hands on my knees and spreading my legs even more as his cock entered my tunnel.

With one quick thrust he was fully inside. We stared at each other, our breaths held, our gazes locked, and then slowly Jag leaned forward and kissed my lips with his as he pulled his cock back out, holding steady just with the head of his penis pressed against my womanhood before he thrust his hips forward and I felt the warm, hard length of his cock like a heater inside me.



“Oh my god, that feels amazing.” I sat up, my eyes wide, smiling up at him.

He slid it into me, my juices coating his prick. His rhythm steadied and I clenched my muscles, holding his cock tight, stroking it with my love channel as he slid in and out of me.

He gripped my shoulders as I thrust my hips up to meet his intensity with my own.

“You’re magnificent,” he said.

I smiled at him as I reached forward, and the tips of my fingernails traced lightly over his anus. He moaned loudly, thrusting forward with such a ferocious thrust, I had to grip his neck just to stay on the counter.

“Oh Helen!” He called out my name as he thrust inside me, lifting me in an exultant wave, my body bathed in a golden light as his heated cock filled me with ecstasy.

Chapter 22

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 5:30 pm*

The next day was the groundbreaking ceremony at the site of the pub. It was a wonderful feeling. A lot of people in the town had come out and I remembered how much I had become a pillar of the community in many ways. I didn't think of myself as such, but as a business owner in a small town and the owner of a place where everybody came at some point or another probably every month, I knew a lot of people.

What shocked me the most was that all the building materials were stacked and ready to start building.

"The materials are all here?" I asked. "Azalea was telling the truth."

"How do you think I did it?" Hilda retorted. "Magic isn't only to be used to fight demons; you know. It can be used to make life pretty easy."

"Well, I can't thank you enough," I said to Hilda, a wealth of affection flooding my heart for her. She had gone through so much shit to raise a child on her own after having her memory wiped about a one-night stand. I wasn't mad at my father. He was doing whatever he had to do and if he hadn't done it, I wouldn't exist. At the same time, I had to recognize my mom had been through a lot and she was still helping me. It must've been a disappointment, thinking I didn't have any magic, and now none of us even knew what kind of magic I had. I had finally been able to control the glow on my hand, so it didn't show as I stood at the front of the crowd next to Sheriff Tom ready to announce the construction.

The debris had already been cleared out by the bulldozer and the ground had been flattened so the team could start the actual construction today. It was incredible they

had done all this so quickly and easily. Sheriff Tom had spoken to his friends at the city and pushed the permit through and made it easy. The county didn't pay a lot of attention to a small place like Cougar Creek.

I accepted all the warm wishes of the attendees and then, feeling exhausted, I headed down to the Witch's Brew with Jag, Mae, Jane, Kartika, and Trina. Bianca and Chloe went to the sheriff's office to do some work. The rest of us were going to take a minute to drink tea and try to figure out a plan of attack. The reality was none of us had any idea what needed to be done to save the cemetery.

We pulled out a napkin at the café and started drawing on it. I drew a circle with five points on it. In the middle I wrote High Priestess. Then around the edges I wrote Dark Fae, Light Fae, Shifter, Vampire, and Demigod. I stared at it bemused.

"A High Priestess, Dark Fae, Light Fae, Shifter, Vampire, and Demigod walked into a pub..." Kartika giggled.

I rolled my eyes. "Only, the pub was burnt down by a demon."

"It wasn't a demon. It was a cambion," Jag said. "Don't confuse the two. It would be like confusing a demigod with a god."

"I wish we had some god powers at the moment," I said. "Toern is watching the dogs right now but when we're done with tea we can go and take a look at his memories of the earliest coven and see what they were like."

"It's getting pretty bad up there at the cemetery," Jane said. "We're going to have to do something soon. Do we even have any ideas of what we could do?"

"Well, the problem is it needs to be opened," Mae said. "That's the obvious thing. The River Styx is clogged up."

“Maybe it could be opened somewhere else?” I asked. “Or maybe it can be opened up a little bit?”

“So, what, we only have a little zombie action?” Bianca asked with a laugh.

“You know what they say, once you have one zombie you’ve got a ton of zombies,” Kartika commented.

“Surely the souls of the dead need another portal to the underworld, right? They’re being stopped here, so they must be being jammed going into the underworld. Why don’t we try to get Thrain up here so we can have a word with him? Maybe if we got Thrain and Styx to talk, they would solve the problem together and they could leave our portal out of it.” Jane presented the solution with hope.

“It doesn’t solve the problem,” Jag said. “Styx and Morel want to destroy the demigod world and New Attica. That’s what we’re up against,” Jag said.

“We’re trying to fight this with negotiations,” I said.

“The whole point I think he’s trying to make,” Trina said. “Is that we’re a little past the negotiation phase.”

“If we are past negotiations and the river needs to come through the portal, then we should open the portal,” I said.

Everybody at the table gasped. “Are you insane?” Trina asked.

“It would put zombies all over Cougar Creek.” Bianca pointed out.

“Think about it. It’s kind of an isolated area,” I said. “If we could control the reach to this community, we could stop it from spreading.”

“It would still kill hundreds of people,” Jane said.

“Not if we did it right. Not if we used all of our combined powers to contain the zombies as the river went through and then figured out a second hole for it to go through at the other end so it went back to Undirheim. I mean, we need Thrain involved here, but I think we can make this work.”

“It’s too big of a risk,” Mae said. “Even with the combined powers of the six of us, I don’t think controlling the River Styx and stopping zombies is part of the deal. We basically have to shut this thing down and keep the cemetery closed.”

I looked at her with consternation, feeling a little bit of irritation. “The only problem with that plan is that we’ve been trying to fight and keep the river closed and every step we make it’s getting worse. Now we’ve got zombies walking around inside a warded cemetery. At any moment they could break out. Then we’re going to become zombie hunters. Wasn’t what I had in mind for spring break.”

“Well, there are two things we’re not taking into consideration with any of these plans,” Kartika said. “Helen didn’t come to us alone. She came to us with a golden egg and a sword.”

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“The sword gave her the magic powers and the magic powers gave her access to the Pentacle of Time,” Jane nodded in agreement. “Maybe the sword has a connection to the cemetery. Maybe it can be used as a ward?”

“Don’t you think we’re past just warding it?” I asked.

“It might give the cemetery the extra boost it needs to withstand Morel and Styx. We need to figure out how to use those two tools.”

“Well, they’re my tools,” I said, annoyance flickering up my skin. I mean, I had inherited them. I had found out who my father was and now already all my things were being confiscated for the good of the many. In principle I wasn’t against it, but I couldn’t deny the childlike part of me that had new toys and definitely didn’t want to share.

### Chapter 23

Jane and I decided to meet Toern over by the Sunrise Doggy Daycare. I’d never actually been there before even though I loved dogs. I knew Toern was the most comfortable when he was around all the other beasts.

When we got down to doggy day care Toern was feeding the animals and playing with them all at the same time. The dogs were all joyous and excited, jumping all around and Toern letting them get all over him. I had a Labrador dog once who used to jump on me. Every time, it had scraped my arms and my chest to the point I still had scars even though she’d been gone about fifteen years.

“No, he loves it,” Jane said with a smile. She was so caring and respectful of Toern. She always appreciated him and never treated him like he was from a different place. Jane treated him like he was a man. Even though he came from a different realm beyond the rift. Of course, there was nothing wrong with that. Even as a kid I’d learned about the rift and had often fantasized about meeting people from the other side. Now I had and. They were perfectly fascinating individuals who I loved knowing. It was going to be interesting to find out more about Toern’s experience a hundred and fifty years ago.

We went outside into the yard where the dogs could roughhouse and play. There was a raised deck under an oak tree. Jane made us some iced teas and we went out there and sat where we could watch the dogs play and talk to Toern.

“Toern, do you mind if I explore your memories a little bit?” Jane asked.

Toern shook his head. “Not at all. I’d like to know what I don’t know also.”

“Some of this might be painful,” Jane said. “We don’t know what your experiences have been, and we don’t know these ancestors. We know one of them was torturing you, but we don’t know anything about the other five.”

“You know there’s a good chance I won’t know anything about the other five either,” Toern said. “I remember I was in a deal with Ryder. I would take this post and the time didn’t matter. After I had fulfilled this post, if there was even an end date, then I would be free to do as I chose and would be able to live either in the earth world and be a Legendi or else I would have to return to the rift. It was my choice to take my chances with the coven with the hope of staying on this side of the rift.”

“The problem we have,” Jane said, “is when Toern left his post he created a place where either he needs to go back or else, we need to solve the problem of the cemetery. So, our issue is our relationship and our ability to be together completely

relies on us solving this problem of the cemetery.”

“Well, I think the problem with Cougar Creek in general is that if the cemetery blows up, we’re all going to be forced to either become zombies or fight zombies.” I muttered.

“Of course,” Jane said, “but you can’t blame me for thinking of my love and not wanting him to sacrifice himself in the crypt again.”

“No, of course not. Maybe the sword and the egg can help. I don’t know. That’s what we’re looking for, so when we question you, let’s not focus on the torturing or the pain or any of those things. They will bring up horrible memories. Let’s focus on if he remembers anything about the golden egg or the sword. I want to know if he’s seen them any time before,” I said.

“I will do whatever you need me to do,” Toern said.

“Okay. Let me put you into a bit of a trance. I will do a chant and we’ll go from there. I’ll ask you some questions,” Jane said.

“Of course.” Toern smiled, leaning forward and kissing Jane softly before he settled back in his chair and waited patiently for the spell.

Jane nodded at me, and we approached two different sides of Toern. She started the chant we used on Hilda. It had the exact same result. He closed his eyes and then after a few moments took a deep breath and opened them.

“He’s ready now,” Jane said with a nod.

“Before you were locked up in the cemetery, were you familiar with a golden egg of any kind,” I asked.



Toern shook his head. “I don’t know anything about a golden egg,” he said succinctly.

I looked at Jane, shrugging my shoulders. “Strike one.”

“What about a sword,” I asked. “What do you know about a sword?”

“I have known many swords in my days,” Toern said. “Do you have anything more specific?”

“It has a blue stone on its hilt,” I said. “And it’s silver and bright and powerful. it’s currently sitting on the mantle of The Estate.”

Toern thought for a while and then he suddenly looked up at me, his eyes opened wide.

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“The Sword of Althyrius,” he said. “Yes, it belonged to Esmeralda. She was the lover of Dagda and a member of the coven,”

“Okay, so Dagda got around.” I nodded in irritation.

Jane shrugged. “He was a God. I think they’re kind of known for that.”

“So, how did he end up with it, and why is it in my hands?” I said.

“Because there was a falling out in the coven after the blood pact was made and your father did not want it in the hands of The Estate, at least not the Hayes. At the time she was an insanely jealous woman, and she was in love with the Dagda, too,” he said. “The Dagda wanted to protect the cemetery, but it was too late.”

“What do you mean it was too late? It was a hundred and fifty years ago,” I pointed out. “How could it be too late?”

“The spell had already been cast. The blood had already been paid. The blood sacrifice was made. The second sacrifice was established,” Toern said, his eyes blinking into awareness.

“The second sacrifice?” Jane asked.

Toern looked up at her. “What the hell was that?”

“You said there’s going to be a second sacrifice,” Jane said. “We don’t even know what the first sacrifice was, unless it was you in the crypt?”

“I don’t know,” Toern looked confused. “I just don’t think you are here to do what you think you are doing.”

“We are here to protect the cemetery. That’s what we were told by Hilda we were here to do. It’s what the coven was always meant to do since its first inception,” Jane said.

“I couldn’t see it all clearly but there’s a spell on the coven and on the cemetery.” Toern said.

Jane and I exchanged a look.

“Why do I get the feeling it’s not like a ‘everything is going to be wonderful’ spell?” I asked.

“I think we better get back to The Estate and check in with Mae,” Jane said.

## Chapter 24

Jane had already notified the coven we had a problem to look at. Yet another one. By the time we arrived at The Estate, the rest of the coven had already gathered, even Trina and the kids had closed the bakery to come.

“What did you find out?” Mae asked as we came up the stairs and she opened the door to wave us into the house. Everyone was gathered in the red room.

“Toern thinks the first coven wasn’t what we thought it was. We tried to tap into his memory but all we found was a blood sacrifice. He thinks that was used to cast a spell on the coven and the cemetery, that we’re bound together,” I explained.

“How can we find out?” Bianca asked. “We need to look at everything a little

different. What if what we think happened isn't what happened?"

"Are you saying the first coven wasn't all it was cracked up to be?" Kartika asked.

Chloe stood with her arms folded over her chest. "Well, we already know my maker was a psychotic asshat and a half. I wouldn't be surprised if he associated with reprobates. Even if they are your ancestors." She nodded somewhat apologetically around the room.

Mae fingered the pendant thoughtfully. "How can we get better insight into what happened then?"

