



My Blind Date is a Warlock

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

Description: Magic. Mayhem. And a little romance! Sophia is smart, beautiful, talented—and the only woman in a long and powerful lineage of witches with no powers of her own! Growing up in a town full of supernatural creatures wasn't easy. The last thing she'd ever do is date a warlock. Or so she thought... This book was originally released as a serial through Kindle Vella.

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PROLOGUE

JACOB

“Watch the fangs, will you, sweetheart?” I barked when the blonde vampire drinking from the vein at my neck nearly kneed me in the crotch in her bloodlust. Annoyed blood-red eyes peered down at me, eyebrows furrowed in a deep V.

“This is not working.” She sighed in frustration, her French accent thick. Pushing away from my half-naked body, she grabbed her blouse off the floor and put it back on. “No doubt your blood is the best I’ve had. Powerful warlocks always have the most potent, but, honey—” She reached for her bag and produced a silver-plated lighter with her initials on it and a slim cigarette and proceeded to light it up. “—what’s the use if you can’t even get it up? You know how my kind gets when we drink straight from the vein, you can’t have one without the other.” She glanced pointedly at my crotch, snarling at the obvious absence of any sign of arousal.

“Maybe if you knew what to do with those fangs, we’d both be having fun right now. At least you got a meal out of it. All I got is a torn throat,” I bit out and touched my hand to the fang punctures on my neck, healing them with a negligible use of magic. Giselle hissed at me, baring her fangs and her nails elongating into claw-like talons. I arched a brow, daring her to come at me. Just because she was almost immortal and damned near impossible to kill didn’t mean I couldn’t maim her in ways that would leave her crippled for years. Matter of fact, if I put some effort into it, I could kill her. The bloodsucker knew it and put her claws and fangs away.

“Don’t blame me for whatever’s going on with you. I have no idea why you can’t get

it up, my lord warlock, but it has nothing to do with me.” She waved a hand in the general area of my crotch. “This is the second time in a row you’ve called on me and left me wanting. Me! I was a favorite courtesan of King Louis the Sixteenth, you know.”

I did not think it was possible to see a vampire turn red from rage, as most of them tended to look like pale marble statues, but two riotous spots of pink bloomed across Giselle’s cheeks. She continued with her rant.

“I suggest you lose my number if all you’re going to do is leave me hanging.” She curled her lip and took a huge puff of the cigarette. As far as I know, regular drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes did absolutely nothing for vamps, but they liked to partake for the fun of it, or for nostalgia’s sake, phantom memories from when they were still human.

“We’re done for the night. Get out of my room.”

“What about my money?” She crossed her arms, plumping up her ample cleavage, cigarette dangling from the side of the mouth. Clicking my tongue, I dug for my wallet in the back pocket of my jeans and tossed a couple of bucks at her before forcibly pushing her out of my room. Remnants of her cheap perfume and smoke remained in the air—nothing a simple cleansing spell couldn’t fix. A snap of my fingers and the hotel room smelled like lemons and sunshine, a scent I’d always associated with calm, happiness, and peace of mind, although I couldn’t tell you why. But not even drawing that crisp, citrusy scent deep into my lungs eased the weight on my shoulders. I couldn’t tell Giselle, but I knew what was wrong with me, and it was a problem I needed to fix.

Gemma Jones had hexed me, the witch! Some women keyed their exes’ cars or burned their clothes, but mine chose to render me impotent. For a second, I debated paying her back in kind, but I nixed the idea. I figured breaking her heart was all the

pain she needed, and I was not so narcissistic that I would shy away from the fact that I had not been the best boyfriend. I should be glad that she chose to go with something so minor, considering I broke things off with her on her birthday. Poor thing had been expecting me to propose. Don't know what gave her that idea, seeing as how I'd made it pretty clear that all I wanted was some no-strings-attached fun.

My phone blared from somewhere in my suite and I stifled a groan when I heard the personalized ringtone I used for my grandmother—the weight I was referring to a moment ago. I loved her to bits, but right now she was nothing more than an opinionated pain in my rear end who assumed I lived and breathed to follow her whims and orders like a slave. For a moment, I debated letting it go to voicemail, but the old bat would just keep on calling or resort to using a scrying mirror. The goddess knows I'm still carrying the scars from the last time she went that route and used my bedroom mirror for her witchy FaceTime. I hadn't given her an update on my search for three days now, so she must have been chomping at the bit to know how my hunt was going.

“Rainbow, how are you this fine evening?” I answered after finding my phone under a pile of discarded clothes and old tomes.

“Jacob, you are not too old for me to take you over my knee and spank some respect into your behind. Call me Rainbow again and I'll have you unable to sit for the next month. That is not a metaphor or euphemism, by the way.” My grandmother's cranky voice was accompanied by the noises of pots banging and chatter in the background. Given the time difference between Paris and Boston, I guessed that she must have been preparing for that luncheon thing she'd told me about last week. “You've been avoiding me for three days, boy. I told you to keep me abreast of any developments. Where are you right now? You said it's evening over there.”

I stepped out onto the balcony and stared out at the busy Parisian streets on a Friday evening. My hotel room offered a great view of the Seine River, and it was a

brehtaking sight indeed. The calm waters reflected the fiery hues of the setting sun and it looked like there was a party on one of the cruise barges. I could hear the faint strains of string instruments and laughter carried by the cool breeze over the myriad of big city sounds.

“Paris. I got a lead about the journal. Apparently, Tiberius spent quite a bit of his youth out here. One of his contemporaries is still alive and still lives in the city—a witch by the name of Josephine Margaux. I thought she might know where great-great-grandfather stashed the book.” I tapped my finger on the balcony railing. I could have used a really stiff drink right about then, and a willing woman, but only one of those things was on the table for me until I could get rid of my little hex problem.

“And?”

“And nothing. Josephine has no recollection of the journal. She’s old as dirt, so we can’t rely on her memory, but I do have another lead. A book dealer by the name of Beverley Barnes. I shot her an email some time ago, telling her what I’m searching for and she said she’d look into it.”

Gran gasped on the other side. “We agreed not to bring outsiders in on this. It’s bad enough that your cousin is poking his nose in where it’s not wanted!”

“He’s your grandson too. Stop trying to pawn him off on me,” I teased, even though Daniel was no laughing matter. I needed to find my great-great-grandfather’s Book of Shadows before Daniel did and unleashed the worst kind of magic upon our family and the rest of the world.

Daniel had a superiority complex like you wouldn’t believe. He thought that witches and warlocks were the pinnacles of existence on Earth and that humans, vampires, werewolves, and every supernatural creature out there should be bending the knee to

our kind. He wanted to expose our world to the mundanes and saw himself as some kind of Messiah figure who would lead us all into a new age. It was too bad that kin slaying was frowned upon or else I would have slipped some poison into Daniel's favorite wine before he ruined us all. But then again, knowing my cousin, he would have just come back as a vengeful spirit and haunted me for eternity.

"Jacob, this is no laughing matter. You don't even know this Beverley woman. What if she sees the kind of spells and rituals James recorded in that book over the years and decides to keep it for herself. Is she a witch? Have you run a background check on her?"

"Yes, she is a witch, a respected one from Mystic Cove. She comes highly recommended by a colleague from the college. He tells me she is one of the best and most reliable book dealers out there. And don't worry too much about Daniel, Gran. There is a reason I'm the Buchanan heir and he's not."

"You're older than he is, of course you're the heir. But make no mistake, the moment you let your guard down or he scents blood in the water, your cousin will take you out and claim your title."

"It won't come to that. I'll find the blasted journal and then we'll find a way to deal with Daniel. I gotta go, Gran, I haven't eaten anything since I woke and my stomach's about to gnaw on itself," I said, not wanting to drag out the conversation longer than necessary.

"Fine. Take care of yourself, kiddo. I love you." I could hear the resignation in her sigh.

"Right back at 'cha," I replied and cut the call off. I stared out at the view for a few minutes, ruminating over this whole thing with Daniel and the Book of Shadows. How much longer was I going to travel from one place to the other searching for the

book with my cousin snapping at my heels? I missed my job and my students, even if they could be royal pains. If my sabbatical went on much longer, I might not have a job waiting for me when I got back.

My stomach growling pushed me to go back inside and take a shower, washing off Giselle's scent before going out for dinner. It felt too pathetic to have dinner all by myself in my hotel room, so I decided to go out and enjoy the best nightlife Paris had to offer. But, of course, my plans were derailed when I came out of the shower and found the email notification on my phone. A wide smile stretched across my face—Beverley Barnes had found what I was looking for.

“Mystic Cove, here I come.”

CHAPTER 1

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“Have you ever thought about how weird the English language is? It has all these phrases from other languages across the world and tries to pass them off as its own. Don’t even get me started on all the weird expressions and metaphors,” I mused out loud, a little drunk off sugary goodness. Note to self, next time I think having more than two bowls of Ben and Jerry’s caramel chew-chew is a good idea, I’ll impale my hand with my spoon. There was a slightly tingly feeling zipping up and down my body and making me feel like I’d drank a bottle full of gran’s favorite Gunpowder Irish Gin, and the jury’s still out on whether this was a good thing or not. It made me feel a little bit trippy, hence the reason why I’d been vegging out on the couch for the last twenty minutes, contemplating the complexities of the English language instead of focusing on the mountain of work waiting for me.

“What are you talking about?” My sister’s exasperated voice piped up from the other side of the line, her impatience seeping through loud and clear. My eyes felt heavy as they looked down at the caller ID on my cell phone. I had her on speaker because my entire body felt heavier and more sluggish than usual, as if I was wading against the current or in a vat of molten tar.

“I mean expressions like ‘strike while the iron is hot.’ I’m twenty-four and I’m just figuring out now that the saying comes from the craft of blacksmithing—you know, like how they had to literally strike the iron while it’s hot to mold it. Which makes me wonder where expressions like ‘shoehorning something’ come from.” I sighed and sunk deeper into my couch. For something that I bought secondhand online, it felt like the most comfortable place on earth.

“And don’t you think it’s weird how they cut off all these proverbs to show only the positive or cautionary parts. Like how the complete proverb is, ‘Curiosity killed the

cat, but satisfaction brought it back.’ Why do people do that? Do you know how many times someone stopped me from doing something I really wanted to do by saying that to me?” I huffed, rage simmering within my gut out of nowhere. My skin and flesh felt as if it was about to melt right off my bones even though I had the air conditioning on full blast. What was happening to me? It kinda felt as if there was something...other taking over me and making me feel lethargic and a myriad of emotions all at once. And this wasn’t the normal day-to-day exhaustion one experienced after a day of hard work. Was I coming down with a virus or something? If so, I needed to get ahead of this right quick because with the week ahead of me, I could not afford to be laid out for more than a few hours.

“Soph, are you drunk right now? You know what, never mind. I don’t want to know, just please answer my question and then I’ll let you get back to your one-woman drinking,” Piper quipped. There was a rustling sound from her end as if she was going through a bunch of documents.

“What question was that again?”

Piper let out an annoyed groan. I could picture her curling her hands and strangling a phantom image of myself. “If you wanted to carpool to the coven circle. I’ll come pick you up at your place if you want.”

I screwed up my face and laid down on the couch in a fetal position. The summer solstice was in two days, and the local coven would be convening to recharge the ley lines and give our thanks to the gods and goddesses for another blessed year. It was one of the few occasions when the entire Mystic Cove coven came together, including the out-of-towners, to juice up the ley lines that kept the magic in our town “alive,” so to speak.

As much as it was an important ceremony, it also happened to be an excuse for witches and warlocks to get totally smashed off the abnormal amount of magic

charging the air. It had all the makings of a large family reunion, except everyone used magic and the fight between the two crazy aunts tended to end with someone getting hexed at best and an entire familial line getting cursed at worst—generations present and future.

“Imma have to take a rain check on that. The mayor is having some big to-do in five days with potential investors or whatever. He put me in charge of the gift bags and I’m nowhere near done with the candles and bath salts. Please send everyone my regards.”

The pause on Piper’s end was telling. “I promised myself I wouldn’t pry because I know you hate it when I do, but I need to know what is up with you. You’ve been down in the dumps for two weeks now and you haven’t attended any of the coven meetings in a while. I’ve had to cover for you more times than I can count and I am running out of excuses. How long is this going to go on?”

“Let me think? How long is the new Clarke staying in town for?” I chirped in a droll tone. Piper mumbled out a string of curses Mama would threaten to wash her mouth out for. Most of them, our sweet and genteel mother would be shocked to hear, we learned from our grandmother.

“Are you trying to tell me that you’ve been avoiding the coven because of Hailey friggin’ Clarke? We’re not kids anymore. What is that hag going to do to you here of all places? She’s smart enough to know not to mess with a Barnes witch on our home turf.”

“This is her home turf now too—that witch just would marry the douchiest warlock in town. It’s like they were made for each other. Sometimes I think she married Jerome so that they could come back here and relive their glory days of tormenting me. And besides, your reasoning only holds if the witch in question has the power to defend herself. Pretty sure she won’t have any trouble picking on me the same way she did

back in school. I just don't want to deal with her right now...or ever."

"Sophia, you are not sixteen anymore. You are a full-grown witch with a successful business and more confidence than you know what to do with. Hailey Clarke is just a dark blimp in your past. Isn't it high time you moved on already? We're a long way from Redwood Academy," my sister groused, naming the private boarding school for witches and warlocks we used to go to in Salem. She made it sound as if I was being childish and making a mountain out of a molehill by holding onto a grudge from—and this is a quote I have heard from her and many of our peers and family members—"when we were young witchlings who didn't know any better."

Easy for her to say. Easy for everyone to say that when they didn't have to grow up with the shame of being born into a familial line that boasted some amazing witches and warlocks and be the only one not to possess even a speck of power. It was so easy for Piper to tell me to let the past be when she wasn't the one who was tormented for years at Redwood by our classmates for not being able to complete the simplest of spells. She didn't have professors looking their noses down at her or suffering the endless pranks and humiliations that I did. And at the helm of those bullying incidents were Hailey Clarke and a group of entitled, self-important warlocks.

It was thanks to those bumbling baboons that I ran in the opposite direction the minute one of our kind showed a romantic interest in me. They had soured me on warlocks for life. We witches may outnumber them ten to one, but they still strutted around as if they were the superior sorcerers. As if our place as witches was to be the wind beneath their wings. Their helpmeets. And in their eyes, I was less than a witch. In fact, I was lower on the totem pole than a human, deserving of all their scorn and none of their respect.

My looks and last name might make me a tantalizing prospect every now and then, but I was only good enough for a few nights in their beds. Never would they dare to

compromise their familial bloodlines by marrying me. The witching community was fanatical about bloodlines and keeping them pure so as not to allow the power of the family to wane through the years. In fact, I'd rather mate with any of the werewolves in town. Sure, they were horn dogs in perpetual heat, but when a werewolf loved you, when a werewolf mated you, nothing, not even your impure blood, would stop them from claiming you.

Piper had a grand time during our high school years. So much so that she somehow found the time to tackle normal nursing classes and collegiate level witching classes at the same time. Her time at Redwood was all rainbows and roses, so I could understand why she looked back on those years with fondness. What I couldn't wrap my head around was why my own twin sister was turning a blind eye to the horrible experiences I had and was super keen to insist that I was exaggerating about what a miserable time I had attending Redwood Academy.

"I'm not having this argument with you again, Piper. I just don't have the strength. It's not like I'll be much use during the solstice anyway other than watching from the sidelines as you all charge the ley lines and feel like the world's biggest loser. I am not coming and that's that."

"Sophia, you're being—"

"Look, I don't feel well right now. We'll talk about this some other time." Hopefully after the solstice passed. "Love you, sis. Bye." I cut off the call before she said another word and sat there for almost ten minutes, staring at the dark screen of my cell phone. This was why I'd chosen a university as far from Mystic Cove as possible. Why I'd stayed away from my home and coven for so long. I loved them all to bits, but being around them hurt. Watching them take for granted the power the goddess had blessed them with while I could barely conjure up a few sparks on the tips of my fingers grated on my nerves and left them raw and bleeding.

I hated the way I'd walk into a room or make an appearance at the coven circle and conversations would suddenly stop. How everyone treated me as if I were a fragile piece of pottery that would break if I were not coddled or handled right. The more my family, my coven, tried not to draw attention to my condition, the more it became blatantly obvious that I was defective and had no business being among them.

“No. No! No pity parties for you, madam. We are way past that. You know what you need, Soph?” I picked myself up from the couch, groaning as my joints creaked like the rocking chair out on my front porch. A hot soak was in order, and then I'd be spending the evening in my lab out back. I might lack innate power, but I was the best damn potion maker this side of the equator, and quite the cosmetic scientist.

CHAPTER 2

My “lab” was actually just a shed behind my cottage that I'd renovated into a workshop to be able to make all my homemade cosmetics. Next to it was a greenhouse my parents graciously had built for me—an extravagant housewarming gift when I told them I was coming back to Mystic Cove to stay. I grew everything in there, herbs, flowers, my own vegetables—it really brought down production costs when I was growing all the herbs I needed for tonics and potions. My business partners, Dawn and Destiny, also witches, had their own workshop and greenhouse at their place too. But we'd recently opened a boutique in town that was quite popular with both the locals and tourists.

The bath left me feeling marginally better, but my body still felt wonky, as if something was blocking my chakras. My world had tilted on its axis and I didn't know why. I debated bringing out the tarot cards, but I had a thing against reading my own future, especially when it felt like I had a swirl of negative energy surrounding me.

Or maybe it was the unbearable summer heat wave bearing down on us. You'd think

living in a town nestled between the sea and a snowcapped mountain we'd have it easy during the warmer months. Normally we did, but it felt hotter than Satan's toenails this year.

"Friggin' global warming," I muttered, glaring at the setting sun as I opened the door to my shed and letting out a sigh of relief as the cool air blasted my face. My sister had spelled the workroom to maintain cooler temperatures in the summer and remain warm and cozy during the fall and winter. A swirl of aromatic scents blanketed the workshop from the essential oils that I used for scented candles, face washes, face creams, bath salts and bombs, and an assortment of other cosmetics. One wall of the workshop consisted of shelves that spanned the entire length of the wall. One was filled with jars of dried and fresh herbs, tools, tonics, and potions. Another was dedicated to all the journals I'd collected since I discovered my love of potion brewing. Dozens upon dozens of recipes filled the pages, some of them passed down from my grandmother and mother.

Most of the recipes were of my own making, from healing tonics, tinctures, and tisanes, to frivolous potions like one to change your hair color without using hair dyes. There was one I'd concocted for a classmate who was failing the oral portion of Latin and Gaelic classes because she couldn't pronounce the words. It made her tongue loose and limber. Once you drank it, you'd be able to speak any language you wished to for the next half hour—including Klingon, Parseltongue, and Quenya. I'd made quite the killing off that potion back at Redwood whenever midterms and final exams were around the corner, and from a select few in the cosplaying community who wanted to authentically portray their Lord of the Rings and Star Trek characters. My personal favorite was the energy-boosting mixture I'd concocted. Its only drawback was that it tasted like a donkey's arse—not that I was an expert at what a donkey's arse tasted like.

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The other wall of my workshop was riddled with hooks for my pots and saucepans, more shelves, and I'd even built in a hearth, complete with a chimney and various sized cauldrons. There were three worktables, all cluttered with projects in various stages and sketchbooks for my new jewelry-making hobby. Mystic Cove was an artsy town. You couldn't throw a stone without hitting an artist, professional or otherwise, and I was no exception. I loved working with my hands and jumping from one hobby to the next. I'd tried my hand at pottery and sucked. Then I tried knitting, but after Gran made a scathing comment about the sweater I'd made for Piper's youngest kid, I'd given up on that. It looked like jewelry making was my calling, although so far, I'd only made pieces for myself.

Before I started on the candle order the mayor had placed, and the next batch for my store, I opened the windows, letting in the evening breeze from the forest. Crystals lined the window sill, as they did in most of the rooms in my cottage. Black tourmaline for protection, banishing, and security. Citrine for brightness, positivity, and clearing. Black onyx for blocking negativity while creating patience and determination. Everything I needed for a productive session. Connecting my phone to the wireless speaker I kept in there, I brought up my Adele playlist, pulled my raven black hair into a messy bun, donned my smock, and got to work.

I got so absorbed in the process, melting the wax and measuring out the amount of fragrant oils I wanted for each batch, that I hardly noticed when my tabby cat, Chairman Meow, strolled in and made himself comfortable in his kitty bed in the corner of the room. He gracefully cleaned himself while watching me work. I only broke out of my haze when my eyes felt the strain of working in limited light and I heard a wolf howl in the distance. My house was pretty close to where the Mystic Cove wolf community had their pack circle, which was kind of like our coven

circle—a clearing in the woods where they communed with whatever higher being they believed in, held sacred rituals and ceremonies, or just gathered to chill in their wolf forms away from prying eyes. More often than not, they loved running in the woods just for the fun of it and sometimes ran too close to the residential area. The more cheeky ones sometimes ventured all the way out to my workshop just to watch me work and terrorize Chairman Meow.

“Why didn’t you tell me it was so late already? Or don’t you want your dinner? I got that chicken-flavored kibble you love so much, but maybe you’d prefer to go hunting with the wolves,” I teased the cat and I swear he narrowed his eyes in warning. He got off his bed and trotted out the door, stopping on the narrow path leading up to the house when he saw that I wasn’t following and yowled at me. Chuckling at his bossiness, I quickly cleaned up and made sure that the batch I’d made tonight was setting right before switching on the outdoor lights. Blue sparks shot out of my hand—or maybe they shot out of the light switch—when I turned on the outside lights, sending an electrified bolt up my arm.

“Mother of—” I trailed off in a pained grunt, dropping my phone and clutching my hand close to my chest, feeling the muscles spasm erratically. Tears stung my eyes as I waited for the pain to subside. It felt like needles and pins on steroids. I must have been hunched down on the floor for about five minutes waiting for my right hand to regain its motor function. Chairman Meow came back to watch over me, purring like a truck and rubbing his furry self on me before I felt okay enough to go back into the house.

A quick examination of my hand and arm showed no external damage, so I opted out of going to the hospital. Tiny spasms still shook my hand, but if they persisted Tuesday morning, I’d see a doctor before heading over to The Book Coven.

CHAPTER 3

I woke up to a warm weight on my chest, a mouth full of cat fur, and Chairman Meow's little butt hole right in front of my eyes. The little devil had the nerve to complain when I pushed him off and he glared at me with his blue-green eyes.

"Don't give me that look. How about I sleep on your chest every night and you tell me how that feels?" A lazy flick of his tail and a wide-mouthed yawn showing off his teeth was my answer. He jumped nimbly from the bed and trotted off, presumably to the bathroom to do his business in his litter box.

I didn't need to show my face at The Book Coven until ten or eleven, which was the time Gran usually opened the store because she hated waking up early, unlike me, who was up with the sun. Which was why I found it concerning that not only did I sleep like the dead all of last night, but I missed my six o'clock alarm by two hours.