"It's in your hands," Hilda pointed out. "We need to look at the pendant. If your ancestors touched it there should be some story attached."

"Absolutely. I can do psychometry very easily," Jane said with a confident lift to her chin. It would have looked too cocky coming from anyone else. With Jane, it just looked like a fact.

Mae slipped the pendant off her neck and handed it to Jane. I'd never seen her take it off before, but this time she seemed quite grateful to remove it, as if the weight of it was a little bit much for her at the moment. I couldn't say I blamed her. They'd been holding up against the forces of the Dark Fae and demigod. We thought we were on the right side of the argument. The whole time we didn't truly know our roots. We were just taking it at face value as to what we had been told. Even my mom recognized that.

Jane held the pendant in her hand, her eyes closed. She waved her other hand over it, murmuring a simple spell. Her body grew still, and she let out a long sigh. When she opened her eyes, she motioned us over to the screen that hovered above the crystals.

“It’ll be easier if I show you. Come,” she said.

We watched on the screen as a woman stood alone in the altar room of The Estate. She had long brown hair that was pulled up in a loose bun. Her dress was made of green cotton with a high neck and long sleeves that draped over her thin wrists. She stood alone in the altar room holding the pendant in front of her. Tears were streaming down her face. She reached forward into the cauldron and her finger came out dripping of blood.

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I swallowed hard as she touched a bloody finger to each of the stones in the pendant and muttered an incantation softly under her breath.

“Is this blood offering enough?” She wept. “Will they return to me?”

A whirl of purple and green power came up from the center of the pentacle and it reached out to all the five stones on each point of the pentacle, piercing them with its light. The blood from her finger pushed its way into the stone, making each of them turn bright red at first and then revert back to their normal color.

“Stop,” a woman’s voice came as she wielded a large sword.

“It’s the sword,” I said, pointing toward the blade with the blue stone in the woman’s hands.

“It is done. Esmeralda, you will have no say in this. Your descendants. My descendants. The Dagda’s descendants. All will suffer for what you have done to me.”

The sword faltered in Esmeralda’s hands, but she shook her head. “We have done nothing to you, Geraldine Hayes. What you think of as being disrespectful was completely respectful. Dagda will take none of us. He is married to the Morgana. It is only your decision to punish us for actions you have taken.”

“Lies,” she said, her eyes growing larger. “This offering is done.” She sagged, wilting as her hand clutched the Pentacle.

The Hayes held out her hand and her magic flew against Esmeralda, green and gold light circling and pushing her out the door before it slammed in her face.

“By your blood I protect this house. Only the coven members and approved may enter and leave it.” Geraldine took a deep breath and stared down in the cauldron, tears streaming from her eyes.

A movement in the shadows on the screen caught my eye.

Kartika gripped my wrist. “It’s Styx.”

Geraldine glared at Styx. “I have made my promise to you and committed the descendants of this coven to you via this blood pact. Now fulfill my heart’s desire.”

“You wanted your daughters brought back to life. You wanted them returned from the river,” Styx said. “Before they go to Undirheim. Before they go to the world beyond.”

“You know exactly what I want,” Geraldine said.

In the very altar room where we carried out our own magic, Styx opened a portal to another realm. Through the portal I saw a dark room with a glowing river flowing through it. The river had milky white film forming around the edges, but it flowed clear in the center.”

“That must be what the Styx looked like back then,” Kartika said in awe.

“Geraldine bound the coven to Styx?” Mae asked in horror. “To bring back the lives of her daughters, the Celtic martyrs.”

“But I thought there was a big uprising,” Bianca said. “I thought the Celtic martyrs

died in a battle against Styx or against Morel or against someone.” She looked around the room. “Who is Geraldine Hayes battling against?”

“The only people she seems to have an argument with are the Dagda and Esmeralda,” I said. “Clearly, she had a thing for the Dagda and didn’t believe Esmeralda was the right choice for him.”

“Could she cast a spell to keep them apart?” Bianca asked.

“Maybe she had to cast a spell to keep them apart and bring him to her?” Chloe asked.

“You can’t compel love,” Hilda said. “It’s impossible.”

“Maybe Geraldine Hayes didn’t know,” I pondered. “Maybe Styx misled her? Either way, something is definitely off with the first covenant.”

## Chapter 25

It was my turn to take a patrol of the cemetery. I didn’t mind going down there. The zombies were creepy as all get out, but I needed to look at what we were up against. We needed a plan on how we were going to face it. Bianca and I walked down the slope and through the undergrowth that lined the edges of the cemetery.

The second we stepped out of the foliage I wanted to shirk back. Three zombies stood swaying and groaning in front of us, their wild eyes seeking out what was apparently smelling so good to them.

Us.

“Gross, aren’t they?” Bianca said before she shifted.



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“Definitely,” I agreed as she crouched low and let out a growl that caught the zombies’ attention. “Those wards better hold.”

The wards created a buffer around the cemetery. It used to be to keep non-magical people out, but now the clear forcefield was keeping the zombies in. We walked down the pathway that marked the outer perimeter of the cemetery and even with a simple count I could see the numbers of zombies had grown. A couple of days ago there had only been one. Now there were more than a dozen. They were drawn to us. Whether it was our brains or blood they could smell, I didn’t know, but the zombies ambled after us with surprising speed.

When we got to the main entrance, Bianca shifted back to continue our perimeter walk. She walked closer to the cemetery. For some reason I always felt the safest when she was with me, regardless of what form she was in; Chloe ran a close second. I could understand their powers. They were violent and physical. The witches were a little different. They could wield magic and for some reason, even though it was clearly my skill as well, I wasn’t confident around it.

“I did some research on the Dagda. He was an agrarian god; a great warrior and fighter, but he was also a druid,” Bianca said. “I think you have the makings of glue.”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“You can bring us all together,” Bianca clarified. “You bring us all together because we have magic powers in different ways. Mae, Jane, and Kartika wield magic. Chloe and I are more physical in our response. I think you’re both; magical and a fighter.”

“Hypothetically I can do both,” I said, “but I’m still learning.”

“We’re all learning,” Bianca said. “Not only are we all learning, but we’re still trying to figure out what in Hell’s name is going on here. I mean, unless we figure out a way to use the sword and the golden egg for wards, we’re screwed.” She stopped. She stared into the cemetery, past the zombies, then back at me. “The golden egg. What if it’s a ward?”

“You mentioned you thought it might be,” I commented.

“You weren’t there when we were doing it but in the very beginning when zombie dog woke up there was a red stone. It’s inside the cemetery in a depression of a gravestone and it acts as a ward. Maybe there’s a place in the cemetery for the sword and the golden egg?”

“The best place for the sword is in someone’s hands if we’re going to be battling zombies,” I said. “We need to figure it out who Esmeralda’s descendent is. That’s who owns the sword. Clearly, it’s not you, me, or Chloe, since we know who our ancestors in the coven were.”

“That leaves Jane and Kartika.” Bianca mused. “Which means, no matter what, it’s a Fae sword.”

“No surprise there. Have you seen the handiwork? If we can identify the origins of the sword, we’ll know whose ancestor Esmeralda is.”

Bianca tapped on the ward as we moved by the cemetery. “How are you going to do that?”

“I have Chloe researching weapons right now,” I said. “The sword had a name. Athyrius.”

“Well, I hope whoever inherits it knows how to wield it,” Bianca said.

“What if the golden egg isn’t mine either?” I asked.

“I don’t think it matters whether it’s yours or not. I’m pretty sure the golden egg is part of the ward. I also think it’s yours. I mean, the Dagda made a golden egg from a turnip.”

“Hilda said the golden egg would be a key. All we need to do is go into the cemetery and find out where the key fits,”

We both stopped and turned as five zombies pressed their faces against the ward. Their moans and high-pitched keening was intense, even through the ward, as they smashed their bloody corpses against the side, trying to get us. My stomach roiled as a finger flew off one of the zombies. It hit the ward right in front of my face. I flinched and took a step back.

“You’re seriously suggesting one of us goes inside there?” I asked.

“No, that would be suicide,” Bianca agreed. “I’m suggesting two or three of us go in there and figure out where the golden egg goes.”

“Maybe you guys should be called Crazy Cougar Creek Coven,” I muttered, shaking my head and turning to continue down the path. “I do not see how that is ever going to work.”

## Chapter 26

“I think whoever inherits the sword should go in,” Bianca said as we all gathered in the red room to discuss the situation. We found a time when all the guys were busy, because otherwise, we knew none of them would agree to this plan. I still didn’t

know how I was agreeing to it.

“I’m going in because I’m going to place the golden egg.” I volunteered. There was no way around it. It was my egg and I would need to place it.

“I’m going in because I’ve got a sniff out where the location is.” Bianca wasn’t asking permission either. She was just planning to handle it.

“I should join so to help keep things calm,” Jane said.

“As the high priestess, it’s my job to enter the cemetery and take the lead,” Mae said. “I won’t have the entire Coven go inside. It’s too dangerous and it’s too difficult to watch everyone’s back. One bite from one of these creatures and you’ll become like them.”

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“We need to find out who inherited the sword,” Bianca said. “I can guarantee you it’s not me, because I’m a shifter. It’s not the Hayes because her ancestor was the one being threatened by the owner of the sword. It’s not the vampire because we know who her ancestor was and it’s not Helen because we know it wasn’t the Dagda. That only leaves two of us. Jane or Kartika.”

“If it’s a sword that belongs to one of them, then why did it hold my magic trapped in it?” I asked.

“Objects can be turned into talismans of talent,” Mae explained. “Your father must’ve held it there until something triggered it to come to you. It’s probably what kept it safe during the pub fire.”

“And the pub fire is probably what triggered it,” Jane agreed.

“How could you know that?” I asked.

“It doesn’t have to be that specific,” Mae said. “The sword could’ve just triggered when you were in a time of need. When everything is falling down around you, the sword would stay firm and when you touched it, it would get your powers going.”

“Dagda was given the sword by one of our ancestors, a female who he was friends with,” I said.

“More than friends with,” Jane said. “They were lovers.”

Kartika stepped forward. “The sword,” she said, “belongs to me.”

Jane tilted her head to the side and for a moment I thought she might argue with Kartika. Jane looked at me instead. “I concur with this analysis. If you want to test the sword, you can do so with your hand.”

“I trust you women are old enough to know what’s yours and what isn’t.” Mae turned to Kartika. “How do you feel wielding that thing?”

“I knew one day those three black belts would come in handy.” She took the sword and looked it over with a grin.

“They use swords in karate?” I asked.

“Not the only martial art,” Kartika fired back, slicing the air with the blade.

“Are you kidding me?” I asked. “You’ve watched me fart around with the sword, and this whole time you’ve probably known that not only is it your sword, but you actually know how to use it.”

Kartika looked at me and grinned. “You don’t want to tell all your secrets in the first go, now do you?”

“So,” Bianca interjected. “It’s the three of us.”

“That doesn’t make sense, Bianca,” Mae said. “Listen. You can sit at the gates of the cemetery and howl loudly and keep everybody as calm as you can. If you can focus on that, you can do a lot more than if you’re inside fighting for your life against those crazy hungry zombies.”

“So, you’re suggesting it’s going to be you, Kartika, and Helen going into the zombie lair to find out where to put the golden egg? I don’t like the sound of that.” Bianca shook her head.

“We’ve got to figure out the egg,” Mae said. “Let’s take a look at it and see if we can figure it out.”

I brought forth the box that had the egg inside it. I had grown accustomed to its lacquer finish. It had a black outline across each curved edge and a beautiful red rose lacquered pattern all around the inside of the top, as if a bouquet of tiny roses was exploding from it. I held my hands over it and focused my energy on the box lid. Light flooded into the air.

“That’s new,” I said.

“A lot of times as you get to know more about who you truly are, your power becomes greater,” Jane said. “At least that’s what I found was true for me.”

“How’s it going to be finding out your ancestors were assholes?” Bianca asked.

“I don’t think we all had assholes for ancestors. I think maybe they got mixed up in something a little bit messier than we’ve been led to believe, something that’s been handed down through the ages,” I suggested.

“It’s certainly not anything I’ve heard,” Hilda pointed out.

I held the lacquer box out to Mae so she could look inside and see the nested egg.

“It’s perfectly brilliant. Does it weigh much?” she asked.

“It feels as heavy as solid gold.” I ran a finger over the egg. “Or a lead weight. I don’t know exactly what solid gold feel like in that size, but it’s heavy. It’s not hollow.”

“May I touch it?” Mae asked.

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“By all means.” I held the box up so she could reach inside and easily take out the egg.

“My grandmother used to tell me that if a mother bird wanted her eggs to hatch, she would sing to them,” Mae mused.

“Are you suggesting we sing to the egg?” I asked.

“Well, we aren’t exactly singers,” Mae said, “but we are pretty good at spells and chanting. Do you think it might be worth a try?”

“Like a revealing spell?” Hilda asked, then nodded her head. “It might work.”

“I think we might have to be a little trickier than that,” Mae mused. “If we do a reveal spell, it probably will recognize it and stop it, but what if I did a finder spell? If there is anything inside this egg, there will be a way to open it. We just need to see where the cracks are that are invisible to the naked eye.”

“You’re suggesting that you do a finders spell on it.” I asked.

Bianca smiled and nodded, putting her hands on her hips. “I think it’s a great idea.”

“Do you mind?” she asked me.

“No,” I said. “I don’t mind at all. When I look down at the cemetery, all I see are the zombies coming to eat the brains of everybody I know and love in Cougar Creek. I am grateful for the fact all you guys are here and willing to do this to try to stop the



zombies and keep them in the cemetery. This is ground zero. They will wipe us all out before they move on to the wider world.”

“Ground zero are the friends and families we’ve known our whole lives,” Hilda added. “They may not mean as much to all of you, but I know the parents and the grandparents of the kids who go to the school at the bottom of the cemetery hill. I couldn’t imagine seeing all those kids turned into zombies.”

“So, whatever it takes,” I said, holding the egg out to Mae. “Do your worst on it. If this holds a clue to stopping the zombies, let’s break the egg apart to get it.”

## Chapter 27

Mae took the egg and placed it in the cauldron in the altar room. The same altar and cauldron I now realized had held the blood sacrifice for the Pendant of Time binding spell. This is what we had inherited from our ancestors. We were just now uncovering their stories and piecing them together. I hoped unlocking the egg would help.

We all stood in the circle around the altar and Mae holding out our hands towards each other, palms facing the altar. We began chanting the words to the finder spell. I could feel the power thrumming up my arms. It wasn’t just my energy alone, it was all our power, caught together in a circle, an infinite loop. The purple and green electric lights that floated around Mae’s hands grew stronger. Instead of flying out of her hands, the lights came down her arms and onto the ground. They traced a line to the altar. We kept chanting, even though I couldn’t help wondering if this was safe or not.

This was her finder spell, the one I had heard about. It could take people to the object they needed finding. They had rescued Kartika that way before.

I watched the lights disappear into the altar and the glow above the cauldron grow,

but it was growing massively large. What if—

A blinding light surged out of the altar and exploded in a wave of purple and green across us. It knocked me over as it hit me, making me fall into the darkness.

“You have found the key,” a voice intoned as the darkness receded and we found ourselves on the ground facing the Lady Styx. We stood in a half circle facing Styx, who had her back to the lion statue. She wore a black leather romper and looked particularly smug with herself.

I glanced around, quickly getting my bearings. “Fuck,” I muttered.

“We’re in the cemetery?” Kartika asked, brandishing her sword toward the zombies who were rambling their way to us.

“How’d you get that?” I asked.

She winked at me. “Did the spell with it.”

The sword let out a bluish light, which at first, I thought might be attracting the zombies but then I realized it was putting them into a soft trance. They were swaying back-and-forth. Bianca had already shifted and was howling to keep everything as calm as she could.

“Very good,” Styx said. “You are so resourceful. It’s very impressive how you’ve managed to not only survive but to find each other and then grow strength together. It’s quite remarkable, considering you’re operating under false pretenses. You’ve bought into a lie about who you are and what your purpose in life is.”

“Whatever you tell us can’t change why we are here,” I said, looking around. I was grateful my mother hadn’t been teleported with us. It was the blood coven. Mae,

Bianca, Jane, Chloe, Kartika, and myself, the six of us alone with Styx. She clearly had an attitude, but I wondered if she couldn't possibly be spoken to like a normal well, being, since she wasn't human. I didn't know how far her sympathies lay. I wish I understood her better.

"You found the key," Styx said. "I've been looking for it for the last fifty years. Your father stole it from me when he tried to get out of the agreement he made. When he discovered it had been a completely fool proof agreement and there was no way he could get out of it, he did the next best thing. He hid the key, even from the Hayes. She had no idea when she died where it was and neither did anybody else all these years. If it wasn't for you and your little coven, maybe we never would've found it or found out how to use it. So, I guess, thank you."

The zombies pressed closer. Lady Styx, in her all-black romper and short cropped black hair smiled as if she didn't have a care in the world. "I'm going to take you on a tour of the tunnels beneath the cemetery. The place I've been relegated to. Me. A demigod. Not what you would expect, right? I mean you know how it is, Helen. Right?"

I looked to Mae. What the hell did Styx want from me.

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“How is it you can come inside the cemetery?” Mae asked. “And you were able to make portals in The Estate?”

“Anywhere the river flows, Styx can go,” Styx said, laughing. “It’s not nearly as much fun when you can’t take people with you. As an example, you might notice Morel is not here. No, it’s not because I don’t want my beloved here. Most certainly not. He is unable to move between New Attica and the rest of the world because the demigods have decided it should be a certain way and beings should be segregated and unable to communicate.”

“I don’t think they ever said you couldn’t communicate,” I said. “I had a Fae pen-pal in school, and I heard now it’s getting much more progressive. They’re even having the Fae and the demigods go to school together at the Crown Academy. There is progress being made but it can’t be made when a demigod and a Dark Fae run rabid in southern Oregon. Before you kill a whole bunch of humans and destroy a demigod portal, you might want to slow your roll.”

The whole time we were talking I noticed in my peripheral vision the gathering of zombies was growing larger. I guess zombies were living a little more deeply inside the cemetery than we had realized. Now we saw in horror rows upon rows of zombies surrounding us. My blood ran cold, and my breath caught in my throat.

“We are never going to make it out of this,” muttered Chloe.

“Not with an attitude like that,” Kartika said, holding the sword raised above her as the zombies swayed behind us.

“The good news is I don’t need you to be a zombie,” Styx said. “In fact, it actually goes completely against the spell, so you won’t be made into zombies today. What we do need, however, is a sacrifice.”

I looked at her. “You’ve got to be shitting me. Are you telling me six of our ancestors all decided it was okay to sacrifice their descendants?”

I felt like the world was falling out from under me. He hadn’t only left me here. The Dagda had made sure I had stayed. He’d set up the pub, set up money, insurance. He set everything up so I would stay, and I would be here when the sacrifice happened.

“Don’t take it personally,” Styx said. “He didn’t have a choice. It was his only way to leave. He showed up for Geraldine’s party but fell head over heels for Esmeralda.”

“The dark fairy, my ancestor,” Kartika nodded.

“So, his only way of getting out was to agree to leave something behind.”

“How did he know when to come back to leave me behind?” I asked. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“He’s a god. Time doesn’t make sense. They are here, then there, then they’re in a different place. For whatever reason, at his determination, he showed up here forty some odd years ago and made you. His sacrifice.” Styx’s lips ended in a thin line.

Up until now I’d been paying every bit of attention to Styx and trying to watch her demeanor. I was hoping to see a slip in her composure that would allow us the opportunity to get us out of this situation. There was literally no way to get past the packed zombies behind us.

I looked behind Styx to the lion’s statue. At the base of the lion stood a tablet with

words etched on it in a language I couldn't understand.

"Thank you for the key," Styx said. "Now we have the means to unlock the well house beneath the guardian lion."

"The lion's dead," Chloe said.

"Nothing is dead, and all shall live again," Styx said. "This is the beauty of the River Styx. It is why these foul blockages must be opened."

"Nobody's arguing they need to be opened," Mae nodded as if to soothe the riled demigod. "We are trying to find solutions to clear the river."

"I will show you exactly how we're going to clear this river," Styx said.

I didn't like the sound of that.

Styx clearly didn't care. She was positively gleeful. "We are going to make good the pact your ancestors each made with The Hayes."

"Don't think we agreed to this," Jane murmured, inching closer to Styx.

Styx turned toward the tablet, which stretched taller than her. In her hand she held the egg. Through the magic of the coven, it had transformed into the shape of a key, just as my mother had predicted. Styx inserted it into a hole in the stone tablet I hadn't even noticed before. Without a sound the tablet swung open revealing a downward stairwell.

Styx turned and looked at the six of us. "You can either stand here with the zombies or you can come with me down to the river. Which do you prefer?" she asked.

## Chapter 28

I knew we didn't have much choice. We couldn't exactly face the zombie hordes, and all make it out alive. The choice to go with Styx wasn't much better. The fact she needed all six of us was the one chance we had to thwart her. If a few of us tried to make a break for it, there was a better chance one of us would get away.

I glanced to the side and made eye contact with Mae.

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She squinted her eyes and gave a slight nod of her head. Her eyes shifted to the left. I knew exactly what she meant because I was planning on going to the right. In reality we couldn't fight all the zombies, but if we could get past them or above them, there was a pretty good chance one of us would be able to get away. Zombies couldn't outrun people. Even these, which seemed to have a decent pace. However, they didn't have a stop button. They would keep coming and coming and coming.

I lifted my eyes upward, so she had a general idea of what my plan was. There were some low hanging branches above us, and my thought was if I could get into them, I'd have a chance. I glanced over and saw Chloe was thinking the same thing. Shit, she was a vampire. She probably had the best chance of any of us to get out of here unscathed.

With some sort of "we're all going to scatter" plan established through eye contact, nods and shifting of eyes, we seemed ready to go. Only, I felt incredibly unorganized and not ready for this. The options were grim. Following Styx to the river was a suicide mission. I'd rather face all the zombies in the cemetery.

Styx turned, expecting the pressure from the zombies to get us following her in some obedient fashion down into the crypt.

No fucking way.

Chloe sprang into the air, transformed into a bat, and was on her way higher and higher, out of reach of the zombies and Styx. The other coven members were all scrambling to use magic, but the zombies grossly outnumbered us.



Suddenly a portal opened right next to me. Rushing air blew hard against my face. I leaped into the air, higher than a mere human could achieve, and landed with agility on a branch in the large oak tree, whose branches spread above me. It had the searing taint of a demon portal, but it was Morel who stepped out, flanked by two cambions. Obviously, they had gone to the highest bidder.

“Nobody move,” Morel commanded as wraiths slid in behind him.

I was already up in the branches and not about to take directions from anybody. That hadn’t happened since I’d moved out of my mother’s house when I was eighteen and I wasn’t about to start now. I scrambled up higher into the tree with zombies shrieking after me.

The wraiths rushed towards the coven as three locked their sites on me.

“You’re all going to die one way or the other,” Morel said almost apologetically. “This way your death will have some meaning. You will free your ancestors of their due to Styx and you will help bring about the unity of the demigods and the Dark Fae.”

“Newsflash: problem is already being worked on.” I tossed the words down to him with one eye on the wraiths. “I’ve got another plan.” I held up my hands, leading a huge ball of golden light surrounding them. I took careful aim and then threw the orbs the size of bowling balls in two different directions. One upward at the wraiths and one down toward the zombies.

Morel screamed as I cleared a path for me to jump down from the tree and race out of the cemetery. Chloe was flying with me. All we had to do was make it to The Estate and we would be safe. Styx would be able to come through, but she wouldn’t be able to bring anybody else through those wards.

“Get in!” Anita said, revving the engine. She was out at the front of the cemetery with her jeep idling. “The Estate has been breached.”

I jumped in the back. I heard Chloe splat on top as a bat. She quickly transformed into a human and slid into the open side window.

Drake slammed the door behind me. “Where are the others?”

I shook my head. “We need to regroup and go back and get them. Where’s my mom?”

“She’s at her house,” Anita said. “With our mom.”

“Let’s go there then,” Chloe said. “It has to be safe if your moms are there.”

Anita hit the gas and headed to my mom’s house.

“She always bragged her wards were stronger than The Estates,” I muttered, staring out of the window as we sped past the outskirts of Cougar Creek.

“They will hold,” Anita said with determination.

Mom greeted me with tears in her eyes as we pulled up to her house. We moved quickly into the house, where I knew the wards had stood the test of time. It wasn’t like Styx wouldn’t find us there, but Hilda had the protection of a long line of witches, and I was sure if my father’s power was anything to go by, he had protected her house as well.

My mom and Trina had made an altar in the middle of my mother’s living room. Mom usually preferred to cast her spells outdoors or among her plants, but right now that wasn’t a safe move. They were able to raise energy in the cauldron in front of

them. It spilled over in heaping waves. It flew out from the cauldron and formed a forcefield around them that grew into the very walls.

“She won’t be able to open the portal,” Chloe mused. “It takes the full contract to be paid and she has only gotten two thirds of the payment. She’s missing you and me.”

“I think you could get out of it because you could technically bite somebody and turn them into your offspring. Then you could send them down there,” I said.

“That’s not even funny,” Chloe said, her face pinched. “I’m trying to figure out how to save our coven and you’re trying to find ways to get out of it.”