After giving Chairman Meow his breakfast, I grabbed my yoga mat and phone and went out on the back porch. The fresh and damp scent of the forest in the morning was better than any caffeine injection. I lifted my face to the morning light, basking in it and breathing in the crispy pine scent, soaking in the sound of nature. Birds chirped in the distance, their feathers rustling and settling on the tree branches, and I thought I heard the quiet hum of bees somewhere. Bees... Maybe I should take up beekeeping and make organic honey, I thought as I laid out my mat and brought up the yoga app I used when I didn't want to go to the gym.

My mind went down a rabbit hole as I executed my downward dogs and triangle poses—beekeeping sounded like a good idea from a business point of view. I could save costs on buying beeswax in bulk from suppliers, not to mention honey was a common ingredient in skincare products, and I could just bottle it up and sell it as a standalone product. Gwyneth Paltrow better watch out because I might just take her crown as the lifestyle guru. I scoffed at that thought, nearly face-planting on the floor, when Chairman Meow squeezed between my legs right as I was transitioning into a complicated twisty pose.

“Uh, fudge knuckles!” I cursed, hearing my pelvic bones pop. “Better stop before I hurt myself.” Next on my morning routine was a visit to my greenhouse to water my herbs and flowers and check on the progress of my newly planted ginger and garlic cuttings.

By ten o’clock, I was showered, had my protein shake, and packed up everything I would need while I minded The Book Coven for the day. Dressed in jean cut-off shorts, a sleeveless Iron Maiden t-shirt, and flip-flops was the most effort I was willing to put in for the day. Thank goddess my grandmother didn’t give a crap about appearances. Matter of fact, she was constantly changing her hair color every two days thanks to one of my potions. The only part of my outfit I actually put effort into was my jewelry—any chance to show off my creations—a chunky owl necklace with fake aquamarine gemstones for the eyes. I totally chose those particular stones out of vanity because they were the same shade of blue as my eyes. Most of my fingers were adorned with slim rings, and I had about five bracelets on my left hand. I never wore anything on my right because I had an awesome half sleeve tattoo from my wrist to just below my elbow.

“Alright, Chairman Meow, you’re in charge while I’m gone. Try not to destroy my cushions and the couch, please.” I gave him a little rub behind the ears and grabbed my laptop bag, sketchpad, and car keys.

The Book Coven was a thirty-minute drive from my house, in the middle of town on the opposite side of where Dawn, Destiny, and I had our boutique on the beachfront promenade. Gran ran an incredibly eclectic bookstore, and in an age when everything was going digital, her business was still booming.

Incense and my grandmother’s perfume lingered in the air, as did the sweet musk of older books and grimoires that were placed in the far back of the store. The shelves were arranged in a maze-like pattern, with small bean bags littered around for those who wanted to read a little before purchasing the books, and another seating area was

in front of the store by the large bay windows that faced the parking lot. The Book Coven carried all the popular genres from fantasy, sci-fi, romance, comic books, and a limited collection of manga, to the more niche genres like crime thrillers and the like. Our stationery was also a popular hit. School stuff and art supplies flew off the shelves ever since Landon Grayson expanded his art school and started hosting multiple exhibits for local artists at his gallery.

At the end of the maze were the grimoires, a collection of shadow books from witches and warlocks long dead, and other magical texts. Those shelves were warded to keep the mundane people from buying them and unwittingly hurting themselves and others from trying to cast a spell. That was the first place I went after unlocking the doors to see if there were any new books that had come in, something that called out to me. I ignored the grimoires and the slight pang of pain and envy in my heart because I had no need for a book of spells. But a Book of Shadows was different. A Book of Shadows was more like a witch's personal journal. A narrative of her spells and rituals and manifestations. All of those journals back at my workshop, those were all my shadow books—kind of. Mine mostly contained recipes for my potions and tonics and the details of failed rituals I'd performed in the past in an attempt to boost my meager power. Part of me kept hoping that somewhere hidden in a Book of Shadows, a witch had found a way to unlock a weak witch's power. A way to find what I knew was hidden deep inside of me. When nothing in particular called out to me, I went to the front desk.

Grandmother Beverly worked six, sometimes five days a week at the bookstore. Tuesday was her immutable day off, and seeing as I had flexible work hours and didn't need to be at the shop if either of the twins were there, she'd conscripted me into filling in for her on her day off. There was a sheet of paper on the counter next to the cash register with a list of instructions for me. Like the witch herself, Gran's handwriting was over the top and "loud," if that makes any sense. She wrote in big, bold, cursive letters, and her scrawls were all over the place even though she'd written her list on lined paper—in a glittery pen, no less!

I could almost hear her smoky voice as I read out everything she wanted me to do: follow up on book orders, unpack the new stash of books that had come in, call customers who'd requested special orders to come in and retrieve said orders, freshen up the place, water Walter the cactus and the flowers out front, and so on and so forth.

I stashed my bag behind the counter and got to work, wiping down the counter first and checking the cash register to make sure we had change for the day. I was hauling out the book trolley for the second-, third-, and sometimes fourth-hand books that went for a dollar or less out to the front by the exit when I spotted Lucy, Gran's part-timer, cross the street. She carried two Starbucks drinks in her hands, her skateboard clutched under an armpit, and wore a too-big helmet on her head that practically covered her eyes. She was lucky there were no cars cruising down Main Street right as she was crossing because I didn't think she could see where she was going—but then again, she was a wolf shifter. Great reflexes and all that.

"I know! I know! I'm late, but I got you your favorite, so you have to forgive me, right?" she rushed to say, giving me a cheesy and dimpled smile, her hand stretched out to offer me my favorite order from Starbucks—an iced pineapple matcha tea.

"Thanks, but you're only a few minutes late. Why do you look like you got dressed in the dark and rushed over here?" I asked, taking in her questionable outfit.

Like her helmet, the shirt she wore was too big for her, probably one of her three brothers' shirts. The Manning boys were all giants compared to Lucy's tiny and lithe dancer frame. She was at risk of being charged for indecent exposure with the way one side of the football shirt was slipping down her shoulder and showing off her neon green bra. I couldn't even tell if she was wearing shorts underneath the shirt, and she had on the most horrendous striped rainbow socks I'd ever seen.

"I kinda did. I woke up a few minutes before noon. I'm late by an entire hour." She

sighed, pushing back the helmet when I took my drink. Unfortunately for her, she'd used the arm she was clutching her skateboard under, so it fell to the floor. She reached down to stop it from rolling onto the ground, but her drink tipped over, splashing her gummy bear drink all over the sidewalk.

"Ugh! Why is everything so craptastic today? First, I wake up an hour late, my car engine's busted, I still haven't heard from—"

"Lucy! Lucy, snap out of it. You've got the wolf in your eyes, sweetheart. I need you to snap out of it. Now!" I yelled when her eyes went wolf amber, her emotions taking over. She bared her elongated teeth at me, chest heaving, and her claws were coming out. Lucy was only sixteen, at that awkward stage where she was too old to be wolfing out at the slightest emotional provocation, but too young and inexperienced to get overwhelming emotions under control and stop the beast from coming out inadvertently.

"Lucy, listen to me, you aren't late. It's only a few minutes after eleven; your watch must be off or something—" A low growl had me flinching away from her. Across the street, some people were eyeing us curiously, none of them locals.

While our existence was an open secret to the human residents of Mystic Cove, we were careful about revealing ourselves to the outside world. I couldn't have Lucy wolfing out in the middle of the street during tourist season. The last thing I needed was to be called into the mayor's office and face an inquisition from the council.

"Breathe, sweetie. You've been taking yoga and meditation classes at the gym, haven't you? Use all those breathing exercises Janice has been teaching you." I placed my matcha drink on the book trolley and cupped Lucy's face, forcing her to look at me. "C'mon, Lucy, do what I do, okay?" I breathed in slowly through my nose and held it while counting to five in my head before exhaling slowly through my mouth. We kept repeating that until the wolf retreated and Lucy's eyes went back to

their normal honey brown.

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“That’s a good girl. Now that you’ve calmed down, I want you to put your skateboard and bag in the shop and come clean this mess up and water the flowers.” She nodded somberly, the helmet falling over her eyes again. “Luce?” I called out before she disappeared into the shop. “If you want to talk about whatever is bothering you, I’ve got big ears.” I flicked the shell of my ear, earning a shaky smile from her.

We worked in silence for almost an hour, Lucy unpacking the new arrivals while I worked the counter, helping customers and placing calls to suppliers in search of special orders that had been placed by my grandmother. Every now and then, I would feel a phantom twinge on my right hand or feel like I was being zapped by tiny bolts of lightning, but there was nothing physically wrong with me, except lingering exhaustion from last night.

Today was one of the slower days. We’d had only two customers since I opened up shop. I was waving goodbye to Mrs. Abernathy after she’d picked up her monthly gardening magazine when Lucy sidled up to the counter and leaned on it. “It’s Bruce,” she started abruptly.

“What about Bruce?” I asked when she didn’t continue, never taking my eyes off the computer screen or letting my fingers stop typing out the order form I was filling up.

“I am not going to tell you anything while you’re distracted. Big ears or not, I need you to listen ‘cause I could really use your advice right now,” she pleaded. Stifling a sigh, I minimized the tab on the computer and gave her my full attention. I could already guess where this was going, and while I did tell her she could talk to me about anything, I should have specified that giving romance and love advice was not my forte. The longest my relationships lasted were a few weeks before I got bored or

weary and moved on. But this was sweet, adorable Lucy, whose eyes sparkled at the idea of working in a bookstore during the summer because there was nothing she loved more than being surrounded by books and getting a special discount for her favorite book series.

“Hit me,” I told her.

“I don’t know what’s up with him, he’s been all over the place since summer vacation started.” She groaned, playing with the ends of her purple-tipped dark hair. “He’s been ignoring me for weeks now, flaking out on all the plans we made for the summer just because Savannah finally decided he’s worth her time. Seriously! I could show you all the text message threads of him canceling on me last minute just so he can stick his tongue down her stupid mouth and god knows what else!” Lucy huffed in frustration but failed in hiding the green monster peeking out during her rant.

She and Bruce had been joined at the hip since they were in middle school, and my grandmother, who fancied herself the best matchmaker in the world, had put it into Lucy’s head that the two of them were fated mates. I didn’t dispute the fact that such a thing existed, but I felt like she shouldn’t have said that to a sixteen-year-old who’d barely entered the dating world or come into her own sexuality yet. Lucy had been fixated on this entire fated mates issue since Gran told her she and Bruce were “It” for each other and pushing for her best friend to move past their friendship and into something more.

“I mean, I know he was sending me a clear message. I know I’ve been acting crazy the last couple of months and pushing into something he wasn’t ready for.”

“Oh, really, I haven’t noticed at all.” I smirked at her, recalling all her numerous failed attempts to seduce Bruce.

She tossed a dusting rag she’d been holding in my face. “Oh, shut up, you. As if you

haven't been through a boy crazy phase before."

"Well, most, if not all, the warlocks I went to school with were massive jerks, so..." I shrugged. "Unless simping over Harry Styles counts."

"Anyway, I finally gave him the space he so desperately begged for. And then after weeks of avoiding me like I had the bubonic plague, I finally saw him at a beach party last night—"

"A party on a Monday night?" I cut in again. Lucy gave me a narrow glare that had me raising my hands in surrender. "It's summer vacation, Snow White. What else are we going to do with our weeknights? Anyway, I met this really cute guy, an out-of-towner renting one of the beach houses for the summer. College guy, uber-rich, super handsome... I'm talking Captain America levels of handsome here, Sophia," she tells me. And like the boring adult she claims I am, I point out that she's too young to be partying with college boys, much less flirting with them. If her brothers found out, they'd lock her up for life and proceed to beat said boy to a pulp. When I started talking about how those boys could have drugged her or something, she rolled her eyes and waved my concerns off.

"I'm a wolf. I can smell date rape drugs in my drink from a mile away. Not that I was drinking any booze. I am sixteen after all," she backtracked quickly, as if I would believe any of that. "Where was I? Oh, yeah. So Jeremy and I—that's the Chris Evans look-alike—we were flirting like crazy and I could tell that we were about to move into smooching territory. He took me to his room so that we could get away from the crowd, and I swear he was being a perfect gentleman, so you can get that disgusted look off your face right now." She circled her finger around my face. Still keeping silent, I ironed out my expression and kept a blank but pleasantly interested expression.

"You'll never believe who burst into Jeremy's room while the two of us were quietly

chilling. Bruce freaking Anderson, acting all alpha male and going off at Jeremy for no reason at all. I have never been more embarrassed in my life. He dragged me out of there for everyone to see! And then he has the audacity to be mad at me for flirting with another guy when he's the one who's been running after stick legs Savannah with his tongue dragging on the ground. Can you believe him?"

"The nerve!" I mock gasped and went back to filling out the order form.

Lucy propped her hands on her hips and glowered at me. "What is with the dry reaction? Did you not hear a word I said? Bruce basically acted as if I belonged to him in front of a guy I was really starting to like. What right does he have to get angry when I decide I want to see other people when he's basically been doing the same thing?"

"He has none at all. What he did was pretty rude, but let's not pretend that you and this Jeremy guy were going to be anything more than a hookup. And, hey, your plan worked. Flirting with an older and hotter guy helped Bruce get his head out of his butt, right?" I arched my brows, smirking when she flushed deep red.

"Plan? What plan—"

"I'm going to stop you right there. You don't party, Luce. You abhor any form of social gatherings, especially when there's a bunch of drunk teens involved. That's more Savannah's thing, and you knew she was going to be at that beach party, and you knew that Bruce was going to be with her. You went there to make him jealous, and it worked. So why are you so bent out of shape?"

I watched the teen wilt before my eyes, her bottom lip in a petulant pout. "You're right. Bruce stopped acting like an idiot. But the fight we had last night, the things we said to each other were pretty horrible. And I'm so angry at him for everything he's put me through. How do I get past that?"

“Easy peasy. Communication, communication, and more communication. Talk to each other and air out your feelings like mature wolves instead of resorting to childish tactics. He’s your mate, right?” She nodded. “That means you don’t give up on each other so easily. You fight for each other and you fight for your relationship. Being mates doesn’t mean you automatically fall head over heels for each other. You need to work on it like every other couple. With that said, there are more boxes in the storeroom that need packing up. Now git.” I flicked my head in the direction of the storeroom.

CHAPTER 4

I dismissed Lucy around two o'clock, seeing as how she was distracted and there was nothing much to do anyway. I was seated cross-legged on the couch, staring out the window as cars whizzed by and pedestrians walked up and down the street, tapping my pencil on the half-done sketch of a bohemian-style headpiece design that had been dancing around in my head. Scraps of balled-up paper littered the coffee table from all the scrapped ideas. I wasn’t feeling it today. Not since I got a text from Piper, another attempt at convincing me to attend the solstice ritual.

I felt him before he even walked through the door. The back of my neck prickled, a sixth-sense warning I’d learned never to ignore. So when he pushed open the door to the shop, my eyes were already zeroed in on him. A warlock, no doubt about it. And a powerful one at that, the kind whose magic seeped off him in waves. Not because he didn’t know how to reel it back, but because he was so powerful there was no way to hide it. Something inside me, something dormant, started to stir awake. It reminded me of the way Chairman Meow would wake from his naps without any provocation. Slow, sluggish, and watchful. Waiting.

Unconsciously, my hand went to my sleeve tattoo. It was actually a collection of sigils, runes, and sacred geometry done for my protection in case another witch or warlock tried to attack me with magic. They weren’t foolproof, of course, but I slept

better at night knowing that no one would ever get the jump on me again, especially not a warlock. I had another tattoo on my sternum depicting the three phases of the moon associated with the triple goddess.

The wind chimes above the door rang as he closed it behind him and shot a megawatt smile my way. I don't know what annoyed me more—that he was a warlock and obviously not from around here, or that he was so bloody gorgeous.

“Can I help you?” I scowled, failing to hide my immediate dislike of him from my voice and expression. His smile dropped, brows dipping in a frown at my cold welcome. I had to grit my teeth to stop from snapping at him when I saw the predatory gleam in his eyes, taking me in from head to toe when I stood up, snagging on the length of my legs and his lips curling up in a smirk I was all too familiar with.

Perhaps I was more annoyed at myself because I felt something in me respond in kind. My heart kicked against my ribs and my stomach fluttered.

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He was tall, maybe around the six-three or six-four mark, with the body and build of a soldier. He had inky black hair, a shade or two darker than mine, cropped short on the sides and left longer on the top. His hair was a disheveled mess, as if he'd been running his fingers through it constantly. He filled up his distressed Diesel jeans like Henry Cavil in his Witcher leather pants. I actually had to gulp back the saliva pooling in my mouth before I made a fool of myself and drooled right there and then. The warlock cleared his throat in an exaggerated cough, his blue-green eyes—startling me in their likeness to Chairman Meow's—sparkled with amusement. There were three alluring beauty spots right below his left eye, lining up in a curved line like a constellation. My fingers itched so badly with the need to touch them that I had to clench my hands into tight fists to stop myself from doing something so irrational.

My face heated up at being caught casually checking him out, the pit of my stomach getting warmer and bubbling up with anticipation.

“The name's Jacob—Jacob Buchanan. I'm here to collect my great-great-grandfather's Book of Shadows. You called to tell me you'd managed to locate it,” he explained when I cocked my head in confusion. “You are Beverly Barnes, aren't you? I admit you're nothing like I expected. From what my colleague told me about you, I thought you'd be...well, older. And pardon me for asking, but you are a witch, right?”

And here it comes, I thought bitterly. I tipped my chin up in a challenging gesture and folded my arms across my chest. “Yes, I am. A witch, that is, not Beverley, that's my grandmother. Why do you ask?”

Jacob scrubbed a hand across his stubbled jaw, the grooved V between his eyes getting deeper. “Well, it’s...it’s just that you don’t feel much like a witch. I can barely feel your power.” He laughed nervously and awkwardly trailed off when he noticed my nostrils flaring and the deep breath I took to calm myself down. “May I have your name then, Miss Barnes, or is it Mrs.?”

“You can call me Sophia.” With that, I turned my back on him and went behind the counter to search for his Book of Shadows. His low chuckle followed me, its phantom fingers curling around me and taunting me to take a peek back at him.

“You’ve been brushing up on your faerie etiquette, I see. But I assure you, my lady, I am not of the fae courts, nor do I have any allegiance to the great old one. You do not have to worry about my intentions.” His footsteps were slow and measured as he came to stand in front of the counter and rooted through the pile of book orders that were waiting to be picked up by their owners.

“There’s always something to be worried about with your kind,” I called up from where I was crouched and almost fell flat on my butt when his head popped up over the counter.

He smirked. “What do you mean ‘my kind’?”

“Warlocks. Your book’s not here. I’ll have to search for it in the back. You mind hanging out here for a bit while I go have a look?”

“What do you have against warlocks?” Jacob asked instead of answering, grabbing me by the wrist before I could walk away. The look in his eyes reminded me of the one an old friend of mine used to get whenever there was a problem she couldn’t wait to get her hands on and unravel piece by piece. Of course, the only problems she cared about were complicated mathematical equations, the kind where numbers were barely involved and everything was x’s and y’s and a couple of Greek letters. Reina

was a brilliant mathematician and physicist, and the last time we talked, she was on track to become an associate professor at NYU.

Snatching my hand back, I asked him to have a seat on one of the couches while I went in search of his stupid book. The sooner I found it, the sooner he'd be out of my hair and this feeling of being tipped off my equilibrium would go away. I searched everywhere for the Book Shadows in the storeroom. I'd seen it listed in the store's database and saw the description listed under the name Tiberius Buchanan. But there were no sheepskin leather-bound journals with his name embossed on them. Nor were there any journals lying around bearing the mark of Cernuous, the horned god, anywhere. I looked in Gran's closet-sized office that she barely used. Her desk was empty save for a pad of sticky notes and a Victorian-style handheld mirror. I didn't find anything in her desk drawers either, or the filing cabinet.

"Seriously, Gran, if you knew the guy was coming in today you could have at least placed the journal with the rest," I huffed, twirling the ring on my thumb around with my finger, my eyes flicking around the small office for any hint of the book.

Jacob was nowhere to be seen when I stepped back into the main store, but his messenger bag was lying on the couch. A few teen boys I recognized were gathered around the comic book section. "Hey, have you guys seen a tall, dark-haired guy around here somewhere?" I called out. They all shook their heads and I was about to go look for him outside when he came back around, two grimoires and a Book of Shadows in hand.

"You guys have quite the collection back there. I felt like a kid in a candy store, spoiled for choice. It was tough call, picking which books to buy," he gushed, eyes gleaming and a light flush spreading across his defined cheekbones.

"Uh-huh. Look, I couldn't find your grandfather's Book of Shadows—"

“Great-great-grandfather actually. Tiberius Buchanan. Ever heard of him? I’m told he was quite the notorious warlock back in his day,” Jacob started to say, and I could tell he was about to go on a tirade, so I nipped it in the bud.

“Yeah, whatever. I’m going to call my grandmother and ask her about it. I just wanted to let you know what's going on. You can go back to your candyland or whatever while I place the call.”

“So, is it warlocks in general you don’t like? Or is this some kind of special welcome just for me?”

“You’re a smart guy, I’m sure you can figure it out,” I replied, dialing Gran’s number on the store’s landline. Instead of going back to explore the bevy of magical texts at his disposal, Jacob remained where he was, the two of us staring awkwardly at each other while her phone rang and rang and rang until her voicemail picked up. I tried a second time and still no answer. “Crap, she must be preparing for the solstice event. I’ll swing by her place tonight and ask her about it. You don’t mind coming back tomorrow, do you?”

“I don’t know. I was hoping to grab the book and head back to Boston. Besides, if the rest of the town is as welcoming as you, I shudder to think what the room service is like in the hotel I spotted on the drive up here.” He tried his charming smile on me again. I had to give the guy some credit, he did not wither away from my glare as easily as other people did when they were being stupid.

“The Scarlet Season has offered top-notch hospitable service for almost three generations. They are head and shoulders above any of the fancy hotels out there. You can check the reviews online if you like,” I deadpanned. Jacob sighed, running a hand through his hair. Some of the inky strands poked out at odd angles like he’d just rolled out of bed.

“Can’t you just give me Beverley’s home address and I’ll pick up the book for myself?”

“No way in hell I’m giving out Gran’s address to a stranger. Didn’t your mother teach you that good things come to those who wait? And it’s not like you’ll make it to Boston in a few hours. Why not rest, pick up your book in the morning, and then you can be on your merry way?”

“What makes you think I don’t have a traveling orb or a teleportation spell in my arsenal? I could be back in Boston in a tick and sleeping in my own bed by tonight. Heaven knows I’ve had enough of hotel rooms to last me a lifetime.”

“Dude, you literally just said you have to drive back to Boston. Go book a room at the hotel just in case. I’ll keep trying to reach my grandmother and if I can’t, I’ll see her tonight and tell her that you stopped by.” The bottom of my left eye twitched as we had a stare off in the middle of the store, Jacob’s blue-green eyes flickering between mine as if he was trying to get a read on me.