“Sorry,” I sighed. “You know that is not the case.” The strain was getting to me. My shoulders ached and my nerves were shot raw. I felt worried and tense. “We lost more than half our people. I know you say we’ve thwarted Styx’s actions, but we’ve lost two thirds of our coven.” I looked at my mom, my eyes wide with concern. “How are we going to get them back?”

My mom looked at me sadly. “You guys have to understand. This is not a game. This is a matter of life and death. I know you say you get that, but what I’m trying to say is, your friends might already be dead.”

### Chapter 29

“They can’t do the spell without all of you, so as long as you’re not all together, you’re not in danger. In fact, the two of you should not be together right now,” my mom said. “It would be better if you two split up.”

“And do what?” I asked. “I’m not going to sit around and watch my friends get taken under control by some crazed demigod. I mean, maybe this is the time for us to call the demigod corporation. I love Cougar Creek, but seriously. We’ve got to get Styx under control and get our friends back.”

“I want to get your friends back. There’s only one real way to do it. It’s not the DGC.” Hilda led the way into the kitchen.

I eyed up the altar as we walked by and the forcefield it was emitting. I had to admit it looked pretty strong.

“The demigods won’t do anything except minimize damage,” Trina explained. “They’ll consider the rest of the coven collateral damage for wiping out Morel and Styx. They’ll blow all six of them up first chance they get, knowing then they’ll be able to change time to have it be exactly what they want, when they want, and how they want.”

“Right,” I said. “Because they’re demigods.”

“The good news is daughter, so are you,” Hilda pointed out. “Something I know you don’t think very much about.”

“It’s not like I’ve had a ton of time to sit around staring at my navel and thinking about the fact I’m a demigod,” I said. “The truth is, I don’t know what being a demigod means, Mom. I know when we were growing up in this region and there were just a couple of witches and a cluster of harpies, the idea of demigods was fascinating. I always thought of them as beautiful magical creatures with unknown powers.”

“Well, they have stronger magic than witches,” Mom said. “And they tend to be fairly battle friendly. I used to think it was because they were alive during the wars, but then I realized they were power hungry. Not you, of course.”

“Thanks,” I murmured. Hard to be power hungry when you run the local pub in small town USA.

“Your magic will be tied to the Dagda,” Mom continued. “You will be able to battle, but he was a druid also, so you have magic.”

“Everything he left me was for Cougar Creek Coven. He had me as a sacrifice to Styx so he could get out of town.” I muttered.

“Not at all not at all,” Hilda said. “My daughter, I know you never knew your dad and I didn’t know your dad very well, but I can guarantee you one thing. He did not make you a sacrifice. He had you as a savior. He conceived the one who could fix this problem. He gave me the key to fix it.”

“He gave me the key that unlocked the crypt to capture my with a crazy demigod,” I said.

“What story do you want to believe?” Hilda asked me. “Do you want to believe your dad was an asshole? He can be an asshole. Do you want to believe he had faith and picked the right woman to have the right child with? A child who could change the

course of the curse?”

I stared at my mom for a long moment, weighing the different ideas in my head. There was no way I could take the victim role. It wasn't in me. Even if my father had planned to have me as a sacrifice, well, that was his dumb doing. I was definitely anything but a sacrificial lamb.

“I'm going to make this right,” I said. “I don't know how to do it though, Mom.”

“I think we need to find out what happened first,” my mom said.

“But we know so much already,” I pointed out. “My father was here through some bend in time partying with the ladies in the Coven and a vampire to boot, probably swinging from my guess. Anyhow, he pissed off one lady enough to make her cast a spell on him.”

“I think we need to focus on the Hayes and see what she did,” Chloe said. “We need to understand what happened. What did she actually do to tie herself to Styx? Why was she so desperate?”

“Do you have a spell you can show us?” I asked my mom.

“There's always something that can give you a glimpse of the past but are you ladies sure you want to see it?” she asked.

“I think we need to have as much information as is pertinent to us getting our friends away from Styx, and that means we need to understand the agreement Styx made with the Hayes,” I said. “No matter what it was.”

My mother brought out a large platter. “We can scry in this,” she said.

Having avoided most of my mom's magic for more than thirty years, I was fascinated to watch her now.

My mom spilled some water into the platter and then placed some oil on top before sprinkling herbs on it. She moved her hand over the water three times in a circle, muttering a spell underneath her breath that I couldn't make out.

We gathered around closer, seeing only our reflections at first but then slowly the oil spread across the entire surface of the water. It became like a movie screen on the platter, showing us things that had happened before.

Three young women sat under an Oak tree. At least that was what it looked from a distance. As the scene moved, I could suddenly see they were tied to the oak tree. Their mouths were gagged. To the side stood the woman we had seen earlier. The Hayes, Geraldine.

"What the fuck?" I murmured.

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“Are those her daughters?” Chloe asked in a hushed tone.

The Hayes had her hands held out. Her arms were shaking. In one hand she held a cup full of blood and in the other a bloody athame. My gaze widened in horror as I saw the slices along the necks of each of the girls.

“The Celtic martyrs,” I said. “She killed her own daughters.”

“The notional love spell,” my mom said. “You take that which you love the most and sacrifice it to win something else you covet.”

“Oh no,” Chloe was full of dismay. “She traded her daughters trying to win the love of a god.”

“But it didn’t work, did it?” I asked. “Because he was having an affair with Esmeralda, Kartika’s ancestor.”

“Love spells are impossible to pull off,” Hilda said. “I’m sure sacrificing her daughters created the darkest magic that would fail on an actual god.”

“So, she lost her daughters and the man of her dreams,” Chloe mused.

“Then she went to Styx and cut a deal to get her daughters back,” I finished. “Styx agreed to wait a hundred and fifty years for descendants to be born, then she would take our descendants as a sacrifice and open the river.” I shook my head. “I guess that kind of time doesn’t matter when you’re going to live forever.”



“Did The Hayes get her daughters back?” Chloe asked.

“Looks like she did,” I said, pointing at the platter, which was showing her daughters with her. Then I shook my head. “Maybe not.”

The daughters were pale and light, and I could see they weren’t actually walking with their mother, they were floating by her side. A young child played in the field while The Hayes watched.

“Styx only returned them as ghosts!” Chloe exclaimed.

They were wraith like creatures floating in the air around The Hayes.

“When she died, they must have all gone to Undirheim together and left the child to be the next Hayes.” I shook my head. “What an inheritance.”

“Styx has been manipulating this thing since the beginning and not giving anyone what they want.” Chloe looked like she was going to punch the water.

“Well, The Hayes was trying to do spells to control people,” my mom pointed out. “You shouldn’t do that. It always takes its toll. That’s what it looks like happened to The Hayes.”

“Still doesn’t answer the main question,” I interjected. “How do we get our people back?”

## Chapter 30

“I’ve been doing some research,” Hilda said as she cleaned up the tea we’d been drinking. “There’s a spell we can use that will allow us to neutralize the Pendant of Time.”

“Will it neutralize the blood sacrifice?” I asked. “That’s the part that I find creepy.”

“That’s the only part you find creepy?” Chloe turned and looked at me incredulously.

“Um, no,” I rolled my eyes at her. “It’s the one thing I’m bringing up right now.”

“Got it,” Chloe nodded, turning back to my mother.

“Any spell that has a blood sacrifice is considered dark magic even though many times they’re used for white magic purposes. In this case though, it was all done in the name of control and personal desires.” Hilda explained.

“She made a mistake and wanted to rectify it,” I said. “Sacrificing her own daughters was her first mistake. Trying to bring them back to life was her second.”

“So, what happens if we neutralize the Pendant of Time spell?” Chloe asked.

“Well, essentially it was a binding sacrifice of six people to Styx in order for her to have the three people come back to her. They must’ve had quite a lot on each member of the family with the Coven to make them commit a descendent, but no matter what it was, it can be neutralized.” Hilda said.

“Hopefully not through another blood sacrifice,” I said.

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“You weren’t even around when we were doing the blood sacrifice in the crypt,” Chloe said with a laugh. “That was charming. It’s what led to me becoming a vampire.”

Hilda laid a spell book out across the counter. “So, this spell to nullify the Pendant of Time requires a red feather from a Costa Rican scarlet parrot and some leaves from two different trees up in Quebec.”

“You’re kidding me?” Chloe said. “Quebec?”

“I’ll take the rainforest,” I said. I knew exactly what was in Quebec. “Crown Academy. That’s what you’ve got.” I raised an eyebrow at Chloe.

“Crown Academy?” Chloe asked. “Isn’t that where all the Fae kids go?”

“It’s been open to witch kids now too for about thirty years or so,” I said. “It used to be the height of coolness to get on the list to go to the Crown Academy. I’d once had hopes of maybe getting in, but since I never had any magic powers, it didn’t happen quite like that, did it?”

“OK, so I’m going to Crown Academy. What kind of leaves do I need?” Chloe asked Hilda.

“Leaves from the silver and gold trees that line the courtyard. Bring those back safe, sealed, clean, all the good stuff.” Hilda explained, handing Chloe a cloth bag, undoubtedly, to collect the leaves in.

“Where am I going in Costa Rica?” I asked.

“Well, here’s the thing. Neither of you are going alone. Chloe you’re taking Trina, and I’m going with you.” She nodded at me.

“I don’t think taking you and Trina with us is such a good idea,” I said.

“I don’t think there’s any way around it,” my mom countered. “You two don’t know how to teleport. You’re going to need the energy of another witch. You can’t do it alone. We don’t have a lot of time. So, we need to make this work as quickly as possible.”

“Of course,” I said with a deep intake of breath. Lives were at stake here and we couldn’t let another minute go to waste.

Before I knew it was happening, my mom had grabbed my wrist and raised her hand to circle the air above us. It created a spiraling series of lights that descended slowly over us, blocking out everything in the room. When the lights disappeared, we were deep in the jungle in some foreign country.

“Costa Rica?” I asked. “I’ve never seen plants like this in the US.”

“Yes,” Mom said. “I researched it. The scarlet parrots fly at sunset along the ridge.” She pointed to a ridge that was encrusted with verdant jungle.

“Maybe it would be better if Chloe had come on this one. She can fly,” I said. “How do you even catch a scarlet parrot?”

“First we have to see them,” Hilda said. “And then we’ll have a better idea what to do.” With that she resolutely turned on her heel and started walking up the slope.

“How do you know where you’re going?” I asked.

“I’m looking for a lookout point,” she said.

“What is a better lookout point than a tree?” I asked.

“I know you’re in your forties, but I’m in my seventies. I don’t feel like climbing up a tree today, thank you very much,” my mother said with rare snark.

“I’m saying we could be hiking for miles before we can see anything.” I mentioned.

I was wrong, though.

We stepped out of the woods and into a clearing on the side of a hill. We had a hundred-and-eighty-degree view of the forest from there, and a stellar perspective of the Pacific Ocean down below.

“Perfectly sunset,” my mother said, looking to the horizon. “They should appear over there.” She pointed to a random spot in the distance.

“This should be one of those spectacular moments in life where I’m about to watch Scarlet parrots fly,” I said, “but instead of being excited I’m trying to figure out how to get a feather off of a flying bird so I can save my friends from a crazed demigod, and the world from a zombie apocalypse.”

“You can always come back another time,” Hilda said.

“Okay, but how are we going to get the feathers?” I asked. “The feathers are attached to birds. I think the birds want to keep their feathers.”

“When you explain the urgency of the situation, I’m sure the birds will donate a

feather to the cause,” my mom said with a shrug. “I don’t see why they wouldn’t. It would be so rude of them to not.”

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“Are you talking to animals again?” I asked incredulously. “That’s our plan?”

“You’ve been part of this world long enough. You know it’s perfectly possible to talk to animals,” my mother said.

“Oh, okay mom,” I said. “The only problem with that plan is that...it’s a Scarlet Parrot you’re planning on talking to. I think those were voted the least likely to rip your head off and eat it at first sight, so, it’s hard to imagine that your game plan of ‘we’re going to talk to them’ is really going to work.”

Mom stared at me in silence.

“I’m sorry.” I harumphed. “That’s just how I feel.”

“I understand,” she said.

A call in the distance drew our attention. My heart raced as I peered into the horizon to see the dark dots flying toward us.

“Here they come,” I said.

“Spotted,” my mom nodded.

“So that’s really our game plan?” I asked nervously as the dots grew on the horizon.”

“I’m going to call it a plan,” Hilda said.

I rolled my eyes, feeling for the umpteenth time like a teenage kid around my mom.

“Mom, that’s not a plan,” I insisted. “It’s like a suicide mission. I mean, you know what the Scarlet feathers are, right? It’s not just me that knows they are dragons? Please tell me you know that. If there is anything you learned in grade school, it was that Scarlet Feathers can transform from parrots to dragons at their own behest. I mean do you realize you could ask them for a feather, and they could be like nope and then eat you?”

“Do you want to save your friends or not?” Hilda said.