This would have been the part where I snapped at him and threatened to forcibly throw him out. Most of the time, I was able to hide my intense dislike for warlocks and treat them with some modicum of civility. But Jacob Buchanan made my skin itch with his mere presence. Instead of hurrying him along and breaking the stare-off, I engaged him in this childish game, neither one of us daring to blink first.

Curiosity morphed into quiet laughter, reflected in his eyes and the appearance of light laugh lines around his mouth. Who knows how long we would have been staring at each other like idiots if the group of boys didn’t burst through the bubble we’d enveloped ourselves in.

“So, can we pay for this or...” one of them asked after clearing his throat rather loudly and holding out the ninety-first and ninety-second volumes of One Piece, a

Japanese manga. I blinked at them in confusion, feeling lost for a moment and wondering what they were talking about until the haze wrapped around my brain cleared out.

“Sure,” I chirped with false cheer and gestured for Jacob to move out of the way. “Do you mind? I have paying customers to attend to.”

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“I’m a paying customer too. Or do I get to keep these for free, you know, as an apology for making me come all the way here for nothing?” He tapped an index finger on the stack of magic texts he was holding. And there was that pesky eye twitch again.

“I’ll be with you boys in a sec.” I grabbed Jacob’s books and ran them through the scanner, glaring at him the whole time, a smile frozen on my face for the sake of the other customers in the store. It was more of a grimace, actually, and the infuriating warlock had the nerve to chuckle under his breath.

“You okay there, sweetheart? You look like you’re about to burst a vein.”

I told him the total, which came close to three hundred dollars. Without batting an eye, he reached for his back pocket and handed me a credit card from his wallet. “If looks could kill I would have died a thousand times over, wouldn’t I? And I still don’t know what I’ve done to earn such scorn when we only met, what, ten...fifteen minutes ago? And here I thought my luck had turned around when I walked in and saw you standing there.” He paused, waiting for me to chip in. I quietly went about swiping his card and packaging his stuff in a paper bag.

“Thank you for your patronage. I’ll have my grandmother call you as soon as possible. Boys, you can hand those over now.” Despite my dismissive tone, Jacob lingered a moment longer, looking like there was more he wanted to say. Changing his mind, he gave me a brusque nod and made his way out of the store before changing it again and stalking back toward the counter.

“You know what, never mind.” He changed his mind again and walked out without a

backward glance.

The rest of the day seemed to pass by at a snail's pace, all my calls to my grandmother's cell phone and landline going unanswered. I even called my mom just in case they were both preparing for the solstice celebrations together, but she told me she hadn't heard from her all day.

"You know how she is. She's probably in the city treating herself to a shopping spree or off in the woods somewhere doing whatever she does up there," Mom said flippantly before cutting the call off with a hasty apology when something crashed in the background. She was babysitting Piper's girls for the day and it sounded like she had her hands full. One of my grandmother's closest friends, Catherine Hawthorne, stopped by the store and she too claimed not to know where she was. But I took her words with a grain of salt because there was a look on her face I did not trust.

CHAPTER 5

Five minutes after closing up shop, the wily crone finally decided to call back on my cellphone right as I made my way to where I had my car parked a block over.

"I've been trying to reach you all day! Where have you been?" I exploded before she could get a word in.

"Take a breath and let's try that again, 'kay? Here we go. Hello, darling, how are you today? I noticed all the missed calls. I hope you didn't burn my shop down," she trilled nonchalantly. "This is the part where you tell me what it is you need and do hurry—there's a pitcher of margaritas that won't drink itself."

I pinched the bridge of my nose to stop myself from going off at her. My grandmother's free-spirited nature was something we both had in common, but I wasn't in the mood for her frivolity right now. "Gran, where are you right now? You

know what, don't answer that. I had a warlock by the name of Jacob Buchanan come into the store today looking to collect his great-great-grandfather's Book of Shadows. I couldn't find it anywhere in the shop, so I told him you'd give him a call."

"Oh my, I'd quite forgotten about that. I meant to call you this morning and tell you about it. Maybe I've had one too many margaritas. Last time I attend a garden party hosted by vampires. These bloodsuckers sure can pack away the booze."

"I already checked your desk drawers, all of them, and there was no Book of Shadows," I replied, trying to stay on topic as I tossed my bag into the backseat of my Jeep Renegade and hung my free hand on the top of the open door.

"Then you must have had blinders on because that's where I left it."

"Or maybe that's your margarita brain talking."

"I assure you, the Book of Shadows is right where I said it is. Now get your sweet self into my office and get it for me. You have Mr. Buchanan's contact details, right? Won't you be a dear and deliver it to him for me?" The question was barely past her lips and I was already shaking my head, my anxiety picking up speed at the thought of seeing him again.

"Uh-uh, no way. If the book's where you say it is, you can just hand it over to him yourself. I played my part and let you know that he was looking for you." There was a loaded silence on the other side of the line. I could almost hear the gears in Gran's brain spinning. She was the only person who knew just how far my aversion to—and maybe even fear of—warlocks went. She was the only one I ever trusted enough to tell her what those monsters at Redwood did to me. The only one I told about the insidious cruelty hidden behind the charming smiles and well-pressed uniforms.

"Very well. How's about this, grab the Book of Shadows from my desk and meet at

The Eat for dinner? An hour from now should give me ample time to freshen up and sober up. I feel like I haven't seen you in ages."

I chose not to mention that we just had a family dinner at her house last Saturday, and that I made a regular stop by The Book Coven every few days either on my way to or from the boutique. "What about your vampire garden party?"

"Pfft, all they have here is booze, blood, and rabbit food. I need to get something greasy in me if I want to be useful at the ceremony tomorrow evening and wake up early to open the shop as well. What do you say?"

"Okay, fine." I slammed the car door shut and made my way back to the shop. If that book was not in the drawer—and I knew that it hadn't been when I searched for it earlier—I was going to switch her hair dye potion for a Medusa tonic. A potion that would morph the thick waves she was so proud of into a nest of snakes. And unlike Medusa's snakes who adored her, these cold-blooded little monsters would bite.

"And for goodness sake, don't show up in your flip-flops. Get a little dressy. Let's make a night of it," she told me as I made my way back to the store.

That right there should have triggered the warning bells. I should have heard that tell-tale tone in her voice. I should have remembered that I was not only dealing with my grandmother, but Beverley Barnes: formidable witch and matchmaker extraordinaire. But I was too busy grumbling under my breath at having to walk a block back to the store and was shocked to find that Tiberius Buchanan's Book of Shadows was indeed in the top drawer, sitting right there in the same desk drawer I'd sifted through earlier that afternoon, thick and bound in sheepskin and remarkably well preserved despite its age.

Unable to help myself, I tried to pry open the copper clasp, only for the book to lash out and strike me with raw magical energy. One second, I had the book in my hands,

and the next moment, I was thrown a few feet back and crashed against the filing cabinet. I must have passed out for a few seconds because then I was blinking awake, my head pounding from where it bumped against the corner of the cabinet. A glance at the time on my phone showed that I'd only been out cold for a brief moment, less than three minutes.

Never in my life had I ever come across a sentient book. There were rumors that some of the restricted texts in the library at Redwood had minds of their own, but this was the first time I'd seen such a thing. Of course, I wasn't entirely sure. The blast that knocked me out could have just been a protection spell cast by the owner to keep curious eyes from reading through the secrets that filled up its pages. Most witches and warlocks tended to cast such spells on their Book of Shadows. But I got a distinct "Don't touch me. Don't open me. I will royally mess you up if you try" vibe from dear old Tiberius's journal.

Hesitant to touch it with my bare hands, I went out to the store and grabbed one of the gift bags and wrapped the book up in decorative tissue paper before depositing it in the bag.

CHAPTER 6

I was ten minutes late for dinner. Right before I was about to take a shower, the mayor called me in a panic, wanting to cancel his order because he didn't think a gift bag of homemade cosmetics was an appropriate gift for a bunch of men. Men who, the mayor explained, could afford the best products money could buy and not something made by a nobody from a nowhere small town.

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I'd tried not to be annoyed by the insult given that he appeared to be under a lot of pressure, so I reassured him that even men liked to use skincare products. And even if they didn't want to use them, they could just pass them on to their wives or girlfriends. Men tend to like giving women gifts they don't have to shop for themselves.

I'd never heard the poor man sound like he was at his wit's end before. It made me wonder who these investors were. It wasn't like Mystic Cove was hurting for money. The town boasted top-tier mountain and beach resorts and a booming tourism industry both in summer and winter.

After rushing through my shower and watering my plants in the greenhouse, I raced back into town. Even though Gran had asked me to dress up, I threw on a tie-dyed strapless mini dress, gladiator sandals, kept the make-up to a minimum, and called it a day.

The Eat was packed by the time I got there. There wasn't a single empty stool at the bar, and Rachel, the owner, was whipping up drinks at remarkable speed while keeping up her banter with a group of frat boys. I wondered if one of them was the boy Lucy was partying with last night. Heading over to the bar to get my drink order in before I searched out Gran, I placed the bag with the cursed book in it on the bar with my purse and waited for Rachel to finish up with the frat boys or for her assistant bartender to stop flirting with the blonde jailbait giving him the heart eyes and do his job.

I struggled to pick my grandmother out from the crowd—a first, as she was always the one with the bright pastel-colored hair and tinkling laughter that cut above even

the loudest of crowds. I was so focused on looking for her that my gaze skated right over Jacob's clean-shaven face, but he spotted me. A mischievous smile curled across his stupidly handsome face, followed by a wink, and I knew I'd been played.

"Wow-wee! He's a handsome fella. Friend of yours?" Rachel popped up from nowhere. Well, not exactly nowhere. I just hadn't heard her sneak up on me. Last I saw her she was pouring vodka shots for the Ken look-alikes across the counter.

"Heck no. I was supposed to be meeting my grandmother," I groaned, burying my face in my hands and debating whether I should just leave the journal with Rachel and ask her to take it to him.

"I see," Rachel laughed. And so did I. No one knew how my grandmother's matchmaking talent worked, but she was rarely wrong. I'd asked her once and she told me it was just a "knowing" within her that she got after meeting two people she sensed were made for each other. "I was wondering when you'd get caught in one of her traps. This should be interesting."

"There is no 'this.' I just came to drop off his book. Do me a favor and take this to him. I'm gonna bounce." I pushed the gift bag toward her.

"Too late. Tall, dark, and delicious is already making his way over here, and the man looks ready to devour you whole," Rachel snickered.

"Well, well, well. I didn't expect to see you again after you tried to glare me to death earlier today, Miss Sophia Barnes. Where's your grandmother? We were supposed to have dinner." He stood beside me, his gaze flickering to the paper bag and then back to me. This close, I got a better look at his extraordinary eyes—and the color was much too unique to be classified simply as blue-green. The swirl around the pupils was a bright sea-glass green that speared outward before morphing into a turquoise color with flecks of hazel, ending with an outer ring of deep blue. Ocean eyes. A

rather apt comparison because as calm they appeared on the surface, there was a whole lot more going on beneath their depths. As intoxicating as his eyes were, it was the three beauty spots that I couldn't look away from. They had a bewitching effect that reminded me of an old Irish folktale about Diarmuid Ua Duibhne, who'd been cursed with a love spot so that any woman who saw it instantly fell for him.

"That's what I'd like to know. I was supposed to meet her for dinner tonight and give her this." I picked up the Book of Shadows and handed it to Jacob, glad to be rid of it and the low hum of dark power it had been radiating.

Jacob flinched, the movement so quick and imperceptible that I would have missed it had I not been watching him closely. His olive skin went white, his eyebrows lowering in an intimidating scowl as he pushed the wads of tissue aside to get a peek at the journal. "Wow, it sure packs a punch. The spells written in here must be something else," he murmured, taking the book out of the bag and turning it this way and that, inspecting the cover. Like me, he opted to keep the barrier of the decorative tissue paper between him and the sheepskin leather. It felt like if you touched it directly, you'd get infected by the hypnotic dark power—or in my case, get blasted halfway across the room. "So, I'm guessing Beverley won't be showing up, then?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Is that it, then? Your great-great-grandfather's Book of Shadows? Aren't you going to open it and check for...I don't know, something?"

"It does say Tiberius Buchanan on the cover, and I trust that neither you nor your grandmother would try to swindle me. Besides, I don't think I should open it in the middle of a crowded restaurant. I can smell the black magic oozing from between the pages."

"In that case, my job here is done. Have a wonderful night, Mr. Buchanan." I turned to grab my purse and say goodbye to Rachel, but I ran into a wall of muscle. Jacob's hands reached out to grab me by the waist when I swayed from the impact. A small

gasp escaped me at the feel of his warm hands, so large they spanned almost the entire length of my waist. The heat of his touch burned through the cotton material of my dress, each finger a brand on my skin that set my blood on fire. I stepped away from his hold before I did something stupid like throw my arms around his shoulders, get on my tiptoes, and kiss him on that lush, pink mouth of his.

“What’s the hurry, love? Since we’re both here, why don’t we go ahead and have that dinner? That’s what you came for, right? It’d be a waste for you to drive all the way here and leave with an empty stomach.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’d rather not stay.” I tried to sidestep him, but Jacob moved in tandem with me. I moved to the left, he was there. I tried to pass him on the right, he was already there, and his childish behavior was garnering a lot of attention. It was only a matter of time before word got out that this was one of Gran’s infamous matchmaking blind dates. For someone who hated having their private life blasted across the town grapevine, Rachel could gossip with the best of them, and around here word spread faster than wildfire. The last thing I wanted was to have an audience watching my every move and placing their bets on whether this would be the one time when my grandmother was wrong. And they’d be right because I couldn’t see myself ever giving Jacob Buchanan a chance.

“Please, Sophia, you’re the only person I know around here—sort of. I’ve been on the road by myself for so long, searching for this blasted Book of Shadows. Don’t make me spend another night by myself ordering a meal from the hotel room service menu. I could really use the company. You don’t even have to pretend you like me, just...just keep me company for an hour or two and then I’ll be out of your hair. Please?”

CHAPTER 7

The heartfelt emotion in his voice caught me off-guard, as did the hint of

vulnerability in his eyes, and I must admit that I found myself getting curious about his great-great-grandfather's Book of Shadows. It sounded like there was quite a story behind it if he'd gone to such great lengths to find it. And if I was being honest with myself—and mind you, I wasn't all that ready to admit to myself wholeheartedly either—but more than the journal, it was the man himself who intrigued me more. I was not yet ready to part ways with that something inside me that had woken from its long slumber when he walked into The Book Coven.

A velvety smooth voice crooned in my ear to stay, to find out what it was about this man that aroused feelings of such disquiet and intrigue within me. The more rational part of my brain urged me to run and never look back.

Reluctantly, I gestured for Jacob to lead the way back to his table before it got snatched up and was rewarded with a genuine smile, not the flirty smirks he'd been dishing out ever since we met. Like a gentleman, he helped me into my seat. I was thankful that our table was in the far back, and that I had my back turned toward all the prying eyes. It made me feel less self-conscious.

"I feel like I should point out that even if I had said no, you would not have been hurting for company if you really wanted it. I've spotted no less than five women eyeing you since I came in here," I told him, tucking my seat under the table and helping myself to one of the menu cards placed in the cute little holder at the center of the table. Jacob chuckled, the sound intimate, low and smoky and hitting all the right buttons as my skin pebbled in goosebumps, imagining what that laugh would sound like under the cover of darkness as we engaged in more pleasurable activities.

Unbidden, images cascaded through my head of a shirtless Jacob pinning me to my mattress, a wicked gleam in his eyes as he did things to me that I'd only ever read about in steamy romance novels. I was no innocent, having slept with my fair share of men since I was eighteen—humans, shifters (wolf and bear), and even an old-as-dirt vampire. I'd walked away from each of those encounters satisfied and satiated,

but never had the overwhelming urge to repeat them since I'd never experienced those earth-shattering quakes and cataclysmic eruptions the romance novels are always talking about. As to why I thought that Jacob could make me feel any of those things that were just flowery words used to describe really intense pleasure... Well, let's just forget I ever had that thought, shall we?

"If I were looking to hook up, maybe I would have entertained the offers I see in their eyes, but I'm not looking for that kind of companionship tonight. Not to mention..." He cut himself off abruptly, his eyes flickering down to his lap before looking back up at me again, a sheepish expression on his face and cleared his throat. "Anyway, what do you feel like having tonight?" he asked just as Rachel herself came up to take our orders.

"Since when do you step out from behind the bar?" I asked her, not even trying to disguise the suspicion in my voice. I was onto her. Not even that feigned guileless look on her face could disguise her motives.

"It's a busy night and one of my waitresses came down with food poisoning. Gotta cover her section," she chirped. I swiveled, turning the upper half of my body to get a look at the bar, and wouldn't you know it? Lauren, the waitress I knew was supposed to be catering to our table, was busy mixing up cocktails at the bar. Rachel followed my line of sight and arched her brows in a challenge, daring me to call her out on her obvious fib. She was spying on my non-date and gathering intel to slip to the busybodies of Mystic Cove. She knew that would draw Jacob's curiosity, and I did not want anyone telling him about my grandmother's matchmaking tendencies. Rachel, myself, and our tiny circle of friends had been talking about having a girl's night out soon, and I knew that the warlock seated across from me would be a hot topic.

"So, what'll you lovely people be having? If you have trouble deciding, I recommend the chef's special. Greek-style pork spareribs." She then rattled off a list of side

dishes to pair up with the ribs, each more appetizing than the last. Jacob and I both decided to go with her recommendation and he chose a side of baked sweet potato fries and I went with a BLT pasta salad. We also put in our drink orders, and with Rachel gone to get them, our buffer was gone.

“Do I make you nervous, Sophia?” he asked, after silently observing me and making squirm in my seat. My back was starting to hurt from how rigidly I held myself.

“What makes you say that?”

Instead of answering my question, he flicked his eyes in the direction of my fingers tapping away on the table, and he couldn't see it from where he was seated, but I bet he knew one of my legs was bouncing up and down as well. Shifting in my seat once more, I consciously stopped fidgeting and searched for something, anything, to say and drew a blank. A part of me was waiting for Jacob to show his true self, the cruel and cutting arrogance and disregard for everyone else that all warlocks seemed to possess. I couldn't relax in his presence because I was on the lookout, waiting for him to do something that would give me an excuse to bolt out the door.

“So, Miss Sophia Barnes, you said you were just filling in for your grandmother at the bookstore today. What is it you do when you're not being a doting and helpful granddaughter?”

That was a safe topic. As long as we steered clear of talk about magic and anything related to it, we'd be fine. “I run a cosmetics boutique down at the beachfront. Co-run actually. It's called Midas Touch and I have two business partners. The three of us make our products from home. Soaps, lotions, face washes, and the like. We also sell trinkets and a bunch of souvenir-ish stuff as well.” I'd meant to play it cool, but every time I talked about our boutique, an enormous sense of pride swelled within my chest at how far the Rhodes twins and I had come. From selling our products out of the twins' garage and online to saving up enough capital to lease a prime spot at the beachfront promenade and expanding our client base. Naturally, I didn't mention to him that we sold potions and charms for those in the know. The potions were, of course, mixed by moi, and the twins blessed the charms—we did sell those to the mundane folk sometimes. Charms we could disguise as meaningless trinkets, and

even though the greater population thought of our existence as a paranormal community was the stuff of fiction, they still liked to believe in the idea of magic charms that brought them luck and protection. With potions, there was no way of explaining them without exposing ourselves and bringing the wrath of the Elder Council down upon us.

“That sounds interesting...and a bit tiring, to be honest. I’m guessing the location of the store means that you have a steady rotation of customers. How do you keep up with the supply?”

“A lot of late nights and caffeine,” I replied blithely. Rachel came back with our drinks, a pitcher of water, and let us know the food would be out in a few minutes before winking at me and sauntering on to the next table. Jacob waited until she was gone before speaking.

“And I’m sure a dash of magic goes a long way. Don’t be shy to admit it. I’m always telling my students not to rely on their magic, but whenever I fall behind on grading papers or just plain feel lazy, I have no qualms about enchanting a few pens to work by themselves,” he mused with a fond smile on his face.

Bringing the straw of my frozen margarita up to my mouth, I asked, “You’re a teacher?”

“A professor. At both Redwood Academy and Redwood College,” he announced proudly, only for his smile to be wiped off his face a second later when I spewed the drink all over our table. Shocked by this revelation, my drink had gone down the wrong pipe, setting my lungs on fire and setting off a chain of hacking coughs as I tried to ease the suffocating pain irritating my lungs.

“Redwood?” I croaked, the name tasting like ash on my tongue. “You’re a professor at Redwood Academy?”

“Yeah,” Jacob answered slowly, getting up to pour me a glass of water. He grabbed a wad of napkins from the table next to us and wiped down the mess I’d made. I should have apologized, but my mind was still reeling that this man, this warlock, worked at the one place I detested more than anything. Ninety percent of my traumatic childhood memories were linked to the long and damp halls of the academy, characterized by the gloomy baroque architecture. To this day, I could not look at saltpeter without gagging, remembering how Jerome Clarke and his band of sycophants cornered me in one of the labs and stuffed the powder down my throat. Every time I caught sight of one of the kids wearing a school uniform, I felt sick, even if it didn’t resemble the one for Redwood. I made sure the nightlight was on whenever I went to sleep because I feared the monsters in the dark, feared the crushing weight of the endless, black nothingness.

When Jerome and his wife Hailey, another one of my tormentors, came to town a fortnight ago, I’d nearly passed out from an anxiety attack when I ran into them at the grocery store.

* * *

“All you’ve gotta do is say one simple spell and you’ll be free, Barnes. Better hurry, I hear this particular phouka has a penchant for nubile witches. But then again, you’re not a witch, so I suppose you’ll be fine even if you don’t get out,” Jerome’s reedy voice called to me from the other side of the locked door, followed by the sinister laughs of his buddies. He and his group had followed me when I sneaked out of the dorms to my secret garden after dinner. No one should have known about that garden, but there they were, waiting for me. I didn’t even get the chance to get a single word in before Jerome cast a sleeping spell on me and the next thing I knew, I was waking up in the school’s underground crypts where the headmaster and professors imprisoned all manner of dangerous creatures. Not only had the doors been made of concrete, they’d been enforced with security spells that Jerome and his friends should not have been able to break through. They’d replaced the security with a simple

locking spell, one that a five-year-old witchling would have been able to break, but I was so laughably powerless that all I could do was beg them to let me out. I'd banged my hands bloody on the door, terrified of the hair-raising growls and the jangling of chains I could hear coming from across the room. The darkness in that crypt was so suffocating that for a terrifying moment, I thought I'd gone blind.

"Aperi hanc ianuam, that's all you gotta say, sweet cheeks, and you'll be home free," Jerome snickered.

"How about 'open sesame?' I'm sure even someone as lame as her can manage that." A familiar voice laughed from the other side. Hailey, my one friend other than my sister in this hellhole. The only other person I'd trusted enough to show her my safe space. It wasn't me she was interested in, though, but Jerome Clarke. And since tormenting me was his favorite pastime, she'd used me to get closer to him.

CHAPTER 8

"Sophia!"

Jacob's hand clasped mine, dragging me back from that night. He was still standing next to me, the corners of his lips turned down in a frown, concern written all over his face. Something told me that he'd called my name out more than once while I was zoned out, remembering one in a long line of tortuous "pranks" the warlocks of Redwood Academy had played on me.

That night, the boys and Hailey had locked me in there for what felt like an eternity. Later, I found out that it had only been an hour as I cried and pleaded with them. It was only when one of them panicked after I went silent and stopped responding to their taunts that they let me out, only to bust their guts again when they saw that I had peed myself. And what punishment did they get? Headmaster Pritchard assured me he would give them a "stern talking to" and that I should stop exaggerating. Such

pranks were to be expected in a school like ours. Never mind the fact that I didn't possess the skill set to defend myself against such pranks.

"You drifted off again. Where did you go?" Jacob asked, going back to his seat after I extricated my hand from underneath his.

"Sorry, I was just taken aback by your choice of profession. You don't have the look of a teacher." I had admitted to him the partial truth. Nothing about Jacob suggested that he spent his days in a classroom, prattling on about magic or whatever it was he taught to half-interested students. The professors at Redwood definitely did not look like him back in my time.

"Believe it or not, you're not the first person to tell me that. But Headmaster Pritchard had been on my case to take up a post at the school for ages and I finally relented a year ago. At first, I intended to stick it out for a single semester as a guest lecturer. I didn't expect that I'd take to teaching like a fish to water."

"Oh? And what did you do before that?"

He perked up at my question, a lopsided roguish smirk curling across his face, transforming his features from handsome to wickedly sexy. Jacob had strong, symmetrical Roman features—a powerful and defined jawline, a broad forehead, an aquiline nose, and wide eyes. Even his curly, black hair made me think of all the sculptures that filled museums across the world. His face bore a faint resemblance to that one famous sculpture, Michelangelo's David. I wondered if he had Roman ancestry. I could picture him in a Centurion military uniform, commanding lesser men on the battlefield. And I was drifting again. I surreptitiously pinched my thigh and brought myself to the present and focused on what he was saying instead of tumbling down the dangerous road of fantasizing Jacob as a handsome Roman warrior.

“Would you like to hazard a guess?” he asked, taking a swig of his drink, showing off the elegant column of his neck. I gulped, watching his Adam’s apple bob up and down, and, of course, Rachel had to show up at that exact moment and catch me ogling him. I waited for her to leave before speaking. Cocking my head to the side, I took him in once more, watching him watch me as I tried to guess at his past career.

“I can’t see you doing anything that requires you to wear a suit or be stuck behind an office desk all day.” I took a bite of my salad and hummed in pleasure at the taste. Rachel’s cook had outdone himself this time. I took another bite and then tried the ribs, sighing as the spicy taste danced on my tongue. When I licked the sauce off my fingers and lips, I became aware of Jacob’s heated gaze following the movement of my tongue lashing across my upper lip, and wow! When was the last time a man looked at me like that? Like he wanted nothing more than to splay me out on this table and have me for his meal?

He cleared his throat and shifted on his seat. “You’d be right. Before taking that post at Redwood, I was more of an adventure and outdoorsy type of guy. Being stuck doing the same thing day in and day out was not my cup of tea; it still isn’t. But there’s never a dull day with my students, so my feet haven’t started getting itchy yet. I’m satisfied with where I am for the moment.”

“Outdoorsy type, huh? I’m guessing you weren’t doing anything mundane, or something that any normal human does. Were you a beast hunter?” I guessed. There were a lot of rare and magical beasts littered around the world—and folks who didn’t mind dropping a pretty penny to get their hands on one. I knew of such a man, the old-as-dirt vamp I was talking about earlier. He was rich as Croesus and had an entire menagerie built in his home to collect such beasts. The last time I’d been in his mansion, there’d only been two beasts, a selkie in an aquarium, and a teeny tiny pixie with a bad temper.

Jacob made a whistling sound through his teeth. “Good guess. I was a hunter, but not

a beast hunter. I find that line of business rather distasteful. I actually used to be an archaeologist and a magical artifact treasure hunter.”

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“Get out of here! You’re kidding me, right?” I exclaimed, gaping at him as if he’d grown a second head. When he did not take back his claims, I made a very unladylike snort deep in my throat. One thing to know about me, I was a huge fan of Indiana Jones and Lara Croft growing up. I even had a phase where my parents struggled to pry my phone from my hands because I was so obsessed with the game Temple Run. And here this dish of a man was telling me he used to hunt artifacts for a living.

“That is so freaking cool. You must have a ton of crazy stories to tell during family dinners and social gatherings, huh? What was the most awesome artifact you ever discovered?” I was pretty sure there were sparkles in my eyes as Jacob recounted some of the expeditions he’d been on. As far as ice breakers go, this was the most legendary in my book. Any wariness I felt toward him dissipated, and I began to relax in his company, both of us trading anecdotes about our jobs, even though mine were not as cool and outlandish as his. Sometime during our dinner, his phone began to ping with a slew of text messages. He read the first one and his face darkened in displeasure. He tried to ignore the rest, but each time a notification sounded, his eyes hardened just a little bit more. I wanted to ask him if everything was alright, but we were still pretty much strangers. We hadn’t really talked about anything too personal yet, and I liked it that way for now.

His phone rang after we ordered another round of drinks. He stared at the screen with an inscrutable expression before excusing himself. “Sorry, I need to take this or he won’t stop bugging me.”

“Go right ahead,” I told him and watched him walk toward the bathroom. “You don’t waste time, do you? What happened to being short staffed?” I asked when Rachel claimed the seat he’d just vacated.

“You guys look like you're having fun. Another one in the bag for Beverly, I assume?” she teased, her grin making her look like Harley Quinn’s deranged sister.

“What, is she paying you to keep tabs on us or something?” I scoffed, my question meant as a joke until Rachel’s smile wavered and she avoided looking me in the eye.

“Oh, for the love of— She totally did, didn’t she? That conniving old biddy! I’m going to wring her wrinkly neck the next time I see her!” My fingers curled around the steak knife, mortification and fury curdling my blood at this latest stunt.

“Relax, Soph, it’s not that big of a deal. She just wanted to know if you two were hitting it off and I may or may not have sneaked a pic of the two of you laughing like idiots. It looked like you were into each other from where I was standing.” She shrugged. Her nostrils flared and she glanced back in time to see Jacob walking toward the table. “By the way, your man smells divine. Don’t waste time being mad at your gran and get yourself some of that, girl. Even if he’s not your mate, I bet he’s amazing in the sack.” She leaned across the table to sniff at me and smirked. “And judging by the pheromones you’re broadcasting all over the place, you are not as unaffected as you’re pretending to be.” And with that, she was gone, leaving me as red as a tomato. That’s what I get for having a werewolf as a friend.

The easy atmosphere we had going just a minute before seemed to have vanished in the time between Jacob’s phone call and his return. He was still charming and smiling, but there was a strained edge to his demeanor and a restless energy about him.

I couldn’t stop thinking about what Rachel had said either. Jacob would be on his way out of town tomorrow morning and our paths would likely never cross again. There was no better candidate for a one-night stand. Even if he was a warlock. Should I invite him back to my place?

Before I could come to a decision, Jacob unwittingly made one for me. He raised his hand and signaled for a check. “Thank you so much for the interesting night, Sophia, but I’m afraid I need to get this somewhere safe and secure.” He motioned toward the paper bag on the table.

“Is someone else after it?” I asked as he handed Rachel his card.

“Something like that. I apologize for cutting our night short, but it appears I’ll be in town for longer than I thought. Maybe I’ll stop by your boutique and get something for my sisters. And maybe I’ll even convince you to grab a cup of coffee.” He winked, his hand coming to rest on the small of my back as he led us out of the bistro.

“So, you’re not leaving? How come? And how long are you staying?” I stuttered, watching my nascent plans for a no-strings night of hot, sweaty sex go up in smoke. I didn’t have it in me to sleep with a warlock and then keep seeing his face for however long he decided to stay in town.

“A troublesome relative is visiting our family estate, so depending on how long he plans to stay there, I will be staying as far away from him as possible. Can’t have dear cousin Daniel get his hands on... Well, I can’t let him have what he wants.” He changed what he wanted to say at the last minute, as if I didn’t have enough brain cells to rub together and figure out what he was referring to.

“Is the Book of Shadows that important, then? I mean, obviously it’s important, it is quite literally a testament to your great-great-grandfather’s work as a warlock. But why would you want to keep it away from your cousin?” I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear as we came to a stop behind my Renegade.

It wasn’t that dark outside. The sun had only just disappeared over the horizon. Faint rays still spread across the sky like fingers desperately grasping at the day, unwilling for their time to come to an end. With the dying sunlight backlighting Jacob’s inky

black hair, it almost looked like he had a blue-black halo around his head.

“I don’t mean to pry. But in our family, something like a Book of Shadows is considered a family heirloom. And even though they usually go to the heir of the familial coven, everyone else is still allowed to have a gander every once in a while.”

“Did you just say gander?” The sides of his eyes crinkled, his chest heaving with a silent laughter as he looked down at me, shifting so that my back was pressed against the driver’s door and my view of everything around us was blocked. “My family situation is a little complicated. Tiberius—the owner of this journal—was a brilliant warlock with an extraordinary mind, and that’s not necessarily a good thing. From what I’m told, he was a complicated man, but because he saw things a bit differently, his moral compass did not always point in the right direction. My grandmother, who also happens to be Tiberius’s granddaughter-in-law, often says that my cousin and I are both quite like him. But whereas I inherited his zest for life and adventure, Daniel inherited his ideals. I can’t let him get his hands on this book, so Mystic Cove is where I’ll be for now. Try not to look so put out, sweetheart, you’re wrecking my ego here.” He tapped my chin and forced me to look up into his eyes.

Shoving his hand away and pressing my hand on his chest to push him back from crowding my personal space, I clicked my tongue at him. “Is your ego so fragile that one lowly witch not wanting you around is enough to shatter it?”

“Oh, trust me, Sophia Barnes, you are the farthest thing from lowly, and I can only give thanks to the gods that I’ve been given this opportunity to unravel the layers you’ve wrapped around yourself and are trying so hard to cling to.” He twirled a lock of my hair around his finger, his eyes boring into mine, as if trying to figure something out.

We’ll see how long that intrigue lasts when you find that I don’t have a lick of power flowing through my veins, I thought bitterly. What I said aloud, though, was

something different. “You have no concept of personal space, do you?”

“Law of attraction, baby. I can’t help but want to be close to you.” But he did back away, and I sucked in a desperately needed breath. I hadn’t even been aware that I was hardly breathing when he was so close.

“Anyway.” I switched topics quickly, rolling my eyes at his corny reply. “How sure are you that your cousin won’t find you here, even with an anti-tracking spell? Nowadays, there are things that are beyond magic’s reach. Technology being one of them. All Daniel has to do is track your phone.”

“I’d like to see him try. I’m not a one-trick pony, Sophia. Didn’t I tell you that I always tell my students not to rely on their magic too much? I’ve been up against far scarier criminals in my former job, some of them normal humans who didn’t have the advantage of using locator spells to find me. I know how to protect myself.”

“As long as you don’t bring trouble to my front yard, Buchanan.” I unlocked the driver’s door, got inside, and opened the window when he gestured for me to do so.

“Does that mean it’s a yes to that coffee?” he asked, leaning into the cab, one hand braced on the top of my car. He bit down on his lip, a hopeful glint in his eyes. For a crazy moment, I thought about leaning over and prying his bottom lip from between his teeth and replacing them with my mouth. For just a crazy moment. But the warlock-hating Sophia was still on high alert and knocked me upside the head, reminding me why we didn’t want to go there.

“Goodnight, Jacob,” I whispered as I started my car. As I drove away, I caught sight of him staring after my car in the rearview mirror, a mystified expression on his face that followed me all the way into my dreams.

CHAPTER 9

“Dang it!” I roared in frustration when I dropped a second candle jar in as many minutes. The shards of glass scattered around the floor of the boutique, the ylang-ylang candle broken in half. Dawn and the two customers looking at mood rings she was assisting at the counter looked up at me with mild curiosity. Though, in Dawn’s case, there was some mild irritation. I stifled a sigh, knowing that I would have to cough up the damages even though I was the one who made the candles today.

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If the store had been empty, Dawn could have just magicked the broken shards to the trashcan in our tiny breakroom. But seeing as the women in the shop were tourists, I had to use the dustpan.

“Sweet goddess, what is the matter with you today?” Dawn hissed, stepping from behind the cash register when I returned from the breakroom. “Did someone cast a butterfingers hex on you? You’ve been dropping our merch left, right, and center all day,” she complained, tapping her cream-white heels on the checkered black and white floor tiles, her bright red lips pressed into a thin line, with just the faintest wrinkles around her mouth and eyes. The twins never admitted to their age, but I believed Dawn and Destiny to be only about a decade or so younger than my grandmother—somewhere in their fifties, but with witches, you never knew. They could be well on their way to a century.

She was dressed much like a 50s housewife in a polka-dotted, sky-blue dress, complete with an apron, for whatever reason, and her platinum blonde hair pulled back in a bandana updo like a real-life Rosie the Riveter.

“It was only two candles. I’d hardly call that breaking things left, right, and center,” I defended myself, returning to unpacking the box of supplies I’d brought in this morning. It was just me and her in the shop today. Destiny was out of town on some personal matters, but she’d promised to be back in time for the solstice celebrations later that evening.

“Two too many, Snow White.” Dawn sighed and started helping me. I scowled at her use of that detested nickname. I wasn’t as pale as the fairytale princess was purported to be. In fact, I was sporting a rather fabulous golden tan thanks to my father’s

Mediterranean genes. But because I had pitch-black hair and bright blue eyes, everyone had been calling me Snow White for as long as I could remember.

Some jerk at Redwood had thought he was being creative, and the nickname had somehow reached ears here in Mystic Cove. But my friends and family thought it had been meant as a compliment, not a jab to ridicule my sister and me.

Beauty and the Witch. Snow White and the Hag. Those were the names hurled at Piper and me as we walked through the halls of Redwood. The snickers behind our backs claimed that since I'd gotten all the looks, it was only fair that my older sister got all the magic. For a long time, we'd both been everyone's punching bags. Up until puberty hit, anyway. Then she got the boobs and butt I'd been sporting for a while and suddenly she was on the inside and I was left to fend for myself. Piper never participated in the bullying, but when she became part of the cool crowd, she never exactly stepped in to protect me either.

She'd apologized later down the line, and of course, I forgave her. She was the only sister I had. But I never forgot, and sometimes I thought that perhaps I hadn't forgiven her after all.

"Is this because of the young gentleman you had dinner with last night? Rachel tells me that he had you wrapped around his finger and giggling like a giddy school girl. Beverley tells me he has quite the pedigree. I must admit, though, I never thought I'd see the day you'd last through an entire date with a warlock without scooping one of his eyes out with your soup spoon," Dawn teased.

"There were no spoons around, sadly," I joked back. "And I fail to see how a brief bout of clumsiness has anything to do with Jacob Buchanan. Besides, you know better than to believe a word out of that mangy mutt's mouth," I snapped back without any real heat behind my words. Rachel was, after all, one of my closest friends, and I didn't blame her for spreading gossip to anyone who'd listen. I'd been

there before and spread a few salacious tidbits I'd seen or overheard as well, but it wasn't as much fun when the shoe was on the other foot.

"Then what's got you all moony-eyed and jittery if not the warlock Indiana Jones? Bev thinks he's your soulmate. Should I tell you how many times you've sighed since you walked in here this morning? Or how many times you've stared off into the distance, all dreamy-eyed? I have to say, coming from you, my dear Soph, it's kind of creepy. I've never seen you so gone for a guy before."

"I am not 'gone' for him. I barely even know the guy!" I denied hotly, making air quotes with my fingers as I spoke. What I didn't deny was the truth that I was, in fact, jittery because of Jacob. Since we opened up shop two hours before, my eyes strayed to the door every few minutes, waiting for him to walk in like he said he would.

My stomach had been tied up in knots to the point where I'd barely been able to scarf down a breakfast sandwich and daily breakfast smoothie. And then, I thought I caught sight of his huge frame walking past the window and my heart kicked hard against my ribs before breaking out into a tap dance. The momentary spike of adrenaline made me feel like I was coming down from drinking one too many Monster Energy Drinks and my hands would not stop shaking. All from a brief sighting that wasn't even him.

Dawn hummed noncommittally and threw me for a loop when she didn't press for more information like I thought she would. Instead, she moved on to another topic I really didn't want to talk about.

"So, what's this nonsense I hear about you not coming to charge the ley lines tonight?" she asked, just as two of our regulars came into the shop, followed by more tourists. Again, my heart soared to the heavens when I heard the door open, only for it to come crashing back hard when none of the people who walked into the store were the man I'd hoped it would be.

Get a grip, will ya, stupid heart? The man is not meant for us, my brain scolded the useless organ.

“Hold that thought,” Dawn told me when the regulars headed straight to the counter, which meant they were likely here for potions.

“So?” Dawn asked a little while later over a glass of iced tea when there was another lull in the store despite the flurry of activity along the strip of the promenade and down at the beach. Neither one of us could be bothered with doing any administrative stuff.

Shrugging, I tried to play off my reluctance to attend with a carefree attitude. “What am I going to do there besides watch the coven do all the work from the sidelines and get sauced off Ma Hutchinson’s moonshine?”

“Since when has that ever mattered to you? This gathering stopped being about charging the lines eons ago anyway. Everyone’s just there to get sloshed and munch my hash brownies anyway. You’re a member of the Mystic Cove coven, Soph, you should be there tonight. And if you want to feel useful, you can babysit the young ones while the rest of us are getting drunk off our knockers.” She snorted inelegantly, knocking her knees against mine.

“Who would bring their kids to such a thing? Last time I checked, no one bothered to keep things PG,” I asked, wide-eyed and slack-jawed. This was long before my time, but Gran once told my sister and I that back in her day, summer solstice celebrations got more than a little heated. Even now, it was a common sight for the younger witches and warlocks to sneak off into the woods after all that power had been released into the air. Dating back to time immemorial, sex and power had been inextricably intertwined, which was why some witches and warlocks got unbelievably horny after expending a lot of power. The little ones were usually left at home for summer solstice, but they were allowed to accompany us to the coven circle

during Beltane, Yulemas, and other festivities.

“Your sister for one, and a couple of other families. Don’t ask me why. I was on the opposing faction of the motion, but Hailey friggin’ Clarke bulldozed everyone into agreeing. Apparently, her coven in Ohio allows children during their solstice celebrations, and since she’s Jerome’s wife, no one wanted to argue.”

Ugh. And therein lied the real reason I didn’t want to go—Jerome and his she-demon wife. I’d heard rumors that they’d also invited their brat pack of friends from school. I did not feel like running into any of those jerks again. As small as Mystic Cove was, I’d been successful in avoiding the Clarkes so far, and I wanted to keep it that way.

CHAPTER 10

Jacob never showed up at the store, but I did get a call from my mother, followed by my sister and Gran, each of them begging me to join the coven circle; and when that didn’t work, they turned to “threats” like not inviting me to any future coven circles. In the end, it was my two nieces, Rita and Charlotte, who convinced me to go, claiming that they had something exciting to show me. Piper promised to pick me up at six. Between four and five, I took a short nap to keep from dwelling on the bitter sting of disappointment that Jacob didn’t show up after all.

Why would he? I’d made it perfectly clear that I wasn’t interested in him. Still, that didn’t stop me from mumbling bitterly to myself when I woke up and got ready. An evening in the woods meant cargo pants, boots, and a long-sleeved t-shirt, as well as dousing myself in mosquito repellent. I was brushing up on a necklace design when I heard a car pulling up my driveway. Assuming it was my sister, I grabbed my phone and house keys and rushed to the door.

My mouth went dry and my throat clamped up at the sight of Jacob closing the distance from where his car was parked to my house with his long-legged strides.

Keys clutched to my chest, I squeezed my eyes shut, praying that this was some silly illusion conjured up by inhaling too many chemicals and scented oils from my workshop and the boutique.

“You’re not going to gouge out my eyes with those if I stepped up on the porch, are you?” His amused voice floated up from the bottom step that led up to the porch that wrapped around my little cottage. I looked down and saw that I was holding onto the jangle of keys the way my self-defense instructor taught me, with the three of them poking out between my fingers like Wolverine’s claws. The moves I’d learned may have worked on human men, but against my kind, shifters, and the other beings out there, it would be akin to poking a hornet’s nest.

“H-how... What are you doing here?”

He must have taken that as his cue that I would not be causing him any bodily harm and climbed up the two stairs, leaning against the railing of the porch, making no secret that he was checking me out.

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“Funny story. I had breakfast with Beverley this morning,” he began, and I raised my eyes to the heavens, swearing under my breath.

“And she sent you here?” I huffed, hands cocked on my hips and my bottom left eyelid twitching mercilessly. “How exactly did you come to have breakfast with her?”

“She found me napping on the beach at the crack of dawn this morning. I couldn't sleep, and being cooped up in a hotel room was not helping with my restlessness, so I decided to explore the town without tourists flitting around like pesky flies. This and that happened, I wound up on the beach to watch the sunrise, and then I was suddenly being poked awake by a blue-haired woman. I thought she was a water nymph at first. Interesting woman, your gran. She knew who I was right away and dragged me off to her place for the best blueberry pancakes I've ever had,” he told me with a mystified smile. “We got to talking about Tiberius's Book of Shadows mostly, and the magic texts she collects for the store. And then she told me about the solstice celebrations and asked me to fetch you tonight and voila!” He waved a hand down his body. “Here I am.”

Here you are indeed, I groused mentally. So that's why she'd sicced mom and the girls on me, to double down on her and Piper's efforts to get me to come down to the coven circle.

“Before you go back into the house and slam the door in my face, know that I was only given the directions to your house and not the coven circle. I've been told that one of your coven sisters will be serving a special blend of moonshine and an all-you-can-eat buffet. If I don't bring you along, your grandmother will let me starve. You

don't want that on your conscience, do you?" He batted his eyelashes, feigning a boyish look of innocence that had my mouth tugging up at the corners. I squashed that little bit of mirth before it turned into a full-blown smile.

"Drama queen much? We better get going if you want to get your hands on a glass of that moonshine. I hope my grandmother warned you to bring a sleeping bag or something because there's no way you're driving back to the hotel once you've had Hutchinson's Hooch," I warned him as we walked down to his rented SUV.

Jacob waited until we were pulling out of the yard before he asked, "I don't see yours anywhere. Where are you sleeping tonight?"