I ground my teeth together and stared at the horizon where the Scarlet Feathers were steadily growing in size as they came closer.

“Yes,” I said in a monotone voice. Not only did I want to save my friends, I needed to. There was no way in hell I was going to be able to live with myself with their deaths on my hands.

Even though we picked the harder journey of the two, I wasn’t upset. Though, I’d be crazy if I wasn’t a bit worried. I took a deep breath and steeled my nerves.

“Bring it,” I said. The scarlet parrots made a loud cawing sound as their colors became apparent against the deepening blue sky. The sun was setting to the west directly behind us. The birds were aiming for the sun, and they’d rip through anyone to get to it.

“Now to see them as they truly are,” my mother said, changing her stance and holding her hands up in the air.

“Could I get a little help here?” she said, nodding toward me.



“Oh of course,” I said, adopting the same stance as her and holding my hands up toward the Scarlet parrots flying toward us.

## Chapter 31

The spell my mother cast removed the glamour the scarlet feathers had over them, showing them for what they were. They were massive flying feather covered dragons hurtling through the air, screaming toward us.

My stomach roiled in fear, and I wished I had the sword of Athyrius in my hand, but I had nothing but the golden magic of my father and the strength of my mother.

“Give me fireballs or something,” I said.

“The idea is not to attack this creature,” my mother said.

“The hell it’s not,” I said. “It’s going to eat us.” I felt like I was going to pee my pants and it wasn’t the usual middle-aged need to pee. This was straight up fear.

“We are standing in their roosting area.” My mom pointed out. “They aren’t flying at us to attack us. They are coming back here to roost.

“Great. You parked our asses in the roosting area. They’re coming home to roost, and you don’t think this is a bad idea?” I asked. “They don’t know if we’re friend or foe, Mom, the first thing they’re going to think is that there’s an alien intruder in their nesting area. I don’t think that’s going to go unnoticed.”

“Have faith, Helen,” my mom said.

From where I was sitting, faith was a hard thing to come by.

“Move to the side and give them room to land,” my mom said.

“They can have the whole mountain to land on if you can show me how to get out of here quickly,” I retorted.

“I need you here,” Mom insisted. “You need to do the negotiations. You’re a member of the blood covenant. They’ll only take your concern for it.”

“You’re a member of Cougar Creek Covenant,” I said.

“Yes, but this the blood bond through the ages matters. That’s why Styx has a spell on you and not on me,” my mother explained.

I turned back toward the dragons hurtling toward us in the air. As we moved to the side, I realized we were standing in front of a large cave that was clearly getting their attention.

As they came in for landing, the larger of the two turned its head toward me and shrieked with a high-pitched cry that made me cover my ears and lower my head. I squeezed my eyes shut. They were terrifying.

“Talk to him.” My mother elbowed me in the side.

“How do you even know it’s a him?” I asked.

“Because the female of the species is gray,” she said. “Didn’t you study anything in school?”

“I guess dragons were a little off-topic,” I said.

Shaking her head, my mother gave me a slight push out into the clearing.

I shot her an indignant look. “Haven’t I been sacrificed enough for the day?” I hissed.

She motioned me to turn around to the dragon, whose breath I could feel on the back of my neck.

“Mr. Dragon?” I asked, stepping from the shadows.

The beast opened his mouth, his snout rising indignantly in the air, and let out a loud roar that blew my hair back and left spittle hanging on my elbows and off my shoulders.

“Charming,” I muttered.

“Go on,” my mother encouraged me.

Easy for her to say from a safe distance. The minute this thing decided to eat me, I was a goner.

“Do you speak English?” I asked, chewing my lip and realizing I sounded like a complete idiot, but I didn’t know how else to get the conversation started. What was I supposed to say? Hey, can I get a feather there, man?

“Yes,” the dragon said. “I speak English. It’s a rudimentary language, but it’ll suffice if it’s how you speak.”

“Well, I don’t speak dragon,” I said. “At least I don’t think I do. You know, sometimes they wipe your memories and then...”

“Focus,” my mother reminded me.

I took a deep breath and looked up to the heavens. And then I focused my gaze strictly on the dragon in front of me. “We need a feather to save the lives of four of my friends.”

To my surprise, the dragon started laughing, a deep laugh that echoed up and down the mountain side. “I don’t give a damn about your friends,” he said. “I give a damn about what I give a damn about and your friends are not on that list.”

“How about the future of New Attica?” I asked. “Right now, Lady Styx is looking to make a blood sacrifice that will allow the River Styx to run through the Cougar Creek Coven portal. Zombies will disperse into the wider realms, all over the planet. In fact, in all they encounter.”

“I care nothing if the zombies destroy the humans,” the dragon said.

“They won’t destroy only the humans,” I said. “They will destroy everything, every living thing. There will be zombie animals, zombie humans, zombie supernaturals. Everything will be infected by the zombies. They only have one goal; the destruction of everything they touch.”

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The dragon took a deep breath, it's nostrils flaring as it exhaled. "If you can fight me and win then you can have the feather."

"All right, she'll take the deal," my mother said.

"What are you talking about?" I said. "I don't want to fight a dragon."

"The only way to get there is to go through it," my mother said.

"Can I get a weapon?" I asked.

"You don't need a weapon," my mother said. "You have everything you need."

The dragon came rushing at me without even giving me a moment to think about it.

I dodged to the side, knowing this was one of those surprise attacks. It didn't matter; I needed to stay out of the way. It's tail came lashing out and swung around; I jumped over it and as I did, I plucked a feather from the side of the beast. It screamed in pain as I came down on the other side of it.

"Impressive," my mother said as she tried to dodge the beast's tail. She stumbled to the ground as she reached out for me.

"The feather," the dragon yelled at me.

I had won the feather fair and square though and I knew he wouldn't do anything about it. Dragons were notoriously beings of their word. He had said I could win a

feather in a fight, and I had won the feather in the fight.

I turned to my mother. “Come on, let’s go.” I grabbed her hand and tried to pull her to her feet, but she didn’t budge off the ground. I gasped as I saw the pool of blood gathering around her.

## Chapter 32

I ran to my mother’s side. She was lying with her eyes closed and her head tilted awkwardly. I could tell she was conscious, but her face was crinkled in pain, something entirely unlike her.

“Can you hear me?” I asked, squeezing her shoulder gently trying to get her attention.

“Talk,” she rasped.

“Where did it get you?” I didn’t want to move her in case it made the bleeding worse.

“Leg,” she said.

I laid my mother on her back and saw it had gotten her on the thigh. I found the wound and pressed my hands against it to stop the bleeding. I needed my hands, though, to do a spell. My mom was weak, but I needed her to apply pressure to the wound herself.

“Mom, I’ve got to do a spell to get us out of here.” I leaned in low to say the words close to her ear.

“You don’t know the portal spell.” Her breath was shallow.

“I’ve watched you do it enough times in my life. You’d think I’d know how to do it.”

I joked lightly with her.

“We could end up anywhere,” my mother said. “First you’ve got to stop the bleeding here.”

I took a deep breath in and looked at my hands as a gold light covered both of them.

I wasn’t squeamish, but I didn’t like blood. One of benefits of living in town rather than out by the ranch was I didn’t see a lot of blood. Even though sometimes there were punch ups in the bar, there wasn’t usually blood and if there was, I could kick the brawlers out because it was their own stupid fault.

Watching my mother bleeding in the jungle of Costa Rica was the last thing I wanted to experience. I held up my hands, desperate for the gold light to actually do something to make a difference, to put some pressure on the bleeding, to stop it. If anything happened to my mother...she was losing consciousness. I had to move fast to try to get back to her house.

One thing I knew was a powerful witch could create a spell and make it magic through her own will. I was a demigod. It meant I had a little extra power above a witch. I should have the powers of my father to create some things.

“Heal!” I commanded. “Heal.”

I knew the chant had to be in rhyme, but I didn’t have time. I needed the bleeding to stop, and I needed it to stop now. I lifted my hands away.

“Stop!” I tried again.

“Arrestum,” my mother whispered.

“Arrestum?” I asked. “Arrestum. Arrestum.”

The gold light moved off my hands and surrounded my mom’s leg.

“Is it working?” I asked. “Did the bleeding stop?” It was hard to see past the gold light to the wound.

“Feeling better,” my mom muttered.

The bleeding had slowed enough to transport her.

“I’m going to take you home, Mom.” I squatted down next to her. The gold light wrapped around her thigh like a medical bandage. She had lost a lot of blood and was laying with her head tilted back. Her eyes were closed. Any amount of work to get her home was going to be all on my shoulders.

I sat down next to her on the ground cross legged and I held up both my hands in front of me. I was a demigod; I could do things. I could do things I didn’t even know I could do. That was going to be my motto.

I can do things I don’t even know I can do.

I can do things I don’t even know I can do.



With each turn of the phrase, I moved my hands in large circles around me, building energy circles in front of me and making the most of the magic swirling power around me.

“OK, Mom. This is us. This is where we’re going to get off,” I said, reaching over and grabbing her by the hand as I pushed my other hand and all the energy, I had built up forward into creating a portal.

I yelped in excitement.

“I did it, mom.”

The portal shone like a beacon of safe passage. I just had to get my mom through it. “C’mon, Mom,” I grunted as I propped her up enough to get my arm under her shoulders. My mother groaned as I dragged her to her feet. I propped her up with one arm and hobbled with her through the portal just seconds before it closed.

I collapsed on the floor inside my mother’s house. I’d done it.

We’d gotten the feather. We’d gotten home.

I looked up at Chloe, who stood there looking as frazzled as I was, a cluster of silver leaves in one hand and a cluster of gold leaves in the other.

“Did you know it’s sets off every alarm in the entire region if you touch those trees?” she asked. “Now you do.”

“I don’t think I have the feather,” I said, suddenly patting down all my pockets trying to figure out what had happened to the ingredient for the spell.

Chloe put the leaves down on the table and came rushing over to me as she realized

my mother was barely standing.

“Let’s get your mom taken care of first and then we’ll figure it out.” She helped me carry my mom over to the old brown weather-beaten sofa where we laid her down.

The pouch. I saw the pouch my mother wore around her neck, and I instantly knew that is where she would have put it.

“It’s in the pouch around her neck.” I pointed to a small bag my mom wore around her neck.

“It’s that tiny? I thought you were hunting the Scarlet Feather?” Chloe asked.

“It’s like a Mary Poppins’ pouch,” I explained. “Watch this.”

I slid the pouch open and reached two fingers inside the tiny opening, wrapping my fingers around the soft feather I could feel inside.

“Here it is.” I pulled out the very large feather I had pulled from the dragon’s rump.

“All that was in there?” Chloe asked.

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I nodded, placing the red feather next to the leaves on the table.

“We have it,” I said. “We have everything we need to do the magic spell that will break the bond of the Pentacle of Time.”

### Chapter 33

“We need to leave my mom here and go back to The Estate,” I said as I gathered up the materials for the spell.

“The altar room is the only place to cast the spell,” Chloe agreed. “We need to make sure we have everything in place so we can do it to the best of our ability.”

“We haven’t discussed what could happen if this does work,” I said. “We’ll no longer have this coven.”

“That’s not true. I think we won’t have the bond of the pentacle, but I think you can still be a member of a coven, if I remember everything correctly. We can be in the coven by choice and acceptance,” Chloe explained.

“Well let’s rescue Mae and the others first so we can have a coven to belong to,” I said, heading out to the car.

All the guys’ trucks were parked out front of The Estate when we got there. We double parked behind Branson’s truck.

I shook my head. “We should’ve seen this coming.”

“Yeah, I guess we should’ve,” Chloe said.

We walked in. Branson was the first to corral us.

“Where have you been? Where are the other ladies? Where are Jane and Kartika?” Questions flew at us rapidly and we were so overwhelmed we couldn’t say a single thing.

“They’ve been taken by Styx.” I managed to get the words out in between all of the words flying at us. Suddenly Jag burst through the door. The outside of his skin was slightly on fire which caused everybody else to move back. When he got to me the fire suddenly extinguished. He grabbed me in his arms. His body was not hot, but it was smoldering. I tucked into his arms, feeling the strength of his chest protecting me.

“There’s my demigod,” he said, his mouth seeking mine as he claimed a kiss in relief that I was there.

I’d been so busy trying to solve each crisis as it came up, I didn’t realize how much I missed him.

I kissed him back, relief and gratitude in every touch. It didn’t go unnoticed. There were four guys standing there looking for their ladies and none of them had them. Antonio was holding Chloe off to the side.

“They’ve been taken by Styx and Morel,” I explained. “The Pentacle of Time binds us as a sacrifice to Styx. We were never meant to be the ones to protect the cemetery. We were the ones to sacrifice for the ruin of the cemetery.”

“How do we get our ladies back?” Toern asked.

“We have to cast a spell to break up the Pentacle of Time,” I said. “We’ve collected the things we need, but we need to put them in the cauldron.”