"I was planning on bunking with my nieces, seeing as how their mom and dad are probably going to want some time to themselves." I smirked, thinking back to the spicy text message Piper accidentally sent to me earlier in the afternoon thinking that she'd sent it to her husband, Dave.

"So do you hate your brother-in-law's guts as well, or is he the one warlock you like?" he piped up, keeping his eyes on the winding road in front of us.

My place was on the outskirts of town and well into the forest. The only other people who lived out here were a few witches and some wolves. The few homes were spaced out, giving everyone their much-needed privacy. My nearest neighbor's log cabin was located about three and a half miles from my cottage. Tall evergreens lined either side of the road, their branches reaching out across the sky and creating a patchy canopy overhead. The road was a narrow, single-lane that led out of Mystic Cove and into Beckford, the next town over.

"Dave is human, as is my father. Both of them married into the Barnes family, of which my grandmother is the current head," I explained to him. Most families in our community were matriarchal because our power tended to flow from mother to

daughter. Witches outnumbered warlocks at five to one, so we couldn't afford to be elitist about who we chose to bear our children with—most families couldn't, at least. There was still a small minority who believed in keeping bloodlines pure and surprise, surprise! That faction was led by a group of warlocks who saw us witches only as incubators to give birth to their powerful, pureblooded offspring. To them, the most important thing when looking for a mate was not the qualities she possessed as a person. You could be the most black-hearted person in the world so long as you had great magic coursing through your veins. Seeing as how warlocks were twice as powerful as the average witch, one could argue that they were entitled to their arrogance. In fact, the jerks often claimed that they were the goddess's favorite children. You'd be hard-pressed—even in this day and age when everyone claimed to be progressive—to find a warlock married to someone out of the community.

As if reading my mind, Jacob commented something along the same line of thought with a sardonic curl of his lip and squeezing the steering wheel in a death grip. "Humans...but they're allowed to be full members of the community? People are not so tolerant where I come from. You get booted out of the coven if you so much as hint at wanting to settle down with a non-witch," he spat with so much vitriol that I felt the air in the car crackle. An immense surge of energy filled up the enclosed space, with Jacob at the epicenter. He was the eye of the storm while the energy around him swirled chaotically and searched for something to lash out at. Unfortunately for me, I was the nearest target.

"Jacob!" I gasped in pain, cold tendrils of magic jabbing at me and my breath misting. The temperature had dropped so low it made my head and teeth ache, and yet paradoxically, there was a searing heat burning me from the inside out. A lance of hot pokers stabbed at my core. "Jacob, stop it! Stop it! You're hurting me!" I cried out, tugging at the sleeve of his leather jacket.

"Oh, no! I didn't realize—" he stuttered in a panic. Between one breath and the next, the air pressure in the car went back to normal. But for a moment, there was a

vacuum void of air and magic, making my ears pop. I gagged, my chest heaving as I gasped for breath as if I'd been trapped underwater for a while. Blood and bile crept up my throat, their acrid and coppery scents clogging my nostrils and lathering across my tastebuds.

“Pull over. I think I’m going to be sick,” I croaked, slapping a hand across my mouth. Jacob swore under his breath, swerving the car and rolling to a stop along the side of the road, and I was already out of my seat. Kneeling on the deep brown earth, twigs and stones digging into my knees, I lost my lunch in one go. But that was not enough to purge the alien feeling snaking through my body, searching for a way out. I needed to...do something. What exactly that was, I didn’t know, but my whole body was tingling, much like two days ago when I experienced that bout of painful lethargy. My fingers digging into the earth, I continued to dry heave, expecting to spit out fire the way my throat was burning.

CHAPTER 11

I flinched at the touch of Jacob’s broad hand rubbing soothing circles around my back while his other hand gathered back my hair so that the ends would not trail in the puke. I didn’t hear him get out of the car and crouch behind me. He kept muttering apologies and comforting words while I was dry heaving. The man had a magic touch—a literal magic touch. He expanded his power again. Nothing caustic, raw, or wild this time around. Only soothing and healing. The bite of nausea slowly dissipated, my spasming muscles relaxing, and I was starting to get a little drowsy. Unlike his raw magic, which tasted of storms and smelled like lightning, Jacob’s healing magic was the first bite of frost in the fall, the crispy tartness of an apple orchard and glazed berries.

Without meaning to, I got up from my hunched position and buried my face in the crook of his neck, hoping to draw the scent straight from the source, but I suppose it must have all been in my imagination because all I got was a whiff of his woodsy

cologne.

“I’m sorry for lashing out with magic like a warlock barely out of diapers.” He wrapped his arms around me, one hand cupping the base of my skull and gently massaging it. Biting back a groan at how good that felt, I buried my head deeper in his neck and closed my eyes, quietly enjoying the sensations he wrought on my weakened self. “As far as excuses go, it’s not the best, especially for a man my age. But all I can tell you is that I lost my temper and the hold on my emotions. Any time talk of purists pops up in conversation, all I see is red.”

“So do I,” I mumbled into his neck, my lips brushing against his skin. Jacob’s body shuddered beneath me, his arms holding me tighter. I could feel his heartbeat racing wildly in his chest, like a hummingbird fluttering its wings in a desperate bid to escape its cage. But then I seemed to wake up and pulled away. “But I don’t strike out like a deranged beast. You could have killed me with a single blast of your power, Jacob. Jeez! You almost did!” I pushed away from him, groaning at the needles and pins stabbing at my feet when I stood up, running a hand through my hair.

“I know, I know. That was a rookie move. Next time I pull a stunt like that, feel free to brain blast me.” He grabbed my wrist when I would have walked away. “I once made a classmate of mine poop herself for four hours straight when she tried to come after my sister. You could do that if you want; no one would blame you for defending yourself.”

“Don’t you think I would have if I could?” I snapped, snatching my hand back and stumbling a few steps. “You think I laid back and took your whip of power because....what? If I had the power to put you on your butt, I would have done it the second you shoved your magic down my throat. But I’m a dud! I have no choice but to run for cover whenever you lot think it’s a great idea to throw a hissy fit!” Words I’d kept buried rolled off my tongue, the images before me melding with memories from my time at Redwood. Instead of Jerome Clarke standing before me, tormenting

me and punishing me for having the gall to attend the academy when I was all but human, I saw Jacob.

He was resplendent in the maroon, grey, and white uniform of Redwood, looking down at me from where I knelt on the gravelly ground, my knees and the heels of my palms skinned and bleeding. The slurs that had been hurled my way on a daily basis bounced around in my head, and the deep-seated betrayal and resentment I felt for those who enabled that monster and turned a blind eye to what was happening to me tugged at my heart.

“Sophia, snap out of it!”

Blood coated my tongue and dripped down the side of my mouth. I didn’t even realize that I was biting on my tongue hard enough to draw blood, or that I had my hands over my ears to block out the words and name-calling from my memories until Jacob gave me a good shake.

His eyes were wide, the pupils constricted so that the only thing I could see when I opened my eyes was miles and miles of blue-green ocean. His teeth were bared in a snarl, but I didn’t think he was angry with me. More like terrified. Of what, though?

“Where did you go?” he demanded, his fingers digging into my arms hard enough for me to know that I’d have finger-shaped bruises in the morning.

What was he talking about? “I’m right here,” I answered in confusion.

“Physically, maybe. But for a second there I couldn’t sense your power. It was if there was...a pit of nothingness. A void sucking in all the magic and erasing traces of you.”

I opened my mouth to spit out a retort, but it died on the tip of my tongue because

nothing he said was making sense. I wanted to tell him that I didn't have any power at all for him to sense and that he was imagining things, but my phone went off. A text message from Piper.

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“We should get going.” I walked past him back into the car, slamming the door shut—on him and our conversation. Jacob remained outside for a short while, but after falling apart in front of him, my stubborn pride would not let me ask him what he was doing.

CHAPTER 12

The coven circle was a scenic woodland glade in the middle of the woods at the base of the mountains. The copse of evergreens gave way to a circular clearing of pristine green grass dotted with a variety of flowers here and there, and at the center of the clearing was an ancient wisteria tree. Its weeping branches were in full bloom, creating a purple canopy of shade and littering the ground with petals. Someone had strung mason jar lights on the branches and fairy lights to make it seem as if fireflies were dancing among the blossoms.

Jacob let out a low and impressed whistle, hands on hips as he stared at the tree that was rumored to be older than anyone present. “Ain’t that a sight? Wish I had my camera here to catch it,” he marveled in a wistful tone. It was the first thing he’d said since we left the spot where I threw up. The drive had been fraught with tense silence. The only time I spoke was to guide him down the turn that would lead us to the coven circle.

We’d left his rental parked on the side of the road, along with a multitude of other cars, and made our way to the circle on foot. The clearing was already filled with witches, warlocks, and the human and shifter partners of those married or mated to witches. The two of us were lingering on the fringes, hidden between two pine trees and yet to be spotted. Clearing my throat, I took a preemptive measure at soothing the

awkwardness between us before my family and friends descended on us.

“I can do you one better,” I began, my mouth stretching in a strained smile. Jacob tore his gaze away from the wisteria tree with seemingly great reluctance. “Before you leave town, you should make a stop at High Tide, the local gallery. You’ll find a few paintings that perfectly capture the spirit of our guardian wisteria.”

“Guardian?” he prompted, a gleam of interest in his eyes. I suppose for a man to give up a lifetime of adventure and traveling the world to become a teacher, he must have some intellectual interests. I wondered what subject he taught. With his skills, it could be anything from the history of magic to enchantments and self-defense classes. Shelving my curiosity for later, I told him the tale of Mystic Cove’s guardian.

“According to the stories, the wisteria was planted by Genevieve Barnes, one of the first witches to settle here and declare Mystic Cove a haven town.” As Jacob knew, a haven town was a place for paranormals like us to live without fear of persecution from humans at a time where anything and anyone exhibiting signs of being different or straying from the strict tenets of the Christian religion at the time was declared a devil worshipper. Towns like ours sprung up because witches were being burned at the stake or hung, shifters were hunted under the guise of ridding the world of monsters, and vampires were thought to be the spawn of Satan himself.

“The spot where the wisteria stands is the exact location of a confluence of ley lines that flow all over the land. Throughout history, wisteria trees have long been associated with protection—be it from demons, dark magic, anything evil. And by planting the tree here, on top of a powerful magical source, Ginny believed that the tree’s protective properties would be enhanced. And it must have worked because we’ve been able to keep our secret safe from outsiders all these years and we’ve managed to build a great relationship with the humans living among us.”

“Not to mention the thriving tourism and art industry. Genevieve Barnes, huh? Any

relation?” He bumped into my shoulder playfully.

“I believe she's a great-great-grandaunt or something like that. So I, too, have an ancestor who had a brilliant mind and aptitude for magic, although she was not into using dark magic.”

“And thank the gods for that. We’ve got enough megalomaniacs on our hands as it is. I read through a few pages of Tiberius’s Book of Shadows last night. The first few entries were not spells or potion recipes or anything like that, but his views on what he thought societal hierarchy should be. The man believed himself a god of sorts, and sorcerers—that’s what he called our kind—the pinnacle of human evolution. The only beings above us were the fair folk—if they truly existed.”

“He sounds like a radical purist. How come I’ve never heard of him? I’m sure we would have been taught about someone like that in History of Magic at school.”

“Because my family did everything to bury all the negative rumors about him. The Buchanans are a prominent family, one of the families who founded Redwood Academy. We couldn’t have our name besmirched like that, and I think there might have been others within the family who shared the same views. But they were—” Whatever he was about to say was drowned out by the sounds of my nieces yelling in excitement and screaming my name for everyone to hear.

“Here we go,” I sighed, pasting on a big smile for my little angels and walking out into the clearing, swallowing down the bit of trepidation curling up within me.

Opening my arms wide for a hug, I crouched down to the ground while my eyes scanned the clearing for Jerome and his posse. It looked like they were not here yet. I still had a moment of respite.

“How are my favorite monkeys doing today?” I wrapped my arms around their

giggling forms, getting a mouthful of hair when Charlotte, the younger of the two, head-butted me on the chin. “Aunt Fia, we’ve got a thuprise for you!” she exclaimed, pulling away from the embrace and bouncing up and down excitedly in her neon-pink converse sneakers. Charlotte struggled with calling me Sofia because of her lisp and had decided to call me Fia instead, a nickname that had stuck with both girls.

Like Piper and I, they were Irish twins, born a year apart. At five and four, respectively, they both showed great promise of becoming excellent witches in a few years. Like most of us, the girls would be off to Redwood to receive formal education as a witch in a few years. Even though I knew that they likely wouldn’t go through what I did, I still worried for them. Headmaster Pritchard could be a misogynistic pig at times. His lax attitude toward the warlock students and sometimes harsh and oftentimes cruel disregard for the witches had not changed in the three decades he’d been at the helm of the school.

And Jacob worked for the man!

“You do? I can’t wait to see it,” I gushed, pinching both their cheeks and laughing at the scowls they shot my way. “But first, why don’t you say hello to my new friend?” I got up from my crouch and stood next to Jacob.

“We’re friends now, huh?” he teased me, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and pulling me close.

“I want to meet your new friend, too,” a familiar voice spoke up from behind us. Piper walked around Jacob and me and came to stand behind her daughters. Still dressed in her blue nursing scrubs, her chocolate brown hair was pulled up in a tight bun and her glasses sat on the tip of her nose, perilously close to slipping right off. Her face was bare of any makeup, save for the pink gloss on her lips, and she looked a little worse for wear, but she could still turn a few heads.

“You didn’t have time to change! Why would you come here smelling like death and disinfectant?” I asked her and got a middle finger in reply behind her girls’ backs. She quickly lowered it when Rita tilted her head up to look.

“Let’s see you work back-to-back-to-back shifts at the hospital, deal with these two, and put up with a husband who’d lose his head if it wasn’t screwed on straight and see if you’d still have the energy to take your clothes off at the end of the day. I’ve been meaning to stop by your place and pick up a few more bottles of your energy tonic.” She sighed. Now that I took a closer look, I could see the faint shadows around her eyes and stress grooves lining her forehead and bracketing the sides of her mouth. She could have easily used a bit of glamour magic to freshen up, but my sister did not believe in using her powers for something trivial unless it was for her kids.

“So, Fia, are you going to introduce us to your new friend or what?” Piper asked with a sly smirk, her analytical gaze taking in and noting everything of interest about Jacob. I always thought that my sister would have made a great FBI profiler if it weren’t for the fact that she tended to wear rose-colored glasses in regards to the people close to her or those she liked.

“As if you haven’t heard everything from Gran and Rachel, but I’ll pretend to humor you. Pip, this is Jacob Buchanan, a professor from Boston. Jacob—” I turned to face the man who was watching our interaction with a delighted smile. “—this pain in the butt is my younger sister—by only eleven months and three weeks—Piper Campbell-Barnes.” She’d chosen to take on the compound last name to honor both her husband and our family tradition of continuing the Barnes familial line. I couldn’t remember the last time a warlock had been born into the family. The last five or so generations had produced a bevy of witches, no sons. So, in order to keep the family name alive, all the men in our family had married into the Barnes clan. “And this is monkey one and monkey two—also known as Rita and Charlotte,” I went on, introducing my nieces, both of whom had hearts and sparkles in their eyes as they gawked at the man in front of them. Jacob winked at the girls and gave his attention to my sister.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Piper. Please don’t take this the wrong way, but it’s a bit hard to believe that you guys are sisters. That is not to say that you’re not both drop-dead gorgeous, but you look nothing alike,” Jacob commented with a charming smile.

“You wouldn’t be the first one to point that out. I’ve heard a great deal about the work you did before joining the academy. Hollywood could fashion a whole bevy of movies after you,” Piper shot back seamlessly, and if you didn’t know her as well as I did, you would not have noticed the forced edge her smile took on. Jacob had unknowingly stumbled onto a sore spot, one I could easily forgive him for since he’d already graduated from Redwood by the time Piper and I joined the academy.

Piper and I were opposites in all the ways that counted, from our temperaments to ambitions, likes and dislikes. But the most glaring differences were in our appearances. Beauty and the witch. Snow White and the Hag, they used to call us. Whereas I stood at an even five-foot-five with a willowy figure and barely had any curves to my name, my sister had a voluptuous hourglass that drove men wild. But before she learned that most men went gaga over curves like she had, Piper used to have a complex about her body, believing herself to be fat and lamenting over her five-foot-two stature.

I did not miss my formative years. While my sister wished she had been built like me, I envied her c-cups and booty that filled her jeans like nothing I’d seen before. I hated my flat and boyish body. How far we’d come. The topic was a sore spot, but I was glad Piper handled it like a champ.

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“I assure you that everything you’ve heard was grossly exaggerated,” Jacob said, rebuffing the compliment, a touch of color riding high across his cheeks.

“Oh, so you didn’t stave off a horde of undead soldier mummies with nothing but a bottle of holy water and a switchblade the size of my finger?” Piper held her pinky finger in the air and wiggled it. I started to laugh and covered it up with a cough when Jacob glared at me, his face turning a shade of pink I would have never thought to see on a man like him. Not one who’d gone toe to toe with many creatures of the dark in temples and libraries thought long gone figments of the imagination.

I’d never heard of Jacob Buchanan before he breezed into my life, but after our dinner, when I learned he used to be an explorer and archaeologist, I’d gone and looked him up online in a forum run by and created specifically for our kind. He was not kidding when he said that some of the tales about his exploits were greatly exaggerated.

“It was actually a cursed blade, a scimitar that was said to belong to the pharaoh whose tomb we were desecrating. And the vial of holy water was actually a grenade I’d rigged up to blow holy water all over the place. And you know, a bit of magic always goes a long way,” he explained, a wreath of flame covering his left hand.

Impatient for attention, Rita and Charlotte both tugged at each of Jacob’s arms.

“Hey, mister, are you a monster hunter like the Scooby gang?” Rita asked him in awe.

“Something like that.” Jacob scratched the tip of his ear. The girls exploded in a fit of

excitement and bombarded him with questions while dragging him off to the picnic blanket their parents had laid out for them. No one had set the tents up yet, and it was likely we'd all be sleeping under the night sky given that the weather was perfectly mild and the Milky Way gleamed softly against the darkening night sky with the crescent moon smiling cheekily down on us.

Jacob looked over his shoulder, his eyes silently begging for help, but Piper and I were content to let the rascals keep him busy for a short while.

"He seems nice." Piper hooked her arm with mine and we began to walk to the other side of the clearing where Mom, Gran, and a couple of other coven members were already helping themselves to glasses of moonshine.

"Don't start." I bopped the top of her head with my knuckles. "Where's the spawn of Satan and her royal bitchiness? Did they decide to do us a service and not show up after all," I asked, a tiny bit of hope singing in my veins for all of two seconds before my sister squashed it like a grape beneath her boot.

"Oh, they're coming, alright. Hailey would not let pass yet another opportunity to brag about her grand wedding in the Maldives. Are you going to be okay?" She gave my hand a gentle squeeze, concern darkening her light blue eyes.

"Now you ask me that? Weren't you the one ragging on me just the other day for refusing to attend because I didn't want to face my bullies?"

"Yeah, that was insensitive of me. I should have never told you to get over it, not when everything that happened shaped the way you look at the world right now—"

"Oh, dear goddess, I feel a life lesson and/or unwarranted advice coming on," I groaned when I heard Piper using that tone. The "I'm older than you, married with two kids, and therefore wiser than you" tone.

“Shut up and listen.” Piper shoved into my side, nearly sending the both of us toppling to the ground. “You’ve let what Jerome and his friends did to you hold power over you, so much so that it’s birthed this irrational hate of warlocks in your heart. Some vampires have no regard for human life and kill humans willy-nilly on a daily basis, but you wouldn’t classify them all as murderers who deserve a stake to the chest, would you? Would you?” she asked when I remained silent.

“No,” I replied sullenly.

“It’s the same with warlocks. Just because you’ve had the misfortune of dealing with a bad crop in your past, it doesn’t mean that the whole lot of them are reprehensible pricks. Case in point, the charming Bostonian currently humoring my little hellions over there.” She pointed him out with a soft smile. Jacob was regaling the girls with a story, a fantastical one judging by his hand gestures and over-the-top facial expressions.

“This all goes back to Gran’s matchmaking nonsense. She could be wrong, you know? She’s not all-knowing. This could be the one match she gets wrong,” I said, not ready to give in.

“I highly doubt that, my little snowflake. I’ll be batting a thousand long after I am nothing but dust and bone, best you believe that, girlie.” I felt a hard thump on my back as Gran appeared out of nowhere and scared the bejeezus out of Piper and me.

“Weren’t you just standing over there?” Piper squeaked, looking to where we’d seen her a few seconds ago back to the woman standing behind us.

“You two were dragging your feet, so I thought I should drag you over. But I see that you were too busy gossiping about me. How did you like my gift, snowflake? He’s a dish, ain’t he?”

Piper and I groaned.

“Don't give me that face. You've known him only two days and I can already sense a change in you. Your waves are chaotic, but definitely transitioning into something new. Something better.”

“Waves? Really, Gran?” I scoffed at her babble. By “waves,” she meant the life energy that shaped every living being and was the source of all magic. She quelled my mocking laughter with one look and I immediately shut up.

“Did you get in a fight? You have a cut on your lip.” Gran reached out and ran her thumb gently over the wound. I felt the soft skin knit back together, tiny bites of her healing magic getting to work.

“It's nothing to worry about,” I answered as a small group cleared the copse of trees in the opposite direction from where Jacob and I had entered from. Jerome Clarke was leading his coven into the circle, and as if he had a homing beacon, his sharp gaze immediately landed on me. Cold fingers of dread skittered up my spine at the leer that twisted his otherwise handsome face.

CHAPTER 13

“Are you okay?” Jacob asked me for what felt like the hundredth time, running a soothing hand down the arch of my back. I found myself leaning into the touch before I could stop myself and, truth be told, I didn't want to. I found some comfort in hiding behind his huge and bulky body, away from Jerome's prying eyes. Nicholas, Samuel, and Lucas were there too, his minions who reveled in my torture alongside their leader. They'd all kept their distance so far, including Hailey, who'd spared me a single look of derision before giving me a wide berth and helping set up the buffet table. But now that everyone was finally present, the ceremony was about to start.

“I’ve never recharged ley lines before. What do we do exactly?” Jacob asked, stuffing the last half of his hotdog into his mouth, humming in pleasure at the delicious taste. A speck of mustard got caught on the side of his mouth and some of his scruffy beard. Without any conscious thought, I reached up and swiped it off with my thumb before wiping it on a napkin I grabbed off a picnic table laden with a bevy of food. Jacob’s eyes flared and his magic spiked before he could reel it in. Not wanting to make a big deal of it, I grabbed a cheese puff and explained what usually happened.

“Everyone stands around the big ol’ tree over there and imbues a fraction of their power into it and then we all party like it’s 1965.”

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“Were the parties extra wild in 1965 or something?” He grabbed a bottle of water and washed down the hotdog. I’d warned him to steer clear of the moonshine until after the ritual, lest he cause havoc by using his powers while drunk.

“Don’t know. It’s just something Gran likes to say. You should get going; they’re about to start,” I told him, turning my back from the sight of the coven gathering around the guardian wisteria. I could already feel the air thickening with the cloying taste of magic, so potent that it was being shoved down my throat, scrubbing it raw and leaving me struggling to draw in breath.

“You’re not coming?” Jacob asked when he saw that I wasn’t following behind him.

“It’s not like she’d be of much use if she joined us. I am surprised and appalled that you actually dared to show your face here, Barnes,” Jerome’s smarmy voice hissed behind me. I didn’t even notice that he’d been standing nearby all this time. He and his friends had been so absorbed in their little clique all evening that I had started to relax and enjoy my not-date’s company. My mistake.

“Keep walking, Jerome,” I warned him, backing up into the picnic table when he came to stand in front of me, blocking my view of Jacob and the coven gathering around the tree. It should not have been possible, but everything in my peripheral view blurred and faded away and all I could see was the man in front of me. It had been six years since we graduated from Redwood and the jerk hadn’t changed much. It was such a shame that evil never wore an appearance that truly depreciated how ugly they were on the inside.

Jerome had the face of an angel and the heart of a devil. The cunning of one too. All

these years, he had our coven fooled into thinking he had a shred of decency. I knew that he coveted the position of coven leader. I'd been quietly keeping an eye on that front. If ever Catherine Hawthorne decided to hand the mantle over to him, I doubted that I'd ever set foot in Mystic Cove again.

“My wife begged me not to say anything, and I was going to keep my opinions to myself out of respect for the Barnes Clan, but that's never been my style. How dare you disrespect the goddess by showing your face at this holy site when you are unable to give your thanks and pay the tithe that is due to our most sacred Mother? We do not need fraudsters disturbing the peace. I remember you being a smart girl despite your many, many shortcomings. So why don't you make the smart choice here and leave?”

“Hey, man, if anyone's disturbing the peace here, it's you. Apologize to Sophia and walk away before I turn you into a flea-bitten rodent,” Jacob growled, grabbing Jerome by the arm and pulling him back. He came to stand in front of me, glowering down at the shorter man.

“Jacob Buchanan. I've heard of you from shared acquaintances of ours and they've all spoken highly of you. Especially Headmaster Pritchard. He tells me that he hopes you'll step into his shoes when he retires—”

“What does that have to do with disrespecting Sophia?”

“Which is why—” Jerome continued as if Jacob had not said a single word. “—I am shocked to see you sniffing around this failure of a witch like a lovesick dog in heat. A warlock of your stature, I thought you'd be more discerning in your taste and choice of mates. There are plenty more witches far more suited to you than this...this—” Whatever he was going to say ended in a choked yelp as he crumpled to the ground on his knees. Blood vessels popped in his bulging eyes and he clutched at his throat as he stared at Jacob with dawning terror.

“Jacob, you’re killing him!” I tugged at his arm, hoping to break his concentration so that he would stop mumbling the chant that was slowly suffocating Jerome. “Jacob!” I shook him even though a small part of me reveled in the panic and mortal fear painted all over Jerome’s face. The realization that he was not always the strongest warlock in the room. But I did not want a death on my conscience.

Someone blasted us with a raw wave of magic—Nicholas and Lucas. The power knocked me off my feet, but Jacob remained standing tall, a stalwart pillar of brute force in a chaotic wave of wild magic from the warlocks trying to defend their friend.

“Enough!” Catherine’s voice boomed throughout the clearing. The power she imbued to modulate her tone had me clenching my teeth and covering my ears, as did everyone else who was not at her level, which was almost everyone. Her voice was a clap of thunder, and then there was a ringing sound in my ears as I tried to focus on the commotion breaking out, but everything sounded muted. I saw Hailey rushing toward us, gesticulating wildly with her hands, her face a mask of fury directed at me and Jacob.

Something wet dripped down the sides of my face. I raised my hands to feel what it was and they came back strained red. I tried to make out what Hailey was yelling at me about. Jacob’s lips were moving too, and my family and a few others were descending on us with varying expressions coloring their ashen faces. But for the life of me I couldn’t focus on what anyone was saying or doing. A bout of nausea hit me out of nowhere and took my legs out from under me when I tried to stand up. I guess all those protective runes tattooed on my arm didn’t protect me as they should have. I was due to see my tattoo artist again so that she could recharge their protective magic.

“Soph! Are you okay?” Jacob helped me up before Mom or my sister could. His fingers grazed the thin trail of blood dripping from my ears and rubbed the red liquid between his fingers. His eyebrows were knitted in confusion, as if he couldn’t comprehend what he was seeing. I understood his confusion. I was the only one

whose eardrums had popped at the booming sound of our coven leader's voice. Every witch and warlock in attendance had managed to protect themselves, their children, and their significant others for those who were mated to humans or shifters.

His hands hovered at the sides of my face, a soft blue glow emanating from the palms of his hands. Healing magic. It was limited in what it could do, but the injury was small enough that Jacob could heal it with a negligent use of power.

As the ringing and sharp burst of pain in my ear gradually decreased, I looked up at all the faces surrounding us. Mom, Piper, and Gran had their shoulders slumped in remorse and a sheen of tears over their eyes. They'd forgotten to extend their protective magic to cover me because, aside from the witchlings, little warlocks, and humans, everyone else should have been able to cover themselves.

Jerome and his wife had such loathing and revulsion in their eyes, I was sure they wanted to kill me at that moment. Ignoring them, I gave my family a shaky smile. "I'm fine, guys. Stop acting like I died. It's nothing that can't be fixed, see?" I motioned toward Jacob, my voice coming out a little louder than it needed to since I'd yet to regain my full hearing.

My reassurance did nothing to assuage the guilt I saw glimmering in the blue eyes that passed from one Barnes woman to the next. Piper gnawed on her lip, old memories haunting her—I could see the shadows in her eyes. She was thinking of all the times my lack of magic had slipped their minds and led to me getting hurt. Because in a household so attuned to using magic for practically everything, it had taken them all a long time to adjust to having to temper their power. Mom was married to a human, but after all those years living together, he'd learned how to look out for himself. He'd learned never to walk into a witch's workshop unannounced lest he get hit by a spell that was not meant for him. He'd learned not to open certain books or drink anything around the house that he was unsure of lest he accidentally un-alive himself. I'd learned that too—but not fast enough to escape a multitude of

near-death accidents.

“That should do it. I fixed the damage, but I am not sure when your hearing will get back to normal,” Jacob told me with exaggerated slowness, shaping every word carefully. He didn’t take his hands off me, cupping both sides of my face and caressing my cheeks. Without meaning to, I leaned into his warm, callous-roughened touch and fell into the crook of his neck. I wasn’t aware that I’d been shivering until he drew me in for a hug and the light shudders turned into teeth-chattering shudders. I think Jacob said something to me, but with the temporary hearing loss and the roar of blood past my ears, his words were lost to me.

I have no idea how long we remained locked in an embrace for all to see, but when I finally calmed down and we broke apart, I saw that Catherine and Jerome were standing away from the larger crowd. Surrounding them were his friends and my family, and it looked like they were engaged in a heated exchange. At least Jerome wasn’t pretending anymore and letting his true colors shine bright for all to see—that he was a classist bigot.

Jacob followed my gaze, clicking his tongue when he saw what arrested my attention. “I have a mind to go over there and finish what I started.”

Sinking my hand into the short strands of hair at the back of his head, I gave them a hard tug and forced him to look at me. “Don’t go getting blood on your hands for my sake, Buchanan. I don’t need saving.” And because I could see that my words did nothing, that he was still aching to finish the fight Jerome started, I cradled his face in my hands and tilted mine up and rubbed my nose against his.

Caught off guard by my uncharacteristic show of affection, he left out a soft gasp. Garlic and onion scented breath from his earlier hotdog wafted across my nose. Normally I would have found that disgusting, but not with Jacob. The sky-high walls I’d been so determined to keep locked around my heart were starting to crack—thin,

hairline fractures that could cause the entire structure to come crumbling down if the right amount of pressure was pressed on the right spot.

“I mean it, Jacob. I am no damsel in distress and I don’t need you to be my white knight.” I looked over his shoulder, taking pleasure in seeing Jerome’s face turn redder and redder with each passing second he squared off against Hawthorne and my grandmother. “I am not afraid of Jerome Clarke anymore,” I lied. Even though he’d just shown himself for the piece of trash that he was, there was nothing to stop him from coming after me.

“I am not looking to be a white knight, but you can’t expect me to just sit back and watch while some douchebag goes off on you for absolutely no reason.”

“Oh, he has his reasons all right. Stupid and totally unjustified reasons for despising the very sight of me—but reasons nonetheless,” I sneered. I could tell that Jacob wanted to ask me more about Jerome and our blatant dislike for each other, but did I dare trust him with the truth? I was at a crossroads. On one hand, his reaction to my being a witch with no magic would give me a clear and unfiltered glimpse into the kind of man he was. Whether or not he was a purist like the majority of warlocks who passed through the halls of Redwood Academy. After all, Pritchard was looking at him to take his role as headmaster, according to Jerome. On the other hand, I was scared to see the banked flames of interest in his eyes when he found out that I was a dud. From the little he’d said about his family, it sounded like they were old-school traditionalists. It was only reasonable to assume that he picked up some of those values, no matter how outdated many of them were.

But then again, there was that old adage about making assumptions. Heart in my throat, I grabbed his hand and led him away from the coven circle. Neither of us would be missed, and I had no desire to remain in the same place as Jerome and his posse.

“What about the solstice ritual?” Jacob looked back to the clearing over his shoulder but allowed me to drag him into the woods. The sun would be completely gone in the next thirty minutes or so. The coven needed to get started before they lost daylight. But that was their problem right now, not mine.

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“They’ll be fine without us. If you’re concerned about missing it, you can always come back next year.”

“Yeah? And you wouldn’t mind me waltzing back into your town? Into your life? It seemed like you wanted me gone as soon as possible,” he joked, stopping mid-stride and pulling me back so that I crashed into his body. His arms snaked around my midriff and pulled me flush against his body so that my back was pressed against his chest. Dipping his head, his soft lips brushed against the shell of my ear, sending jolts of pleasure up and down my body. “Maybe you’ve finally decided to stop pretending that you don’t feel this tug between us?”

“First of all, you were never in my life. You’ve barely stepped in through the door,” I huffed, even as I relaxed into his hold and allowed him to rest his chin on top of my head.

“And second?” he prompted, his smile practically audible in the warm tone of his voice.

“Secondly, I didn’t drag you out here so that you could practice your subpar flirting tricks on me. I want to tell you something, and I didn’t want to do it in front of all those prying eyes.”

He went rigid and grabbed me by the shoulders, turning me so that we were facing each other. He must not have used any product in his hair because the longer strands were windswept, making my fingers itch to run through the thick tresses and smooth it down...or mess it up more.

“You’re not going to tell me that you’re married, are you? Because I was working up to asking you out on a second date.”

“We didn’t have a first date,” I pointed out.

“Fine, first date then. I’ll even take you somewhere obnoxiously expensive and fancy. I’ll woo you so hard, you’ll be seeing stars for the rest of your life. It’s only fair since you’ve been living rent-free in my mind from the moment I saw you sketching with such fierce concentration at your grandmother’s shop.”

“Jacob, I’m trying to tell you something important here. Can we be serious for just a sec?” I tried to be stern, but that proved to be impossible since I was pretty sure my heart had turned into a gooey pile of mush and my face was hot to the touch.

Voices rang out from the direction of the clearing. The coven had started to charge the ley lines and were chanting a prayer of thanks to the goddess. The collective power pulsed outward in waves. The charge in the air sent birds flying from their nesting branches.

“Can we go somewhere that’s not here?”

CHAPTER 14

Having a warlock in my house, my safe haven, was anathema to everything I believed in. Jacob had offered his hotel room or grabbing an early dinner while we talked, but I wanted to be surrounded by familiar things in a familiar place where I’ve never once been made to feel ashamed of who and what I am.

That is not to say I did not harbor second thoughts about bringing this man that I was only starting to know into my house. There was a barely perceptible tremble in my hand as I hesitated to unlock the front door to the cottage. Again, Jacob offered to

take us somewhere else that was a neutral space or to talk outside, sitting on the porch swing swaying in the gentle breeze off to the side of the cottage.

“It’s okay, we can do it here...or maybe in the greenhouse.” What place was better to bear your most shameful non-secret secret than surrounded by flowers and herbs with calming and relaxation properties?

I’d sent a text to my sister explaining what happened and she’d replied, but I did not have the strength nor the desire to read about what happened after we left. Or worse, get an apology from my family for not using their magic to protect me.

“How do you feel about hibiscus tea?” I asked, opening the front door and motioning for him to go in before me.

“I haven’t given it much thought, really. I’m more of a caffeine fan myself. Irish coffee if I’m feeling frisky,” he joked, his attention focused more on taking in every corner of my tiny living room that spilled into the kitchen.

It is said that you can tell one’s personality just by observing their place of habitation or taking a peek into their fridge. I wondered what conclusions Jacob was coming to about me.

Taking off my shoes and placing them by the door, I tried to see the open-plan place through his eyes. It wasn’t messy per se, but it was cluttered. Mostly with flowers and tons of books stacked on every available surface. A vase of lilacs sat at the center of my bean-shaped coffee table, its dried petals littering the table and carpet. I’d need to switch them out for fresh flowers soon. On the island counter in the kitchen were bright yellow sunflower blooms I’d bought from the florist. Two potted ferns were placed on either side of the TV mantle and there were a bunch of paintings and photos decorating the walls. My couches were a mismatched set that I’d bought secondhand, and a chair had a pile of clean laundry I’d been meaning to fold up. The

floors were a checkered pattern of mahogany brown and amber that contrasted with the cream white of the kitchen cabinets that brightened up the place when the morning sun came in through the kitchen windows. Strings of crystals dangled from the curtain rods. You couldn't see it now, but when the sun was out, a splash of rainbow colors was reflected on the floors and kitchen cabinets and lacey lavender curtains that I always kept pulled back from the windows.

I'd gone for warm and earthy tones when choosing the décor, and I was quite proud of the way it all turned out, but with Jacob here, I suddenly felt self-conscious.

"I wouldn't mind trying it, though. I'm always up for new experiences and adventures," he spoke up suddenly, looking away from a photo of Piper and me taken at her wedding. "The hibiscus tea," Jacob explained at the look of confusion on my face. I'd forgotten that I'd offered it to him.

"Oh, right. I'll make some sandwiches to go with that. Are there any allergies I need to be made aware of?" Walking into the kitchen, I opened the door that would lead out to my workshop and greenhouse. There was an antique brass key hook shaped like the Tree of Life by the door where I kept the keys to each of my buildings.

"Not that I know of." Jacob automatically reached out for the set of keys when I handed them over. "What's this?"

"This—" I fingered one of the keys. "—is the key to the greenhouse. I have a dining table there for when I'm entertaining guests. Wait for me there while I make us something to eat." He was already halfway down the path when I remembered to warn him, "Oh, and watch out for Chairman Meow. He doesn't do well with strangers."

"Chairman what now?" he called back. Instead of answering, I laughed quietly to myself. If Chairman Meow was lounging in the greenhouse as I suspected, Jacob

would not be forgetting his name anytime soon.

CHAPTER 15

There was an imposter in my greenhouse. Someone had stolen my cat and replaced it with this...this... Whatever that blob of fur purring contentedly in Jacob's arms was. It was so not my surly Chairman Meow. That little brat barely tolerated my presence on a good day. How the heck did Jacob soften him up in less than ten minutes? I'd expected to find him swearing up a storm, possibly with his clothes torn to strips and Chairman Meow a hissing and snarling mess. Instead, the traitorous feline was purring like a brand-new luxury convertible in the crook of Jacob's arms as the latter got a close look at my crop of herbs.

"Is this nightshade?" he asked about the tray of poisonous herbs I was growing behind a glass case so that my cat or my nieces who liked to come in here without my supervision wouldn't accidentally touch them.

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“Yes.” I placed the tray of refreshments on the black wrought iron table standing in the middle of the rows of plants and flowers. It had been Rita’s idea to drag it here from the kitchen porch because she and Charlotte wanted to have a tea party among the flowers. I’d left it in here for them ever since and often brought my guests out here as well.

Identical sets of blue-green ocean eyes stared at me—one set heavy with sleepy laziness and the other vibrant and alive in a way that stole my breath. I’d often thought that there was nothing sexier than a man with a baby in his arms, but there was something to be said for a drop-dead gorgeous man cradling an equally adorable tabby too.

“This is quite the setup you’ve got here. My grandmother would like it. I get the feeling that you two would get along like a house on fire. She spends most of her days in her greenhouse too, though it’s nothing as cozy as this,” he commented, dropping Chairman Meow gently to the ground and brushing his fingers against the dark burgundy petal of a black dragon hibiscus bloom before making his way to the table. “Did you construct this yourself or...”

“My dad and brother-in-law own a construction company. They supplied the materials at half the price and everyone helped in setting up this and my workshop as a graduation/welcome home gift,” I explained, a soft smile on my lips as I remembered the day they’d unveiled their gift to me.

Grabbing the handle of the glass teapot I used to brew the tea in, I poured a cup for Jacob and then one for myself in matching cups. My grandmother had the same set at the bookstore, and so did my mom and sister. Jacob held it up, a dubious expression

on his face as he examined the deep red of the brew.

“I promise it’s not poisoned,” I teased when he kept sniffing at the tea instead of drinking it. To prove my point, I took a small sip, careful not to scald my tongue. Jacob did the same, made a noncommittal hum deep in his throat, and reached for a sandwich. Chairman Meow mewled, rubbing himself against Jacob’s legs before curling himself into a ball of fur at his feet and settling in for a nap. “You didn’t cast a spell on my cat, did you? I’ve never seen him take to a person so quickly,” I said, suspicion coloring my tone. His eyes twinkled with amusement, the movement of his shoulders fluid and languid when he gave me a nonchalant shrug.

“What can I say? Animals love me,” he said around a full mouth.

My smile died away when I remembered why we were here in the first place. I could have waited for him to finish eating first, but I could hardly get anything down my throat except for the tea. Best to just get it over and done with.

“I have no idea how to say this except to just rip the Band-Aid off,” I began, curling my hands around the porcelain teacup and rubbing the rim with both my index fingers.

Jacob sat up straighter in his chair, gulping down a huge bite of the chicken sandwich that he’d barely had any time to chew properly.

“I do not possess any magic. I am a witch in name only,” I confessed, my voice shaky and my pulse pounding in my throat. It felt like I was about to hurl out a chunk of my heart with the way it was thundering away, but I continued talking before Jacob could say anything in reply to my shameful confession. As if by saying it out loud to him was a spell that loosened my tongue, I spilled my entire backstory to him.

“And that’s why Jerome and his band of purists detest me so much. They detest the

fact that I call myself a witch when I am basically just a human who happens to be particularly skilled at potion-making.

“There was quite an uproar when my parents enrolled me at Redwood—Headmaster Pritchard and quite a number of the teaching staff were against it. Most of the professors had valid reasons for their doubts. Mainly that I wouldn’t be able to keep up with my peers. And they were right. Every class, except for potion-making and the core classes like reading, writing, and math, required the use of magic. My grades were horrible in those. To say I barely scraped by was an understatement. But despite urges to transfer to a mundane school, I refused to be shooed out and my mother was stubborn about keeping me enrolled there. I guess maybe she hoped I would awaken into my power eventually. I wished for that too.”

There was a beat of heavy silence, Jacob looking down at the platter of sandwiches with an opaque countenance. The automatic lights came on, casting his features in shadow and light, making him appear a harsh sculpture hewn from marble since he wasn't moving a muscle. Not even his chest appeared to be rising and falling with drawn breath, and I waited for the other shoe to drop. I waited for the harsh words, the derision and rejection.

I could no more stop the involuntary flinch that overtook my body when Jacob cleared his throat than I could have stopped my heart from beating. “I see.” His voice was void of any emotion. He cleared his throat again and took a sip of tea, wincing at the tart taste. I pushed the bottle of honey toward him to sweeten his tea. Most people didn’t like the strong taste of hibiscus tea, but I did not mind the sweet and sour tartness of it.

“You say that most of the staff had valid reasons for not wanting you on the student roster. What about those who didn’t?”

I tried to read his mood, but he’d brought the shutters down. No, that wasn’t true. He

had an analytical look about him. His eyes were narrowed and settled squarely on me like he was trying to figure out something. What, I had no idea.

“That was mostly Pritchard. He claimed that he did not want to sully the prestigious reputation of the school by allowing a lowly human to attend classes with talented warlocks and witches. And yes, he referred to me as a lowly human.” My nostrils flared, a breath catching in my throat at remembering the appalling way a man of Fredrick Pritchard’s age and stature had treated the twelve-year-old. And all the years after that he’d turned a blind eye to my bullying. “His open opposition to my attendance was all the permission the warlocks needed to pick me apart. Some witches joined in too, but the boys...”

I huffed out a dry laugh, scratching my eyebrow and focusing on the swath of riotous colors over his shoulders—hibiscus blooms of all colors, lavender flowers, bluebells, orchids, and many, many others. Focusing on them helped drown out the images and sounds that sometimes plagued me in my sleep and kept the tears at bay even though I could feel the tell-tale sting in my eyes and a familiar itch in my nose and throat.

“The boys were especially cruel. You would have thought I was some stray beast instead of a living, breathing person with feelings, worthy of respect, with the way they picked on me. Even punching bags get a reprieve from having blows rained upon them, but I couldn’t even sleep in peace in my own dorm room. I always had to keep an eye open. Had to have eyes in the back of my head and hearing better than any wolf. But what good are normal human senses against beings with magic? I never saw or heard them coming, and I did not have the power to defend myself. Pritchard couldn’t be arsed to do anything about the blatant target on my back, especially when the ringleader was one of his favorite students.”

“I assume you mean Jerome.” Jacob’s voice was a low, guttural growl. I nodded in answer.

Pressure built in the air, pressing against my skin, leashed but violent like a brewing rainstorm before the heavens let loose and a deluge of rain pours down accompanied by blinding lightning flashes. It made me wonder what an unleashed Jacob was like, when he let his power run amok without regard for anyone or anything around him. His power was a potent, brilliant thing. Alive in a way I couldn't explain, and it seemed to change with his emotions. When he was healing my ears earlier, it had been a gentle touch. Something I wanted to cocoon myself in and snuggle up against. He was one of the most powerful mages I'd ever encountered. No wonder Pritchard wanted him as his replacement. The teachers at Redwood all had huge and often fragile egos. If someone wanted to keep them in check, they would need a deep and powerful reserve of magic at their disposal.

"Please don't take this the wrong way, but are you sure you have no power at all?"

"I think I would have known if I had magic by now, Jacob. I've never cast a successful spell in all the twenty-four years I have been alive."