“Can we help with the magic?” Matheus asked. “I’ve got earth magic. Branson can’t do shit, but I think the others have stuff. Toern, you’ve got some monster magic up there. Antonio, you’re another useless shifter, but Jag, you can use demon magic.”

“I don’t know if we should be using demon magic in a witch’s spell.” I cautioned.

“I think it’s the perfect combination,” Matheus said. “This is a spell to separate a bunch of people who were bound together. You want to use a mixture of magic and not exactly the same magic that’s already being used.”

“So, we’re going to have what? A Fae, a monster, a demigod, and a vampire.” I said. “That’s our mix?”

“I’ve heard of worse cocktails,” Chloe said.

“Okay, let’s go into the altar room and see what we’ve got.” I motioned towards the altar room.

“Did your mom tell you how to do the spell?” Chloe asked.

“It must be in the grimoire. I’ll have a quick look while you get the room in order.” I sounded a lot more confident than I felt.

“You’ll get it,” Chloe said encouragingly.

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“I’ll be back in a second.” I ran into the library, which was next door to the altar room. On the pedestal at the center of the room sat a large old book that looked like a Bible. Mae had given us all the spell though that quickly shifted the bible to show the grimoire magic spells.

It only took me a few moments to say the spell and reveal the grimoire pages. I quickly leafed through to find the spell that would unbind the pentacle of time.

No pressure.

The way I looked at it, everybody connected to this bond was given a death sentence by Styx regardless, so if we tried this and got it wrong, we were just going to end up with what we had lined up already. If we tried it and got it right, we would succeed and survive.

I took one last look at the book and took a deep breath. This was everything I needed to break the spell and free us from the Pentacle of Time, which tied us to Lady Styx. Only in then would we actually be free to combat her.

## Chapter 34

I composed myself as I walked from the library back to the altar room. Mae wasn’t there so it was going to be up to me to help bring the coven together. Even though there were only two members of the blood coven, we would be able to break it without the rest of the members here. I headed into the altar room. Chloe, Hilda, Trina, Anita, and Drake were all in their positions around the central cauldron.

“I put the leaves and feather inside the cauldron,” Chloe said.

“I looked up the spell. All I need is everybody to get around the circle and then I’ll start.” I stood in front of the altar and lit the candle at the front of the cauldron. I focused all of my energy on it. I could feel the glow of my hands and the warmth of the gold magic that infused my body. It was thrumming and preparing to come out and create some magic in the real world.

“Recitalist deletan melato.”

The words came out a little slow at first. I was unsure of them, but I knew I needed to have them a lot stronger if I was going to be able to pull this magic off.

“Recitalist deletan melato.”

I repeated the words again, this time clear, strong, and loud so everybody in the room could hear.

I saw some nods go around the room and next time the voices joined mine in the spell.

“Recitalist deletan melato.”

“Recitalist deletan melato.”

Soon the room was full of the sound of us repeating the magic spell. We had enough witches in the room. I hoped we had enough of the other type of magic. I looked at the circle. We had a large group of people. Matheus, Toern, and Jag all stood in the circle. Frank, Antonio, and Branson stood by the side in case anything went wrong, but nothing could go wrong with this; our friends lives depended on it. The coven needed it. The town needed it if they wanted to be protected from the zombies.

“Recitalist deletan melato.”

“Recitalist deletan melato.” The chant rose in volume inside the room as all of our magic formed in the air around us.

“What’s going to happen?” Chloe yelled, worry furrowing her brow.

“It’s going to break our bond.” I said. “It won’t drive us apart, though. It’s just to stop the spell Styx made.”

My gaze met Chloe’s. She gave me a brief nod, letting me know it didn’t matter. It was time to enact the magic. I raised my hands and the magic swirling in the room from all of the witches, the monster, the satyr, and the demon came together in a large magical brew above us. I raised my hands in the air feeling the energy swirl around my wrists as I gathered it all together in a big ball above the cauldron.

I stepped in front of the cauldron and picked up the candle, dropping burning wax onto the feathers and leaves. They immediately burst into flames as I brought the magic down into the cauldron. The chanting increased, raising to a fever pitch as the ball of golden light fell into the cauldron and exploded with the fire. A huge puff of smoke went up above the cauldron.

The chanting died out.

“Did it work?” Chloe asked, her voice quiet.

She was looking at her arms and turning her hands over.

“I don’t feel any different,” she said. “I still feel like a vampire.”

“It was never going to change you from being a vampire,” I said with a smile. “I



don't feel the pull of Styx anymore.”

“Neither do I,” Chloe nodded.

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We all looked around the room silently. We had ruined the spell our ancestors had made. The spell that bound us to a demigod's sacrifice.

"That's quite an achievement." Jag smiled warmly as he pulled me close to him and nuzzled my neck.

"Yeah, it's great," I said. "The only problem is we still don't have our friends back, have we accidentally signed their death warrant?"

Frank let out a loud guttural sound that enveloped the room.

"It's time we go down and get them," Branson said. "They're in Toern's crypt?"

"Yeah, but I don't think all of us bursting in is going to solve the problem," I said. "If we walk in the front door, she's more likely just to kill them."

"The biggest problem is that you're not thinking like a demigod," Matheus said.

I looked at him, my head tilted to the side.

"I'm a demigod," I said. "However, I think, is thinking like a demigod."

"Demigods want what they want, when they want it," Matheus said. "I haven't known many demigods, but I know the way they are reported to think. Styx is going to want everything for herself. She is not necessarily going to want to kill them, yet. She is going to want it to be the way she planned it. Styx is going to be focused on getting the sacrifice to work."

“Why would she not want this sacrifice to work?” Branson agreed.

“So, her goal right now isn’t to kill the other four coven members,” Chloe nodded in agreement. “It’s to get the other two coven members back and sacrifice us all for the sake of her river and opening the portal.”

“Well, that isn’t happening,” I said. I might not have been a demigod for very long, but I was very aware I was a demigod now. Matheus was right about one thing; demigods liked to win. They liked to get their way and I wasn’t planning on changing any of that myself. It was me and Chloe against Styx. We were going to be fine. We were going to handle it. The reality was that we had all of the mates of the women in the coven with us. Together we would solve the problem and free the rest of the Coven.

My eyes met Chloe’s grimly across the altar. It didn’t matter what it took, we were going to have to succeed at this. No matter what.

A loud explosion rocked The Estate unexpectedly.

## Chapter 35

“What the fuck was that?” Chloe asked, running into the kitchen to look at the back windows and down toward the cemetery.

“Holy fuck,” Antonio said at her side. He was already racing out the back door and starting to shift.

“What is going on?” I cried running up behind them.

“They breached the wards,” Chloe said.

“The zombies?” I asked, my heart racing.

“Yes,” Frank said, pointing down toward where the zombies were starting to spill out of the cemetery, down the hill. They were heading down toward the town.

“No!” I shouted. “We can’t let them get to town.”

“It’s exactly what Styx is trying to do,” Antonio spoke. “She knows you want to protect the town, so she’s sending the zombies to start to destroy it. If you go down and try to protect the townspeople, she will stop you. She will catch you. That’s what she’s expecting you to do.”

“We can’t let the townspeople get eaten by zombies,” I said.

“We’ll handle the zombies,” Branson countered.

“You guys go to get the coven,” Frank agreed. “You can trust us to stop the zombies.”

“There are too many of them,” I pointed out. “You won’t be able to stop them all. “

“We won’t be able to do anything unless you get the rest of the coven free from Styx,” Branson said. “We’re relying on you.”

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I looked down the hill at the zombies tumbling out of the cemetery. At least this would give us access to where they were keeping the rest of the coven.

Branson pulled me to the side, putting his hands on my shoulders as he looked into my eyes. "I need you to bring Mae back for me," he said. "I'm trusting you. You're the only demigod we have and when it comes to going up against demigods, the best thing to put against them is another demigod. I know you haven't been one long, but by all means we need you to be one now. Can you do it?" He asked.

I glanced over to the side and saw Chloe watching. She had a look of pride on her face and a smile. I assumed from her expression she was positive I could do it. I wished I had her same confidence, but regardless, even if I didn't have faith in my abilities, Chloe did. Hopefully that was going to be good enough for what we needed right now.

"OK, we've got this," I said. "Chloe, you and I are going to go into the cemetery."

"That's what I figured," Chloe said. She pulled out her gun.

"I don't think those work on zombies," I said, petting Carl, the zombie dog.

"No," she agreed, reaching out to Antonio as he handed her a massive machete, "but they'll slow them down long enough for me to cut their heads off. We got this."

I wished I had half the confidence she showed, but I knew they were all relying on me to be my best demigod self, whatever that meant. Regardless, I was going to do it.

“What have you got for me?” I turned to Jag with a slight smile.

He pulled me forward in a kiss, holding me close apparently not caring who saw how he felt. “Come back to me,” he said.

“Oh, I will,” I said, grinning again. “I have unfinished business with you for sure.”

Within moments we were all at the front of The Estate. Branson had a complete arsenal in the back shed. He handed out weapons to everybody. The guys were armed and dangerous. Trina, and her children were also armed.

“Trina, you can’t go in there. We need someone to stay here,” I said, shaking my head as she brandished a large kitchen knife. “You’re not even fast enough to outrun a zombie if it comes after you.”

“I’m not old. I can take on some supernatural shithead that’s coming into my town to try to mess up my people,” Trina said.

“Whatever happened to my peace-loving frenemy?” I asked

“I ran into a demigod gone wild and a bunch of zombies who are trying to kill my town,” she said.

“You still can’t go into town,” I said.

“Try and stop me,” Trina said, waving the kitchen knife toward me.

I squinted at her.

“You realize you’re volunteering to fight the zombie apocalypse?” I asked.

“Do you realize I am a witch of great power ready to take on the world and protect my own?” Trina said. For a moment I stood there looking at her. My heart swelled with pride to the point the tears almost pricked my eyes.

“We’re a team,” I whispered, amazed that after all these years I was making peace with her.

“It’s settled then. We better go,” Chloe said, nodding at me. “I know it’s hard but standing here isn’t going to make it any easier.”

I nodded in agreement with everything she was saying. “It’s time to protect our town and save our people.”

The guys jumped in the back of Branson’s and Antonio’s pickup trucks and headed down into town. I turned to Chloe. “I think we should go in the side gate.”

“Smart idea,” she said, her gaze momentarily going down the street to where Antonio had left with the guys.

“Don’t worry. You’ll see him again,” I said.

“I certainly hope so,” Chloe said. “Because if we don’t see each other again, it’ll mean one of us is dead.”

She resolutely started walking toward the cemetery.

### Chapter 36

We approached the side gate of the cemetery.

The wards were all down on the cemetery. It was a strange thing. Anybody could walk into it at the moment. Based on the sirens I was starting to hear in town, it was obvious the zombies were not going unnoticed in the small town of Cougar Creek.

I couldn't think about it. I couldn't think of all my friends down in the town facing the zombies. Jag was down there with the others. My mom. My heart clenched. I had to join them. Even if we rescued the rest of the coven, we weren't going to be able to stop all the zombies, not with the few people we had sent out there to help.

"We've got to be quick," I said to Chloe.

"I couldn't agree more," Chloe said. "The town's going to need the entire coven working to stop the zombies."

"We don't even have a solution yet," I pointed out. "The idea right now is to save the coven and hope six of us can come up with some idea of how to stop this catastrophe."

"It's a step closer than anything else we've had so far," Chloe said.

The second we stepped into the cemetery; we could tell it was different. There was a chaos inside where the grass was ripped, and the trees were torn. The zombies hadn't been milling around inside the cemetery; they had been destroying it one leaf at a



time. Even some of the headstones were turned over.

They were violent.

“Come on,” I said, breaking into a run as I headed toward the lion crypt.

Chloe easily kept up with me and within minutes we were standing in front of the lion’s statue, the tablet door closed against its feet.

“How are we supposed to get it open? We don’t have the key anymore,” Chloe said.

“We have magic,” I said, holding my hand up over the lock. “If the golden egg could open it, I just need to make that shape out of energy to do the same job.”

I reached my hand up and twisted it focusing all of my energy on opening the door. I didn’t know all the spells of my mother yet. This one I did, because I had tried very hard to use the unlocking spell. It was the one that had taught me I had no magic powers, because every time I’d tried to use it on my mother’s grimoire or on someplace, I wasn’t supposed to be, it had never ever worked.

“Adomine tourlots.”

I spoke the words loud and clear, sure they were going to have results. I was right.

The lock turned and the tablet twisted aside.

“Come on,” I said. “We’re going straight in the front door, so I don’t know if there’s any need to be quiet. We know it’s a trap.”

“Let’s walk into it and see what happens.” Chloe agreed.

I moved in front of Chloe so I would be the first one in the passageway. A spiral staircase led down. As we got lower, the walls became dripping wet, until soon the stairs themselves were slick with water.