"And in the thirty that I've been on this earth, I've come to realize that we will never fully understand this force we call magic. It is an ever-changing and complex thing. Unique to each warlock and witch but very much the same, and it has a very distinct aura. An aura that I have felt around you on more than one occasion."

I was already shaking my head before he finished speaking. Needing to do something with my hands, I pushed up from my seat and went to pick up one of the watering cans stored at the back of the greenhouse. I wasn't surprised when Jacob grabbed the second one and followed me out the door as we both went to fill them up with water.

"You're wrong," I told him over my shoulder.

"I'm not so sure I am," he countered. "I'll admit that the first time I met you, I couldn't tell whether you were human or something else because I couldn't sense

anything from you. But sometimes when you get emotional, like earlier when I...when you asked me to pull over, I could definitely sense the magic flowing off you when you lashed out at me. It wasn't a powerful thing, but I sensed it, Sophia."

"What you sensed was the power coming from the wisteria tree at the center of the coven circle. We were close to its location where multiple ley lines intersect. Of course the place would be teeming with magic," I said through clenched teeth. I hoped that would put an end to the sudden turn this conversation had taken, but Jacob was determined to die on this hill, and it only served to enrage me because I knew what it felt like to be given false hope and then have reality slap you in the face so hard you could never see straight again.

"How can you be so sure—"

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“I just am!” I exploded, whirling to face him. He didn’t expect me to stop so suddenly and would have bumped into me if, in my anger, I didn’t shove at his chest. “I can be sure, Jacob, because I’ve been down that road more times than I’d like to count. I’ve been to mystics, witch doctors, shamans, and friggin’ monks, hoping, hoping to the blessed goddess that they’d find out what’s wrong with me. That they could help me find my magic. Help me be whole.” My voice broke as the tears I tried so desperately to hold back blurred my vision.

Sucking in a stuttering breath, I continued on. “And you want to know what they told me? They had no friggin’ clue what’s wrong with me. I don’t have a single drop of magic in my blood. I can’t manipulate the life force emitted by the ley lines. I am one hundred percent human! It makes sense if you think about it. My father’s human, so it was a fifty-fifty chance that I would take after him, right?”

“You are not broken, Sophia,” Jacob insisted, taking the watering can from my hands and placing them both on the ground. “You’re not,” he repeated when I shook my head and tried to shirk off his touch when he grabbed my hands. “I won’t try to give you false hope, but I won’t let you think less of yourself either. You think I don’t know you told me about all of this because you believe me to be like those jackasses you went to school with? Sorry to break it to you, honey, but I am made of better stock than that—despite the convoluted values my father tried to drill into my head,” he argued, the last bit said in a wry tone.

My tears would not stop falling. He diligently wiped them away with his calloused hands, but his touch was more soothing than the softest tissue out there.

“I told you about my lack of magic because of the way you look at me,” I sniffed,

stepping closer to him.

“And what way is that?” He lowered his head, brushing back stray wisps of my hair, pushing the bangs away from my eyes.

“Like you want to devour me whole. Like you want to own me. You look at me the way my dad and Dave look at Mom and Piper and that scares me. Because how can you look at me like that when we only just met? I needed to know if me being who I am would make that look die out.”

“Well, I am standing before you right now, looking you straight in the eye. So, you tell me, Sophia—whatever your middle name is—Barnes, what do you see?”

I don’t remember us getting any closer, but we were practically sharing the same breath, his nose brushing against mine, and I might have gone cross-eyed trying to look at him.

“It’s Cleo,” I told him with a wet laugh, swallowing down the lump in my throat. “And I don’t think kissing you right now is a great idea. I have a three-date rule.”

CHAPTER 16

My family and Catherine Hawthorne all descended on my tiny cottage the next evening after I spent the entire day dodging them.

“Maybe you should get a bigger house, sweetheart. Somewhere in town, not so secluded?” my mother suggested over a glass of iced tea. Everyone else had opted for wine except Piper, who’d helped herself to my stash of scotch after coming off another long shift at the hospital.

“Oh, hush your mouth, Belinda. I’m right down the road, and so are the twins. The

girl's as snug as a bug in a rug out here. Where's she going to find a big enough property to accommodate her workshop and that gorgeous greenhouse in town?" Gran said in my defense. The battle was won with that. Mom knew how much time I spent in both buildings, how much pride I took in brewing my potions and creating homemade cosmetics. What I lacked in magic I made up for with the magic I created out back. But still, she refused to let it go.

"I know, I know." She sighed. "But this living room is so tiny. Look at us cramped on these couches like sardines in a can. At least think about renovating and adding more space or rooms to the cottage. This house is not big enough to raise a family."

Piper choked on her drink and wine spurted out of my nose. My sister cackled like the witch she is, nibbling gleefully on the gingersnap cookies I'd brought out for her.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! Who said anything about raising a family?" I screeched, jumping to my feet and heading into the kitchen to grab a cloth.

Mom waited until I came back to the living room before speaking again. "Now that you've found your mate—"

"Let me stop you right there, Mother. It is way too soon in this relationship for me to even think of having Jacob's babies."

"So, there is a relationship?" She jumped on that like a starving wolf. I made a strangled sound in my throat knowing that no matter what I said, she was going to twist my words to hear what she wanted. Okay, maybe I wasn't being fair to my mother. In her defense, I did use the "r" word first.

"Please don't tell me you came all the way out here to talk about my non-relationship with Jacob because I'm exhausted. I'd rather be soaking in a bath and catching up on Cobra Kai episodes."

“You can say that again,” Piper quipped, but her expression did not match the lighthearted comment.

Catherine surprised me by being the one to speak up. “Unfortunately, we are not here for something so trivial, joyful even, dear. But never you worry, for the day will come when us old nosy biddies will come to harangue you about your new beau.” She placed her wine glass on the coaster. “We are here about what happened yesterday at the coven circle. Let me say my piece first, and then you can say whatever it is you want to say.” She cut me off when I would have protested, her voice gentle but no less firm. “We all heard the things Jerome said to you, and we learned more of his beliefs in a conversation afterward, and I must admit that never in my years of being the leader of the Mystic Cove coven have I ever been so appalled by the garbage I heard yesterday.” She sighed.

Piper cleared her throat and leaned forward in her seat. “I know you never wanted Mom and Dad to know, but I had to tell them about what you went through at Redwood.”

“Piper!”

“Do not be mad at your sister, Sophia. You should have told us that you were getting bullied a long time ago. Your father and I always suspected, but you always denied it when we asked and so did Headmaster Pritchard,” Mom explained.

“You talked to him about all this?” I was slack-jawed.

“Did you really think we did not notice? You are my baby, Fia. Every time you came home for vacation, it was as if your inner light was snuffed out. My little firecracker coming home a shadow of herself. Your father and I would watch you bloom to life again, only for your vivacity to diminish when it was time to go back. Why did you not tell us?”

“Because!” I snapped. “I didn’t want to disappoint you, Mom. I knew how much it meant for you to have both your daughters graduate from the academy just like every other witch in our family. I didn’t want to disappoint you or have you think I was weak just because I wasn’t like any of you. I didn’t want any of you looking down on me.”

Mother teared up at that and got up from her seat to crouch in front of me. Taking my hands in hers, she squeezed them and peered into my eyes. “We are family, Fia, and we love you. We would have never, ever thought you were less, never!” She cried, the sight of her tears ripping my heart to shreds.

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“I know that now, Mommy, but little Sophia wasn’t so confident in herself and secure in your love to believe otherwise. And those assholes at Redwood knew how to play on those insecurities.

“I understand, and I’m thankful that at least you confided in your grandmother, even though I wish she had come to me.”

“My granddaughter sought me out in confidence. I wasn’t about to betray that and I will not apologize for it.” Gran sniffed and mother and daughter had a staredown in my living room. “But what I will apologize for is for letting that two-faced snake weasel his way back into our town and our coven and attempt to spread that poisonous filth.”

“Spread? You mean he was trying to indoctrinate people into this pure bloated mage garbage?” I blurted, outraged at such a thing. This was the first I’d heard of it.

“Sadly, yes. That it happened right under my nose and I allowed myself to be taken in by his charm is a failure I will never live down,” Catherine said. “He and his wife mostly targeted the younger ones who’ve come back from Redwood for summer vacation. Thankfully, none of them were inclined to join his crusade. It would have been nice if they’d come to me the moment Jerome approached them. But, apparently, they thought nothing of it since Jerome’s nonsense is spreading even on the grounds of the academy.”

“It’s been spreading for years, and Pritchard has been aware of it. Heck, he’s one of the ringleaders,” Piper huffed. “I’ve actually been reconsidering sending the girls there when the time comes and just teaching them everything we know right here.”

“Oh, best believe that I will confront Pritchard about this,” Catherine went on. “And as for sending the girls away, you might not have to. I approached the mayor about building a mage academy here in Mystic Cove. He and I are meeting with possible investors and benefactors soon.”

“So that’s what the investor meeting is about,” I exclaimed with a snap of my fingers.

Catherine nodded. “If all goes according to plan, the school will be up and running within two to three years. But back to the topic at hand. I came here, Sophia, to apologize on behalf of the entire coven for the way Jerome and others have treated you. It doesn’t matter that you have no magic. You are our sister—you are a child of this coven. That those charlatans made you feel like you don’t belong is unforgivable. Which is why we’ve ex-communicated the Clarkes from our coven.”

My heart skipped a beat. “The entire family?”

“No. just Jerome and Hailey—for now. Needless to say, his parents are beside themselves. But they both agreed that it had to be done. Martha and Ben never raised their son to be so hateful,” she explained. “They claimed to be quite at a loss for where Jerome could have picked up such a bigoted attitude, and I believe them.”

We discussed the matter for a few more minutes before they left, but not before Mom insisted that I come home for dinner and bring Jacob with me before he left town. Piper stayed behind when they left, claiming she wasn’t ready to face the chaos of her home just yet.

“Mama needs some me time. Dave said he’d take the kids out for pizza tonight and I don’t want to be alone. You mind?”

“Not at all. I’ll bring out the snacks and the booze and we’ll re-watch *The Witcher* or something.”

“Oooh, Henry Cavil. Yummy! And bring out the scotch. It’s my day off tomorrow and mommy’s going to make the most of her night.”

We were halfway through the re-watch when she suddenly paused it.

“What gives?” I complained around a mouthful of microwave popcorn.

“We’re cool, right?”

I frowned at the question and forced myself to swallow down the popcorn and set the bowl aside. “Of course. Why wouldn’t we be?”

“Because,” she stated as if that were enough of an answer, her face set in a frown while she formulated what she needed to say. I waited patiently until she found her words and listened when she did.

“I hate that I was too much of a coward to stand up for you. After having the girls, watching their bond grow stronger with each passing day...it makes me realize how crappy I was as your older sister. I would never want Rita and Charlotte to go through something like that and think that their sister did not have their back. I should have protected you, Fia, and it haunts me every day that I didn’t.”

“We’ve been over this before. You were a kid yourself. There was only so much you could do. I forgave you a long time ago. You should forgive yourself too.” I drew her into a side hug, kissing her on the forehead. “Ew, you smell like sick people.” I pushed her away. Piper swore at me and grabbed a fistful of popcorn. “Don’t you dare!” I warned too little too late and got a rain of popcorn in my face.

“So, what’s the 4-1-1 on you and the sexy warlock? Feel free to share all the juicy details,” she sunk deep into my couch with her glass of scotch.

“Who still says what’s the 4-1-1 in this day and age? The only sexy man we should be discussing right now is Geralt.” I grabbed the remote and pressed play, hitting my sister with a cushion when she laughed at me.

CHAPTER 17

“You know that hanging out in my workshop while I work does not count as a date, right?” I peered up at Jacob over the rim of my lab goggles, my voice muffled by the mask around my mouth. I was working on a potent potion, or rather, an herbicide for Mrs. Abernathy’s precious roses. Aphids were bothering her roses and she wanted something that would keep them away and her roses in good health throughout the year. Apparently, someone from a gardening journal she’d subscribed to was coming to do an article on her blooms that had been selected as finalists for a rose contest.

Jacob looked up from his great-great-grandfather’s journal, eyebrows arched in consternation. “I’m not the one who’s been coming up with excuses every time I want to take you out. You’re always busy with something or other, and if this is the only way I can spend time with you, so be it.”

It was three days after the solstice incident, and for the last two days, Jacob had either been hanging out in my workshop with me or helping at the boutique when he wasn’t busy combing through Tiberius’s Book of Shadows.

“How long are you going to hide out in our town with that? Have you heard anything from your cousin?” I transferred the pungent mixture from the flask I was using to brew it into much safer bottles, careful not to spill any of it. I was usually steadfast in my work, but with Jacob’s eyes on me, composure flew right out the window.

“Ouch. I thought we’d made some progress, but you’re trying to throw me out of town already.” He feigned a look of betrayal, clutching a hand dramatically to his chest. I rolled my eyes at his antics.

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“I’m only asking because I don’t want to be the stupid one who gives her heart away to a man who’ll be leaving any day now. Or is this just supposed to be a summer fling before you head back to Boston and take over for Pig-chard? I guess I’m not sure where we stand. What is it exactly you want out of this?” I asked, flicking a finger between the two of us.

“First of all—” He groaned, standing up from the floor and stretching even though there was a perfectly fine bench not even a foot away from his spot by the window. “—I never said that I was going to take over for Pritchard; I’m not even sure I want to. But after what you told me about his conduct, I certainly will be bringing up the topic of his replacement to the school board. And secondly, whatever this is, it’s not a fling, and I’m hoping to use this time we have together to figure out what it is. Boston is not on the other side of the world. It shouldn’t be too hard for two mule-headed idiots like us to figure out a way to make it work long-term if we really wanted to.”

I put a cork stopper on the potion bottles and took off the protective gear, tossing it onto the workbench. “I can’t tell if you’re stupidly optimistic or very naïve. Maybe you’ve never been in a long-distance relationship and have no idea the toll it takes on people,” I told him, my eyes following the Book of Shadows he placed on the table, the pages open wide. I frowned at the vestiges of dark magic emanating from the journal, despite Jacob reassuring me that it was safe. Chairman Meow had taken one look at it and bolted into the woods. “You find anything interesting in there?”

I moved to stand between his legs when he perched himself on the top of one of my worktables as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do. Likewise, Jacob’s big hands came to rest where my waist dipped in before flaring out to my narrow hips. If he moved them a fraction lower, those hands would be resting on my denim-

covered butt. As if he could read my thoughts, his hands twitched before digging into the skin exposed by my midriff-baring tank top.

“Loads. I am both impressed and terrified of the way Tiberius’s mind worked, and it also puts into perspective why my grandfather and father were the way they were. Daniel too, sadly.”

Making a calculated decision, I placed my hands on his thighs, watching for the minute changes in his expression and body. I felt his thigh muscles, broad and hard as steel, twitch and tense up. His eyes went molten and there was a sensual lift to the corner of his lips as he arched in eyebrows in a silent question. “I can’t get a read on how you feel about your family. You talk of your grandmother, mother, and sisters with a fond tenderness, but the male members of your family with a bittersweet tenderness.”

“Then I’d say you’ve read me really well, Fia.” He played with my beaded, turquoise, chandelier earrings. “All those reasons why you hate the general warlock population? The bigotry, superiority complex, the cruel arrogance, and autocratic high-handedness? That’s how the men in my family were raised. How I would have been raised had my grandfather not passed away while I was a baby and my grandmother not taken me in, away from my childhood home and my father’s toxicity. My older sister, though, she was not so lucky.” His eyes went a glacial blue, fractured through with sea-glass green that shattered out from the pupils. There was such keening pain reflected in them, it made my heart grow heavy with sadness.

“What happened to her?” I intertwined our fingers together and laid them on the desk on either side of his spread legs.

“She mated with the alpha of a leopard pack in Kenya. Mom and Dad had Jazz—that’s short for Jasmine—in their teens, so there’s a fifteen-year age gap between us. I was just starting out at Redwood when she met Aasir while doing a

stint for Doctors Without Borders out in Nairobi. They were mated within three months of their meeting. When father found out, he disinherited her and told her never to darken his doorstep again. I remember him yelling at my sister, asking her why she'd lower herself to laying with an animal." He ground out through clenched teeth. "The way he said it, as if Aasir was a mindless, savage beast instead of alpha to one of the biggest packs in Africa and the C.E.O of a successful communications company. I'd never seen him so livid before. I mean, I'd always known that he hated us having to associate with shifters or vampires or humans, even though there was not much we could do about it since he was a successful lawyer with most of his clients being humans. But when Jazz came home to share the good news and introduce her then-fiancé, that's when I saw the first glimpse of the monster lurking within the man I used to respect, and I was powerless to do anything to help my sister."

"Oh, Jacob, I'm so sorry you and your sister had to go through that." I didn't know what else to say to assuage the guilt that was clearly eating him up inside. But he was just a kid when all of that went down. What could he have done to stop his father from tearing their family apart? I kept this thought to myself, though. I got the feeling that it would not make him feel any better. "What about your mother? Did she try to persuade your father otherwise?"

He snorted, the bemused scoff eerily horse-like in its sound. "My mother is a sweet, soft-spoken witch who was raised to believe that a wife always stands behind her husband, and I do mean that quite literally. Unless my father says otherwise, she walks a step behind him and waits on him hand and foot. She became pregnant at sixteen and married my father a year later. She never got the chance to explore who she was as an individual. Her entire existence has been inextricably intertwined with my father's. Though it breaks her heart that she cannot see her oldest daughter and grandson without my father blowing a gasket, she still maintains her distance from Jazz out of deference to him. My grandmother, Lorraine, married into the Buchanan family just like my mom, but she's a strong woman who has never been afraid to speak her mind." The shadows in his eyes lessened in intensity as he spoke about his

grandmother.

“She always tells me, ‘Jacob, my boy—’” He mimicked what I assumed was Lorraine Buchanan’s stern voice. “—you find a girl who gives back as good as she gets. None of these flighty girls who’ll roll over on their back and let you bulldoze over them with your nonsense. You find a woman who’ll knock the sense back into that big, stubborn head of yours and hold you up when you feel like you’re about to drown. You find a woman who’s not afraid to soar high above the clouds with you and roll in the filthiest muck with you. You find her, you cherish her, and never, ever make her feel like she’s less than the gum beneath your shoe.”

As he spoke, he didn’t take his eyes off me. And I couldn’t take my eyes off him. My throat and mouth had gone dry.

“She sounds like a wise woman, your grandmother.”

“She is. When she realized that Father was raising me to be just like him and my mother was doing nothing to stop him, she got me and my younger sisters out there and revoked his title as heir of the family. For all that he was super traditional, at least grandfather had the sense to name her head of the family before he passed. I’m just glad that she didn’t name my aunt as the heir either. Goddess knows she would have let Daniel run our family into the ground long before now.”

“No offense to your family, but you make me glad that the only thing I have to worry about in my family is a meddling, matchmaking grandmother.”

That startled a laugh out of him. He threw his head back and chortled, dispelling the heavy atmosphere that had settled around us.

“You know, I’ve been hearing talk about that, and every time I step into a store or just walk about town, random people come up and ask me if we’ve made it official

yet. So, that stunt with the dinner date was Beverley setting us up on a blind date?”

“Yep,” I said, popping the ‘p’ for emphasis. “And she wanted to give you your great-great-grandfather’s journal.” I ran a finger over the aged paper and faded ink, gasping when I felt a dark jolt of power run up my arm and settle somewhere in my chest.

“Even though it’s full of questionable things, I’m glad I got it back. Not only can I keep it safe from the wrong hands, but it is a family heirloom—even if some of the stuff written here makes Tiberius come off as a megalomaniac. There’s a spell in here that he never completed, but from his notes, it sounds like he was trying to find a way to compel other beings into servitude for witches and warlocks, stripping away their free will.”

“Yikes. If you start feeling the urge to take over the world, please let me know. I wouldn’t mind knocking you upside the head once or twice.” I curled my hand into a fist and pretended I was going to bonk him on the head. Jacob grabbed it with ease and jumped off the table.

“Duly noted. But enough talk of all my bleak family life. I am ready to take you out on that date now, Fia. What say you?”

“I say you better charm my socks off. And, Jacob?” I cut him off when he would have started celebrating. “If you want to kiss me now, I wouldn’t be too mad about it.”

He froze for a moment, and then he didn’t waste any time. Between one breath and the next, my feet were swept off the ground and then I had the hard surface of the work desk underneath my butt. Jacob grabbed my face in a rough hold and kissed me brutally. It was not as sweet and gentle as I thought our first kiss would be, but a savage branding, a clash of teeth and tongues and fighting for breath in between.

It was only when we heard a soft thump followed by Chairman Meow's loud yowl that I pulled away reluctantly and tried to blink away the stars in my vision and clear the cobwebs clouding up my brain. Our chests rose and fell in sync, both our pulses wild and erratic.

"Let me, uh..." I lost my train of thought when he began to trail down my neck, giggling when he started sucking at the ticklish spot just below my ear. My body gave an involuntary jerk when his fingers snuck under my shirt and brushed against my bra—if I weren't wearing one right then, I would have been a puddle at his feet. Already my bones were liquid and he'd done nothing more than kiss the ever-loving heck out of me and cop a feel.

"Jacob," I moaned in protest even though I leaned into his chest. "I need to feed Chairman Meow and then we can go on that date I owe you."

"How about we skip right ahead to dessert?" he rumbled, his bristly whiskers rubbing against my cheek, no doubt leaving a trail of red marks. Anyone who saw me would know right away that those marks were beard burns.

"That's fifth...no, sixth date stuff. So how about it, big guy? We'll never get to a sixth date if we don't have this first one."

With a groan, he stopped his ministrations and stepped away from me, letting me drop to the floor with my jelly legs.

“Just let me feed him and get changed, and then we’ll be on our way.”

He hummed in agreement, turning away from me and rearranging his pants—and dang if that did not turn me on.

CHAPTER 18

The mayor’s dinner with his mystery investors got pushed back a week, so I’d been holding onto my gift packages all that time. An entire week where Jacob was practically glued to my hip, much to the glee of everyone in town. I got wind of a betting pot that was going around about whether I would be joining him when he left for Boston.

That made me hesitate to give one hundred percent of myself to this relationship—unlike Jacob, who was so gung-ho I was wondering if there was something I was missing. I mean, we’d only just met. It didn’t help that he was being cagey about when he was going to leave; anytime I brought up his cousin, he’d either change the subject or kiss me silly until I’d forgotten what I was talking about. We’d been on two more dates after the first one, during one of which I’d taken him surfing in the dead of night when there were little to no tourists lurking around to ruin the fun. That night, I’d almost given in and let him have me right there on the beach with the moon shining down on us. But I’d managed to pull back at the very last second. To his credit, Jacob was being a good sport about not pushing me into committing fully or being more intimate. There was a lot to like about him—but the fact that he was a warlock from an old-fashioned, conservative, purist family wasn’t something I was ready to overlook. It wasn’t something I was sure I could ever overlook. Did I want to spend my whole life worrying that something could change? That his family

could wear him down? That his family could even be a danger to me? And what about our kids? What if they were like me, totally powerless? Would Jacob's family really allow such a slight against them to stand?