“Be careful,” Chloe said. “This is dangerous.”

“I got it,” I muttered, carefully watching where my feet landed. We carefully walked in circles for what seemed like forever until we were deep into the bowels of the earth.

The stairs brought us into a cavern, the stench of which was overwhelming. The River Styx was there. I’d heard about it, and I’d read about it when I was in school, but I didn’t have any idea what it actually looked like. It wasn’t healthy. I knew it was a river with the souls of the dead moving through it, but it shouldn’t be white and clogged. Inside the room was a stagnant pool full of dead souls.

“I think I’m going to barf,” Chloe said.

“Please don’t.” I swallowed hard. “It’ll only make it worse in here.”

Chloe chuckled. “Not sure anything could make it worse in here.”

We had to find them. There must be some channels under the cemetery that share the River Styx.

“OK, but why this gate? Why did she need the key to get in this gate? There’s something in here. we have to find,” I said.

“She wants to open the portal,” Chloe said. “There must be access to the river and the portal through here. This thing was made a hundred and fifty years ago and I don’t think it’s been updated since, so the portal’s got to have a manual open and close.”

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I looked around the cavern. There were three doors leading out from it.

“What do we do?” I asked.

“We take them together, one at a time.”

“Isn’t this where cops usually say let’s split up and cover more ground faster?”

“Do you want to walk through one of those doors on your own?” Chloe asked.

“Not in the slightest,” I responded.

“Come on, let’s go,” Chloe said. She picked the first opening on the left and we walked through it to a cave passageway. It was dark and narrow. The ceiling was low. It was clearly a channel, but it didn’t feel like it had been built by human hands. it was a little too round as if the water itself had cut the channel into the rock.

The floor was sandy, as though water had flushed it out.

Realization dawned on me just as a roaring sound filled the air.

“Chloe turn around,” I said. “Turn around quick. This isn’t a passageway.”

“What?” she asked, immediately turning towards me.

“This is a waterway.” I gasped. A loud rumbling sound was echoing through the passageway. “That’s the sound of water rushing toward us.”

## Chapter 37

Chloe and I turned and started running down the passageway heading back to the main room.

“She’s opened the portal,” I cried. “It’s too late.”

“We have to find the others,” Chloe screamed.

“We have to get covered,” I said. The water was roaring right on our heels, I could feel the rush of the wind from the push of the water flooding down the passageway as we ran. “Shift!”

As a bat, Chloe would stand a better chance of getting away from the water.

“I can’t leave you,” she said.

“Do it!” I said. “Find the others. Get them free.”

I watched gratefully as Chloe shifted and flew in front of me. The water was still coming close behind. My hair was blowing forward from the rush of the water. I was going to have to find a place to stay. I searched the wall of the passageway, looking for a crevice to crawl into. There was a small inlet. I crawled up the side and then spied a crack in the side of the rock. It was just large enough for me to fit into and high enough for me to get my face above the water as the rushing river flooded past me, swirling and kicking up the sand and dust. I clung to the crack with my lips barely breaching the surface of the water as I gasped the stale cavern air.

My body was completely wet, covered in water, but after the initial rush, the water died down a bit and ended up in a steady flow. Good God. I didn’t even know exactly how to get out of here, but I knew I was swimming in the River Styx now and maybe

there would be no chance of getting out at all.

The water died down. I took a deep breath and swam back toward the entrance of the big cavern. I ducked down into the doorway and came up in the room.

I treaded water, feeling sick to my stomach. The river was full of a bunch of dead souls. The river was making its way into the large room through the three openings. I looked up and I realized what the chamber was.

A holding tank.

The water was rising steadily. It was going to flow out from beneath the lion and into Cougar Creek.

I swam quickly toward the stairwell and crawled back up to it.

I lay at the top of the stairwell, completely drained and devastated, my body aching as if the water from the River Styx was claiming it and dragging me back down into it. Chloe had gotten away, I could only hope. Could she possibly find where they were keeping the other coven members? I had no idea. All I knew was right now I felt exceptionally drained, exhausted, and in desperate need of some level of recovery before I was able to even stand up and think straight.

“Come on, Helen, you’ve got this,” I said to myself. I pressed my face against the stone steps. The River Styx had zapped my energy. I looked at my hand waiting for the golden glow to come, but it didn’t. The River Styx had taken my magic.

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I stood up, swaying on my feet, trying to get an idea of what to do next, but I couldn't even stand upright. I held my hands together, waiting for golden light to appear. I saw a small spark of it at the very center, but there was nothing else.

"I'm dying." I whispered the words out loud in realization as I felt my life force slipping back toward the river.

"There's no way in fuck I'm dying right here," I said.

There had to be something I could do. My mind started running through all the different things I'd learned since discovering I was a demigod.

"I'm a demigod." I said the word softly at first. But then I said it louder. "I am a demigod." I glanced back over my shoulder at the rumbling water that was pouring out from under the cemetery. It didn't matter for me. I was a demigod. This river wasn't going to kill me. It might make me weak; it might make me tired; it might make me hesitate for a moment, but it wasn't going to kill me. It was going to make me stronger.

I stood up and waded forward through the cemetery. I got up to where the swamp was. I could see the River Styx had made a small pond there that overflowed down the cliff face and into Cougar Creek.

The River Styx was loose in Cougar Creek. The zombies were in the town. I could hear the screams and the chaos. I had to find my coven, though. That was my first priority

They had been taken into the passageway but clearly, they weren't down there now, unless they'd been thrown into the River Styx as a sacrifice. In which case, all was lost.

Still there had to be another way down there. Maybe Toern's crypt, the one with the demon markings on it.

I moved slowly toward Toern's crypt, knowing this was where I was going to find the answers and find my coven mates. I wasn't sure where Chloe had gotten to, I only hoped she was safe.

When I got near the crypt, I saw the ground looked like it had exploded. This was a gateway directly to Undirheim if I remembered correctly. The domain of Thrain. It wasn't the friendliest arrangement in the book, but under the circumstances he would probably fight on our side. My mother had mentioned he had shown up earlier. Would he give back the coven if they had been sacrificed to him?

## Chapter 38

I had never felt so alone in all my life, standing at the entrance to the crypt and knowing I needed to go inside and rescue my friends.

The truth was I wasn't alone. They were there for me. They were waiting for me. I went into the crypt carefully, but there was nothing in the crypt itself except the platform where Toern had been kept for years. I wasn't here for the chamber. I was here for the back room.

What I needed was Mae's finder spell. We didn't have the same magic, though. Maybe there was a magic I could use that would be something like it.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, willing the magic to come to my hands. I

was feeling drained still from my bath in the River Styx, but I knew I could at least send out a weak pulse. It only took me a moment to remember the words of the spell and start mumbling them until tiny gold lights emitted from me, showing me the path forward.

At the back of the chamber was the door leading the Undirheim. Somewhere in between, my coven was trapped. I walked down the passage some more, but it didn't take me long to find them. The passageway opened up into a large chamber. Hanging from the ceiling in five cages were my coven mates, including Chloe.

Styx and Morel sat on thrones in the center of the room, a cauldron of fire burning before them.

"I rule here now," Styx said.

"It's not possible for you to rule in Cougar Creek," I said. "This town has a demigod and you're not it."

Styx looked like her blood was boiling. Her face flushed a bright red. I didn't care. There was no way she was getting my town, not on her terms.

"My terms are you leave," I said. "I understand what you want."

"I've got what I want. The only thing I need to add my collection is you," she said.

I shook my head. "The Pentacle of Time blood bond is no more. You'll gain nothing from killing us."

Two cambions came forward, flanking me.

"That's what you think," Styx said. "I have some dark magic in store. With the



sacrifice of a whole coven of witches, I can still make the River Styx run three times as large. It'll make the opening we need to bring the Dark Fae through. That will still take a blood sacrifice and we've decided it's going to be yours."

"Well, I hate to break it to you, but those aren't my plans for the day," I said, swinging my hand to the right and shooting a golden ball of light toward where a cage was locked at the top. I missed the door and hit the chain, breaking it from the ceiling.

"Heads up!" I cried as Kartika's cage dropped from the ceiling, with her in it screaming.

Styx, Morel, and I all jumped to the side as the cage crashed to the ground of the cavern and the door burst open. Kartika jumped out. She wasn't as exhausted as I was; she hadn't had a bath in the River Styx. She held up her hand.

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“What are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m calling my sword to me,” she said.

Styx and Morel jumped to their feet.

“I don’t think you’re Thor,” I grumbled.

“What? How the hell else am I supposed to get the sword?” she asked.

“Maybe you’re not supposed to have it. Maybe you have to use Dark Fae magic or something?”

“Let’s see if my aim’s any better?” she said, holding up her hand and aiming it at Mae’s cage door.

“That was spot on,” I said as the lock undid and the door swung open. Styx and Morel were on their feet now, screaming at us as they rushed forward. Styx waved her hands in large motions causing the dust on the ground to stir up. She was digging. The floor was falling away beneath us, and the river was coming back.

“This chamber is the place where the rest of the river will run through,” she said. “We only need to give the six of you as a sacrifice and then the River Styx will run freely through New Attica.”

“I hate to break it to you,” I said. Even though I was wobbly on my feet, I held my hands up against her, “but I don’t think that is what will happen today.”

I swayed a little as I tried to steady myself. Chloe flew down in her bat form. Mae had jumped down out of her cage. I fired a golden shot and hit Jane's door open. She did a swinging backflip out of her cage, landing perfectly with both feet firmly on the ground and arms outstretched.

"How do you make middle-age look so damn good?" I asked.

"Incoming!" Chloe called.

I turned as Styx's arms brought water up out of the ground.

"She plans to drown us!" Chloe cried.

"You will be a sacrifice to the river," Styx said. A rock protrusion came out of the side of the wall where she and Morel stood as the water rose up around us.

The water was flowing toward the opening of the crypt.

"Let go!" I said to the rest of the coven. We could feel the ethereal bodies of the dead souls grappling against us, working to pull us under. "Hold your breath and let go!"

They all looked at me in fear, but they knew there was no fighting it. We were being taken in by the River Styx and if we faltered, it would be even worse. We had to understand what the river wanted to do with us and then find a way out. My only hope was our breaths held long enough for that to be possible.

## Chapter 39

The water swirled all around my head and my face as I held my breath. Long bony fingers pulled at the tendrils of my hair. I wanted to scream in disgust, but I knew going with the flow was the best way to get through this. The flow was fast and

furious, pushing us along. I reached out and found Chloe's hand in the darkness. I could feel the energy connect. All the coven members must be joining hands. Each time they connected; our energy surged until we were all connected together in a chain.

We were stronger together and we all knew it.

When we were all connected, I began kicking in the direction the water was flowing, pulling them with me until they understood what I was trying to achieve. Let Styx and Morel think we had drowned.

I kicked harder. I was losing my breath quickly and knew I was going to run out of breath before I was able to find any air. I only hoped my sisters in the coven were all still connected and able to hold their breath as well.

The pain in my lungs sharpened, searing. I kicked harder and harder. Finally, I knew there was no way I was going to be able to last anymore so I kicked for the surface, hoping against hope we were beyond the sight of Styx and Morel and hoping there was actually air up at the surface.

I burst through the top of the water, desperate for air and clinging to the hope all of my coven sisters had survived the swim also. I pulled on Chloe, who came up, and one by one we pulled each other up out of the water until all six of us were bobbing heads in the River Styx. If I was not mistaken as I looked around at the massive cavern, we were in Undirheim.

"What the fuck?" asked the demon who stood on the edge.

"We need help," I said.

"You're in the river," the demon said, shaking his head.

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“We need to get out of the river,” I said.

“Nobody gets out of the river,” the demon said.

“We know Thrain,” I said. “The other problem is, we’re not dead.”

“I don’t give a fuck if you’re the Queen of Sheba. Nobody gets out of the river,”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Aris,” he growled.

“OK, look. I’m not saying we’re going to get you in trouble with Thrain, but...”

“I don’t care if I’m in trouble with a friend,” Aris said. “I follow the instructions.”

“We aren’t dead,” Jane said, the water making her voice weaker.

“Look, Styx is changing the flow of the river. It’s clogged up at the end of the tributary she used to have. Now it’s flowing badly, so she’s opening it up.”

“Why should I concern myself with what goes on in the human world?” Aris asked.

“Because if they get their way and Morel and Styx start killing off all the humans and a zombie apocalypse covers the entire earth, you will get so many dead bodies coming through here you won’t know what to do with them. How are you going to manage all that?”

“So, who exactly is stopping this apocalypse?” The demon asked.

“We would be if you get us out of the river,” Chloe screamed, clawing at the bank.

Our magic didn’t work in the river very well, so we were stuck.

The demon came over to the edge and reached down giving Chloe a hand.

“Why didn’t you say it was Styx? She’s a troublemaker. Always has been and always will be.”

I glanced over at Kartika. “Didn’t I say it like three times already?”

“Maybe demons don’t hear very well?” she asked.

Aris reach forward, grabbed Chloe’s hand and pulled her out of the river. Within a minute he had us all out, laying on the banks of the River Styx trying to catch our breath.

“Is there any cure for this feeling?” I asked. “I feel like I’ve been hit by a semi.”

“Only time,” he said.

“There’s got to be something better,” I said. “We’ve got to go stop the zombie apocalypse back in Cougar Creek. So, what we need you to do is to help us get back to Cougar Creek in fighting condition.”

“There’s only one way to do it, but you may not like the side effects.” Aris explained.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You’ll be bound together for life,” he said.

I almost rolled my eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me. That’s not a problem.”

“Hook us up,” Mae said.

“You had me at hello,” Bianca said with a nod.

“Didn’t we just work to unbind the pentacle of time?” I asked.

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“Yes, but that’s a totally different thing,” Chloe said. “Destroying us was Styx’s plan. This plan is to get us fighting fit. We’re going to share our energy and the combination of all of us will uplift the entire group and get us back in condition in no time.”

“I’m in,” said Jane.

Chloe and Kartika both nodded when Aris’s eyes came down to me.

“You ready to take the plunge?”

“It can’t be as bad as the plunge in the River Styx,” I said. “Get us out of here. Get us back to Cougar Creek.”

A ferocious wind surrounded the six of us as red light burned everywhere with gathering speed, ferocity and brilliance until it was too much to keep our eyes open. I closed my eyes as light exploded around us.

### Chapter 40

We landed in a twisted pile in the altar room at The Estate. We looked around and took a collective deep breath as we jumped to our feet.

“I feel like a million dollars.” I stretched my arms up, my body pulsating with heat.

“You better feel like a million.” Jane twisted her wrists. “We’ve got zombies to fight. Let’s go.”



“Wait,” Mae held up her hand. “Before we leave, we need this one chance to make our own magic with the six of us right here. This way we will show we have strength.”

She took her position at the center of the room, the five of us took ours around the edges. She began chanting a spell, “Dominus latinu rigo nato.” She repeated the line one more time until we caught the refrain and then we all joined her in the chanting of the lines.

I wasn’t sure what she was doing, but I trusted her implicitly and I knew whatever she was giving us would be the right thing for this moment. An energy swirled around the room as I saw the purple and green light come out of Mae in the center. Bianca, in her human form, began emitting a green energy, Jane a turquoise blue, Chloe a red, Kartika a burnt orange and around me was a golden glow. All of these colors of lights went to the center and poured into the cauldron, spilling over as all the colors blended together, making an iridescent platinum.

“Together we bind all of these energies and all of these powers, creating communion and close ties. No longer will one magic be felt without the aid of the others. No single one magic will ever stand alone, and all of our magic shall live through the strength of the others.” Mae proclaimed the words. “And so, mote it be.”

“And so, mote it be,” we all answered together.

We closed the spell out by reciting the incantation again three times.

Upon completion of the spell, a bright light flew up from the cauldron and out to each one of us, right into our heart chakras and then it flowed up and down our centers until my entire body was buzzing with a line of energy. I could only imagine the rest were feeling the same way.

“Okay. Now let’s go get them,” Mae said, walking out of the altar room and leading us to the arsenal. We put on padding and grabbed the remaining swords and guns that were there, then headed down into town in the back of one of the trucks.

“We can only stop them partially with force,” Mae said. “We have to use magic, but this time we have to take the magic to the zombies. We can’t handle it up here.”

The only problem was, to get to the middle of the zombies we had to basically be willing to fight them off.

“Let’s cast a spell and get them to Gargoyle Park,” I suggested. “I think the fastest way to get them all into one location is to corral them.”

“Once we get them into the location,” Mae agreed, “we can cast a spell to turn them all back into bones.”

“Do we have the power for that?” Jane asked.

“Well, if we don’t, then zombies are going to take over the human world,” Mae said.

Bianca shifted and began howling, racing ahead of us into town.

The blood on the streets was intense already. Citizens of Cougar Creek had died. I watched Sherriff Tom coming toward me, lurching and limping, clearly already suffering from the impacts of being a zombie.

“Oh no. Sheriff Ted,” I said, turning to Chloe.

She looked sad and disappointed. I couldn’t blame her. He hadn’t been a bad sheriff and had been a strong, upstanding member of the community.

“Someone has to put him out of his misery,” I said.

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“It should be me,” Chloe said. “Nobody needs to see him like this. He’d be terrified if he knew he was a danger to the people of Cougar Creek. He spent his entire life trying to keep these people alive and well.”

She grabbed a machete.

“I’ll do it,” she said and within seconds she turned around, swung the machete in a spiral, and sliced off his head.

“He’ll rest in peace once we get to Gargoyle Park and get the spell done,” she said.

We separated and went to different parts of the town, trying to eradicate the zombies coming our way. Most of the humans were hiding behind barricaded front doors. Anytime I saw one running, I told them to do exactly that as I ran through the town trying to entice more zombies to follow me.

Within thirty minutes we had all the zombies corralled in Gargoyle Park.

“It would help if you can get the gargoyles to work,” Kartika said to Frank.

“These things actually work?” I asked in surprise and delight. “By all means, spark them up.”

Frank gave a single nod, and the gargoyles flew up in the air, circling overhead.

“Send them out to look for zombies somewhere else in the vicinity,” I said.

I turned back to the mass of humanity that had turned into a swaying, keening mass of muscle and blood and bone and sinew with their eyeballs hanging out of their heads and their brains showing through their fractured skulls. The zombie dog was cute, but these things were gruesome. They were all out to eat us if we gave them have a chance.

“So, now how do we work this out?” I asked.

“It’s simple. We need to get Mae to the center of the zombies,” Chloe said.

“How we going to do that?” I asked.

“I can take her,” Frank said. “We can stand on the gargoyle pedestal there.”

“She’s going to have to work pretty quick if she wants the magic to work before they actually get to her,” I said.

“I’ll have the gargoyles protect her so she can cast a spell.” Frank said.

In seconds, the gargoyles had lifted Mae up and brought her to the pedestal. Zombies were all grappling for purchase against the pedestal itself. Fortunately, it was out of reach of their fingers, as though the original builders of the pedestals had known one day there would be a woman standing on it trying to protect the world from the zombie apocalypse.

We all took our positions at five points in the park. Mae created a binding light to encircle the entire group of zombies.

“Now we have to walk them up the hill and back into the cemetery,” she said.

“Right,” I said, as if it was a normal thing to do.

The zombies snapped and made their distinct keening noise all the way up the hill to the cemetery. Fortunately, it wasn't far away because it took all of our energy to get them up there. By the time we finally got them through the gates of the cemetery, we were all exhausted.

“Would you look at that. It's almost like they're coming home,” I said.

Bianca stood up on her pedestal. As the zombies moved to the center of the cemetery, the rest of us took positions in five points of the cemetery.

I kept my machete in front, swiping at zombies as we chanted the spell to make them all stop. A cloud of light erupted over the cemetery, moving like a shockwave through all the people and the zombies. The zombies fell apart. The living humans stood in place until there was nothing but the bones of the quiet dead at our feet.

## Chapter 41

Everybody tried to convince me to have the grand opening at night, but it wasn't what I wanted at all. Pubs were originally family places with beer gardens. In Ireland the whole family would gather there on the weekend and enjoy the fresh gardens and the good beer and some good food. It wasn't a place to be drunk and disorderly.

That's why I'd decided to have the grand opening start in the day. There was no reason why I couldn't carry on into the evening. I wanted to have a little fun with my people.

I wanted the community to know that O'Halloran's was open and ready for business.

With pride I stood out front with the ribbons, preparing to cut them. Jag stood directly at my side, his arm around me making me feel warm and secure.

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The ribbon was stretched across the front entrance of the door, in front of which we all stood for a photograph: Mae, Chloe, Bianca, Jane, Kartika, and me. Smiles brightened our faces and I held scissors in my hands. The warmth of love and light filled me as I stood there experiencing the appreciation of my coven mates.

“In the name of the Dagda I open this pub for all of Cougar Creek,” I grinned.

I cut the ribbon and allowed everyone to come inside. I hadn’t let anyone in since the rebuild had started. We had broken ground, but we hadn’t finished up until after the River Styx had changed course and was now running through the center of Cougar Creek blending with our creek. It made it a bit dangerous, but it had been the easiest way to give Styx a little room to grow, clean the river, and not involve the demigods. The river had grown, giving O’Halloran’s a beautiful river view. We had added a rooftop terrace. After I cut the ribbon, I walked inside the pub past the beautiful, polished wood bar and up a spiral staircase that led to a rooftop terrace. The beautiful forest of Oregon could be seen stretching out across the mountains around Cougar Creek. Down below the Cougar Creek mixed with the Styx, running through the valley.

“You got lucky,” a male voice said over my shoulder.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Ryder, the demigod of monsters,” the man said, giving me a glimpse of his horns before they disappeared back under the glamour.

“You should know you’re now one of us,” he said.

“No thanks,” I said. “I may be a demigod, but I don’t have any plans on leaving Cougar Creek.”

“That’s still the name of the town?” He asked with a smile. “Maybe we should call it Styx Creek.”

“Very funny. I don’t think we’re going to let it be known Styx is out.” I responded.

“And how exactly are you planning to hide that from the demigods?” Ryder asked.

I frowned at him. “The demigods have shown no interest in this place since all the problems first began.”

“Because they weren’t informed except where it mattered with Toern and Mae.” Ryder pointed out.

“So maybe a better question,” I said, “is why aren’t you telling them about what’s going on here or what happened?”

“Because I don’t think they need to trouble themselves with it,” Ryder said. “You seem to have solved the problem fine on your own.”

“This problem cost lives,” I said.

“I know,” Ryder said seriously. “And we thank you for dealing with it. I still don’t understand exactly how you let the River Styx go through, but you’ve managed to keep the portal closed to the Dark Fae.”

“Well, it turned out the Dark Fae didn’t want to come into New Attica.” Kartika walked up. “You know, most Dark Fae don’t like it around here.”



Frank came up behind her, putting his arms around her and holding her tight.

“What are you two going to do now we’ve solved the crisis of Cougar Creek?” I asked.

“Oh, we’re going to stick around a while,” Kartika said, smiling up at Frank, who gave her a kiss. “We’re going to keep the cabin at The Estate and settle in there for a while. The pentacle of time might be gone but I think the creek still needs a pretty strong coven here taking care of the portal.”

Chloe was looking out across the view. “This was an amazing addition,” she said, smiling at me warmly, her new sheriff’s badge shining on her chest.

“You didn’t want to be the sheriff, I’m sure,” I said, “but you know Cougar Creek needs a sheriff.”

“She’s going to be the best one in town,” Antonio said. “Now we can keep all the shifters in town, too, without having any threats of prices on their head.”

Jane and Toern walked up holding hands, one of their furry friends in tow.

“You two can’t go anywhere without a dog, can you?” I asked. “You realize Ryder’s right there and everything is okay. You’re allowed to be out and about in the world? Morel made the sacrifice and the crypt is clean.”

“Oh, I like having dogs around,” Toern said.

Jane looked at me. “And mon cherie can have as many pets as he likes. As far as Cougar Creek goes, we will stay. I don’t think there’s anywhere in the world I could take Toern to where he could feel more comfortable and more at home than here.”

I grinned as Mae and Bianca joined us with Branson and Mateus. All of us stood on the deck of O'Halloran's pub looking out across Cougar Creek with the sun high in the sky, warm on our skin. "Looks like we're all staying." I grinned as we pulled out chairs.

"Can I make you something to eat?" Jag asked.

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“Nope, we’ve got the kids working in the kitchen today,” I said. “Anita and Drake wanted some extra college money. I hear they’re going to Crown Academy.”

“Exactly. And next week Mae and I are going to fly out and talk to our kids and see if they want to attend as well,” Bianca said. “Who knows, we might get a whole group of Coven kids at Crown Academy.”

I started laughing. “You guys can all show up for parent’s day and embarrass the crap out of all your kids. It’ll be fun.”

“Not all kids are embarrassed by their parents.” Hilda said, giving me a pointed eye.

“I adore you, Mother,” I said. “You don’t embarrass me in the slightest.” I reached over and squeezed her hand. I’d come so close to losing her I would never take her for granted again.

I raised my glass toward the ladies of Cougar Creek Coven. “Here’s to defeating the River Styx and incorporating it into our beautiful town.”

“Here’s to the women who made it happen,” Mae grinned, reaching forward and clinking her glass against mine as the other four women brought their glasses forward.

“Here. Here,” we all said in unison. Jag leaned forward and kissed my cheek. I closed my eyes basking in the warmth of friendship and the Southern Oregon afternoon sun.

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