On Friday evening we were due for another date. Jacob insisted on checking out the local skating rink and watching the roller derby when I'd told him my grandmother was on the team. She, Catherine, Dawn, Destiny, and even Rachel were on the same team with a few other women from competed with teams from Mystic Cove, Beckford, and other nearby towns. It was violent and loud and if Gran weren't a seasoned skater and witch, I'd be worried for her safety—not that they ever used magic to win their matches. Against my better judgment, I'd agreed to make it a double-date with Piper and Dave while the girls stayed at their grandparents' place for the weekend.

The universe must have felt my unease about this whole double-date thing. Friday morning I was attacked with another lethargic episode. I would have chalked it up to the summer heat, but it felt more serious than that. With how heavy my head felt, I half expected to collapse to the ground and just lay there until someone found me. But I was responsible for opening up Midas Touch that day and had to deliver the gift bags before heading out to the skating rink. My body was malfunctioning; glitching, more like. For five minutes after waking up, I couldn't get it together, as if my motor functions were degraded or my brain had forgotten how to operate my limbs. It took me too long to get up off the bed and hit the shower, my movements jerky and twitchy like a rusted automaton. My blood was aflame, or at least something close to it. It hummed with a frenetic and volatile energy in my veins, roaring past my ears so that it drowned out every other sound. Breathing was a chore that left me more exhausted with each inhale. And yet, I pulled myself together somehow, getting behind the wheel of my car—even though it probably wasn't the best idea—and drove to the beachfront mall where the boutique was located, promising myself I would go to the hospital around lunchtime. By twelve-thirty, the store was still teeming with customers. Our busiest day yet this season, with stock flying off the

shelves.

“I’ll be with you in a minute!” I called out absently when I saw a customer approach the counter from the corner of my eye while I kneeled down to pick up a tray of rings I’d dropped. If the twins were here today, my ears would have been burning—maybe even literally—from the dressing down for all my clumsiness. Already I’d jotted down five things I would need to pay for, including an insanely expensive dreamcatcher Dawn made herself. Not to mention I kept giving customers the wrong change and I messed up quite a few orders in our online store.

“Looks like you’re having a rough day. Need some help?” a familiar timbre asked above my head. A bout of nausea came over me when I stood up too fast and dropped the tray of rings again. The teenagers whom I was trying to help swore up a storm for everyone to hear.

“Lady, if you're too hungover or drunk to help us, why don’t you get someone more competent to man the counter, hmm?” the black-haired Barbie with a caked-on layer of makeup snarled at me, popping her gum like it was going out of fashion. I couldn’t tell whether the dull throb at my temple was out of irritation from serving a bunch of self-absorbed teenagers who thought my lot in life was to wait on them hand on foot, or from the headache I pretended I didn’t have.

“Jeez, how do you work in a cosmetics boutique and come to work looking like Frankenstein's long-lost sister?” her friend, a petite strawberry blonde whose foundation was not doing a great job of obscuring the acne she was so obviously trying to hide, snickered.

With my nerves frayed to the point of being non-existent, I opened my mouth to tell them off. In fact, I was ready to boot everyone out, lock the door, close the blinds, and take a nap in the office, away from the blinding sunlight that reflected off almost every surface in the shop. Before I could say anything, however, Jacob stepped in. At

first, I thought he'd snap at the girls, based on the small tick of his jaw. He surprised me when he walked behind the counter and gave the girls a brilliant smile that left them a little starry-eyed and open-mouthed. Black-haired Barbie might have even drooled a little.

"Now, now, ladies, there's no need to be rude. It's pretty packed in here, and as you can see, there is only one Sophie and she's trying her best to help each and every one of you." He stepped in front of me and the girls leaning on the glass display case where we kept the more expensive jewelry pieces. I wanted to tell him that we didn't allow anyone to lean on or touch the glass, but he had the girls under his spell without lifting his pinky finger. While he helped the brats, I replaced the rings on the tray and handed it over to Jacob for the girls to choose from while I went to assist customers who wanted to pay for their purchases.

I was sure that Jacob had come to the boutique to say hello and touch base, but he ended up helping me for the rest of the day, the two of us barely exchanging any words unless he needed me to explain something about our inventory or anything that had to do with the store. My plans of stopping by the hospital went right out the window, the two of us falling into a seamless working pattern well into the late afternoon. The entire time, I was aware of the odd looks Jacob would throw my way, possibly noticing the way I was dragging the whole day, no matter how much I tried to hide it. By the time the rush of customers dwindled down, I was afraid to raise my hands and show everyone the sweat stains on the armpits of my blouse. Despite blasting the air conditioning, the inside of the shop might as well have been a blast furnace.

"Soph, you're as pale as a sheet." Jacob walked up to me and placed the back of his hand against my forehead and sucked in a breath when he felt my temperature, shaking his hand. "You're running a fever. How are you still standing right now?"

"It's only two more hours 'til closing time. I've made it this far. Might as well go all

the way.” I waved away his concern even as I pulled a stool from under the counter and plopped down gracelessly like a puppet that had its strings cut without warning. He shook his head, reaching into the pockets of his light blazer and producing a monogrammed handkerchief. I was oddly charmed that he carried one; it was so old school of him—and dabbed away at the light sheen of sweat glistening on my forehead.

“I’m sure your business partners would not mind you closing early for a medical emergency.”

“I’m just coming down with a summer cold. It hardly counts as a medical emergency.” I tried to laugh it off, the dry and brittle sound trailing off when I noted the pinched expression Jacob wore. His jaw was clamped up tighter than my mother’s cookie jar when she wanted to keep her granddaughters from getting to them before lunch. He tried to hide it, and for the most part he succeeded but for the eyes. There was no way to mask the depth of worry darkening his eyes. Sighing, I capitulated and agreed to shut down for the day.

“I’ll drive you home,” he offered—actually, more like ordered. Not that I would have said no, my head was spinning so badly. Something other than puke was roiling in my gut, searching for a way out. Some primitive, instinctual corner of my brain had an inkling of what was happening to me, the answer floating to the surface only to be snatched away before I could get a full picture of where this sudden cold came from. All I knew was that my nerves were screaming in pain and this restless thing in me wanted—no, needed a release to blow off some steam, take the pressure off, and then I would feel better. I wanted to tell all of this to Jacob, but as the thoughts fired off in my head, they were gone before I could grasp them, and I struggled to find the words to describe what was happening. Instead, I asked him to drive past the mayor’s house so that I could drop off the packages before he took me home.

“I need to call Piper and cancel the date for tonight.” I fumbled with my phone after

being buffeted into Jacob's car like a helpless baby. He leaned over me, buckling my seatbelt for me and giving me a whiff of his woodsy pine forest scent. As sick and aching as my body was, it still had the audacity to react to the proximity of his body.

“Ask her to come check in on you too.” He pulled back, his searching gaze looking over every inch of me, at least what he could see. He chewed on his tongue, a habit of his I’d picked up on that he did when he was not sure if he should say or do something.

“Out with it,” I urged him, swallowing down the bile creeping up my throat, wincing at the slight burn. I hadn’t eaten anything all day, certainly not something that would cause heartburn.

Pushing my sweat-slicked bangs away from my forehead, he peered into my eyes, all authoritative and commanding, the teacher and leader in him coming out. “I know you don’t want to believe me, and you hate even considering this, but I can feel it flowing within you... I don’t know how to explain this. It feels wrong, somehow, and I think that’s what’s making you sick.”

“Feel what?” I whispered, shaking my head and feigning ignorance. I’d rather be a blissfully unaware idiot than a hopeful one. At least I would not have to glue my shattered edges back together in the aftermath when it turned out that this was just a normal cold and nothing more. Jacob was... I didn’t know why he kept insisting on this. I was dry as the Sahara was when it came to the amount of magic in my blood. I was human, and that was it. A human with a really bad cold because I went to bed with the air-con on full blast last night, not because after twenty-four years of being a powerless witch I suddenly had a power boost. Things like that happened only in fairy tales, not real life.

“You’re imagining things,” I interrupted him before he could tell me he was talking about magic. “Why would I suddenly get magic after all this time? That doesn’t make

sense. If anything, I'd wager that someone hexed me and that's why whatever magic you're sensing feels wrong."

"I don't think that's what it is," he argued, but I held my hand up. I'd had enough of this conversation.

"Really? Because Jerome and his wife have been ex-communicated from the coven. That sounds like motive enough to curse me. My very existence is motive enough for them to curse me. Maybe this sudden illness is supposed to kill me. Whatever it is, it's not what you're thinking, so just stop! If you're so desperate for me to have magic, then maybe we should end things right here so that you can find a witch more suited to your tastes," I snapped sharply.

"That's not what this is about, Sophia, and you know it. I am just worried about you."

"Yeah? Well, it feels like you're trying to convince me to find ways to... I don't know. Jumpstart my magic? Start seeking out more witch doctors to pick and probe at me? I already told you that I am not a witch in the one way that matters, and you assured me you were fine with that. Maybe that was all lip service just to get in my pants." I regretted the words the moment I saw his eyes shatter and the fire within them go out. His expression went scarily blank and I knew he must have been hiding some serious emotions for him to go that cold.

"Make that call to your sister," he instructed and shut the car door in my face.

CHAPTER 19

Jacob was pissed. Oh, he didn't rage or snap at me or anything like that. Instead, he drove me to the mayor's house, surrounding himself in a wall of icy silence after I shut him down. I could tell from the way he clenched his jaw and the white-knuckled grip he had on the steering wheel and the turns he took too sharply for my liking.

I could have reached out, apologized for the harsh words I spat at him. Those had been my own insecurities speaking up, part of the reason why I still questioned whether he was being genuine in his feelings for me or just killing time with a small-town girl before getting back to his real life. A man like Jacob, blessed with good looks, wealth, the heir to a prestigious family, and a powerful warlock with a thriving career—it would be remiss of me not to believe that he didn't have a gaggle of women beating down his door.

Over the ten-minute drive, I tried to summon up the courage to apologize, but by the time my tongue loosened up enough to shape the words, we'd pulled up in front of the grand estate belonging to the mayor. The guard at the gate saw my face and automatically swung the high iron gates open and waved us down the winding driveway. The little courage that I drummed up vanished into thin air.

There were already a few cars parked in the circular driveway of the Victorian mansion and I prayed that I wasn't late. I was under the impression that the dinner would be later in the evening, but this appeared to be more of an early evening garden party than a formal event. I spotted Catherine Hawthorne's sedan parked ahead of those of other members of the city's unofficially official council. We called it that because, strictly speaking, this council was not under the direct command of the

mayor's office, but more of a governing body made up of members from each of the races that thrived in Mystic Cove—human, mage, vampire, and shifter. Those on the council helped the town navigate the sometimes-tricky paths of all of us living in the same town together without letting one of the three other powerful races gain too much authority over the others or run roughshod over the humans who were defenseless against all of us.

“I’ll just be a few minutes,” I told him, unbuckling my seatbelt. The collection of gift bags was in the trunk of the car, about fifteen of them. I’d be done in two trips and then he could drop me off. He probably needed some time away from me to cool off.

Without saying a word, he got out of the car and helped me gather up the bags. Each one of them contained two different scented candles, a set of floral-scented hand and face creams, bath oils, and a couple of bath bombs. Jacob’s trunk smelled like a spa—a mixture of aromatic scents like sage, lavender, aloe vera, honey, and a plethora of others.

“Remind me to get a couple of these before I leave.” Jacob brought one of the bags up to his nose and took a sniff. His voice was subdued, eyes still cold and distant. I flinched at the reminder that he could be leaving any day now, even tomorrow morning if his grandmother gave him the all-clear.

It could be as early as tomorrow, or as late as a few weeks, but one thing I was sure of—come the end of summer, Jacob’s presence in Mystic Cove would be a fading memory. He had his students to get back to.

“Hey, Pam.” I greeted the woman who opened the door, the mayor’s personal assistant. She gave me a strained smile, the soft strains of jazz music floating out from behind her.

“I was just about to call you. Nearly gave myself a heart attack when I realized that

no one informed you to bring the bags by earlier. Hank went and changed plans for the dinner party into something else entirely. I swear that man is trying to drive me to an early grave,” she complained, stepping aside to let us in. Her nose crinkled and her eyebrows went all the way up to the severe widow’s peak of her hairline when she saw the giant of a man hulking behind me. She cleared her throat, hand over mouth to hide her smirk, but she couldn’t do anything playful glint in her eyes.

“Don’t start,” I warned her. “Where do you want these?” I held up the bags.

Lips twitching, she led us through to the dining room and then outside through a set of French doors into the rose garden. A small tent had been set out across the lawn. Fairy lights and lanterns were strewn above a table set for sixteen placed in the center of the tent. The guests were yet to be seated and mingled around the gardens, drinks in hand. I pegged the faces I didn’t know as the out-of-town investors—around eight or nine of them—and even though I couldn’t be sure, I suspected they were all witches and warlocks too. They were here about building a sister school to Redwood after all.

“You can just place them over there. I’ll hand them out when the night winds to a close.” Pam pointed to a smaller table off to the side of the French doors.

Jacob and I were arranging them in neat rows when my body started glitching again, the muscles in my hands spasming and making me knock a few bags over. “Dang it,” I swore under my breath when I felt my calf muscles started to do the same thing and my knees lock painfully.

“Soph?” Jacob was by my side immediately, his arms around me before I buckled down a graceless heap of twitching muscles. “Breathe, baby.” He touched his forehead to mine and kept repeating the same thing over and over again. I wondered why until my lungs cried out for breath and I realized that I’d stopped breathing. I sounded like a dying whale when the spasms stopped just as quickly as they started

and I sucked in a lungful of air.

“Oh my God, is she okay?” Pam asked. Someone had cut off the music and I was aware of the crowd gathering around us. It took a few more breaths before I felt relatively steady on my feet, but I did not tell Jacob to let me go. Instead, I burrowed my head into his chest, both because I was embarrassed to face all those people and because he centered me in a way I could not explain. He quieted that writhing sense of otherness in me, but not enough to suddenly make me feel better. If he was using magic to do so, I couldn’t tell.

“Jacob, what’s wrong with Sophia?” I heard Catherine ask. I looked up from Jacob’s chest and over my shoulder to see her squeeze past the guests and stand next to us. She grabbed my hand. I don’t know what she did, but after a moment she gasped, a startled sort of mystified wonder morphing her beautiful features.

“Not here,” Jacob said to Hawthorne. “Do you think you could stop by her place when you’re done here? Catherine?” he prodded when she remained frozen, staring at me as if she didn’t recognize me. She jumped at the rough bark of her name from Jacob and nodded thrice, rapidly like a bobblehead action figure.

“Of course, of course. I’ll...I’ll be there.” She and Jacob seemed to be having a secret conversation that I wasn’t in on.

“Then we’ll see you in a few hours. Soph, can you walk back to the car?”

I think I might have nodded, and then he was following me out after muttering an apology to everyone and hastily righting the upended bags. We were almost to his car when another one pulled down the driveway and a sylph of a woman stepped out. Braids that flowed down all the way to her waist, sun-kissed golden-brown skin that seemed to shine from within, and a face that looked like it belonged on the cover of Vogue. She bore a striking resemblance to Naomi Campbell with high cheekbones,

full lips, and long legs. She was dressed in a sequined silver mini-dress that showed off her beautifully defined and never-ending legs.

Behind me, Jacob tensed up, swearing under his breath. Probably because the newcomer was staring at him as if she wanted to gut him and wear his intestines around her neck in victory. Her hate-filled glare shifted from Jacob to rest on me, her dark feline eyes going impossibly darker and narrowing to slits. The last time I felt the kiss of death peppered down my spine was when Jerome and his friends locked me up in that dark crypt.

“Hello, Gemma, you look well.” Jacob stepped up to stand between me and Gemma, his voice a strangled croak. I narrowed my eyes at his back when he reached out to stop me from moving out from behind him. Annoyed by this protective tendency of his, I pinched him on the side and moved to stand beside him. I did not know who this woman was, other than a witch, but I refused to cower behind Jacob like a helpless ninny.

Gemma crossed her arms, flicking a dismissive look at me before curling her lips in a teeth-baring snarl when she stared down her nose at Jacob.

“I look well? Is that all you have to say to me after ripping out my heart and tossing it into the garbage for all the world to see? I’d heard you were traveling the world, but it turns out you were cozying up to this...this...” She waved a hand in my direction. “Is this nobody the reason why you dumped me so callously?”

“Whoa!” I held my hands up in defense when she called me a nobody. I mean, she was right, but it was still rude. “I don’t know who you are, lady, and, frankly, I don’t care. Whatever your damage is with Jacob, leave me out of it.” Facing the man beside me, I said, “Clearly you have some unresolved issues here. I’ll wait in the car while you deal with them.”

“Sophie, it’s not what you think.” He grabbed my hand before I could leave.

“I am not thinking anything, and I am not mad at you either. Obviously you had a past before me, just as I dated others before you, and I don’t begrudge you that. All I’m saying is talk to your ex—” I barely stopped myself from calling her bitter. “—and then take me home.” To prove that I meant what I said, I gave him a peck on the cheek and aimed a saccharine sweet smile in Gemma’s direction. At this rate, I’d have a new hex to add to my growing collection by day’s end.

I sat in the car, watching as Jacob and Gemma argued before she stormed off into the house and Jacob stared at the sky in exasperation before coming to join me.

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“Sorry about that,” he apologized, sliding into the driver’s seat.

“Is everything sorted between the two of you?”

Jacob laughed bitterly at my question, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Hardly. Gem will carry this grudge to her grave.”

I tried not to bristle at the use of the affectionate nickname. It was probably a habit that he fell back into every now and then, which meant they had been together long enough for the habit to form.

“Gemma and I dated for a few months, and apparently that made her think I was going to ask her to marry me when her birthday came around. When I didn’t, she freaked out on me. Long story short, I ended things, and not soon after, my grandmother sent me searching for the Book of Shadows,” he explained, starting the car.

“You don’t owe me any explanations, Jacob,” I said, quietly staring out the window as he maneuvered his way out of the driveway, being careful not to smash into any of the other cars. I turned around to face him when I felt his hand curl around mine, interlocking our fingers and bringing them up to his mouth for a kiss on the knuckles.

“I know, but I wanted to tell you so that we had no miscommunications. I didn’t want you thinking that I’m not serious about wanting to be with you. It might be early days yet, but I’m in this for the long haul, Sophia, and I need to know you’ll be right here with me every step of the way.”

The words were right there on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't say them. Instead, I apologized for my earlier outburst and thanked him again for helping me out in the store. There was a flash of disappointment that he worked to hide quickly, and he gave our interlocked hands a gentle squeeze and held them on his lap the entire drive home. Guilt stabbed at me for not giving him the words he wanted to hear. I needed to work through this roadblock before our relationship imploded before my eyes.

CHAPTER 20

I must have dozed off because I didn't remember getting out of Jacob's car and walking up to my bedroom. He must have carried me up and deposited me on the bed. I flushed at the thought of him divesting me of my shoes and jeans.

He'd left the curtains to my bedroom open, the soft glow of the moon casting everything in silver light and the breeze sending the gauzy material fluttering like a ghostly figure. I shivered, the chilly winds washing over my sweat-soaked body. My sheets and pillows were soaked through and my hair stuck to my forehead and the nape of my neck. My chapped lips tasted salty. Some of it had even crystallized on my skin as the sweat dried. I still felt pretty weak and tired, but my fever had died down.

Someone had left a glass of water and two Tylenol on my nightstand next to my phone. After taking the meds, I stripped the sheets off my bed, removed the pillowcases, and took off what was left of my sweat-stained clothes, intending to toss them in the washing machine downstairs before going back up for a shower. Barefooted and wrapped in only a towel, I made my way downstairs in the dark, keeping an eye out for Chairman Meow. He liked to wander off, but he was usually back by now, sleeping at either the foot of my bed or on the pillow next to mine.

"Soph, is that you?" a gritty voice asked in the dark as I crossed the living room into the kitchen. A huge figure rose up from the three-seater couch. A blood-curdling

scream ripped through the silent night before my mouth could catch up to my brain, which had already clocked that the dark figure was Jacob. My hands were already moving too, the laundry basket lying at my feet as I grabbed my jeans and tossed them at him, wishing it was something with more weight behind it.

He caught the pants midair with ease and rushed to turn the lights on, flooding the room with a bright yellowish-white glow that hurt my eyes. “Easy, babe, it’s just me!”

If you looked at my chest, you would have seen my towel pulsing up and down in tandem with my racing heart. I clutched the towel close to my chest before it unraveled.

“What are you skulking around in the dark half-naked for?” I yelled at him, my eyes glued to his ripped muscles. He was dressed in just his boxer briefs, his shirt, blazer, and pants hanging over the back of one of my couches. Chairman Meow was sleeping on the blazer, getting his cat fur all it. Blue-green eyes glared at me, his pupils narrowed to thin slits before he closed them and curled up to sleep once more.

“I wasn’t skulking,” Jacob began, rolling my jeans up and returning them to me. I tried, the goddess knows I tried, to keep my eyes from trailing a path down his washboard abs to the deep V at his hips and disappearing beneath the waistband of his Calvins. Mentally reciting the recipe for the energy tonic Piper always had me make for her, I attempted to rein in my wild thoughts and force myself to stare at his eyes and his eyes only. Eyes that reflected back the same heat that burned me up from the inside out—and no, I wasn’t talking about my fever. The sheer intensity of want and need coming from Jacob took my breath away. I wanted to let the towel drop and rub myself against his body, trace my fingers over the dips and grooves of his abs, to feel if his body hair was as coarse as it appeared or as soft as the hair on his head.

“I was sleeping when I heard you come down the stairs and I thought maybe

something was wrong. How are you feeling?” He was asking practical questions, yet his voice was smoke and honey.

“I feel—” My voice broke and I had to clear my throat before speaking again. “I feel sticky, sweaty, and hot. But much better than before. What are you doing here?”

“I couldn't leave you all alone when you were feeling under the weather, could I? Your sister and Catherine both agreed that I should stay to keep an eye on you overnight,” he explained, gathering the blankets and clothes and putting them in the laundry hamper.

“They were here?” My eyes went to the coffee table where three coffee mugs sat.

He nodded. “Your sister says you should be fine with some rest and maybe some cold medicine to relieve the flu symptoms, but we had an interesting talk, the three of us.”

“About?” I prompted when it looked like he wasn't going to bother explaining further. My stomach chose that moment to growl, and it wasn't anything quiet or subdued. Jacob laughed and took the hamper into the kitchen.

“Go take your shower. I'll make you something to eat and then we can talk.”

CHAPTER 21

It was around ten-thirty at night when I pushed away an empty plate, my stomach filled up with the omelets Jacob had made. We were seated on the kitchen stools on the same side of my island counter, with the windows cracked open as well as the door that led outside. Aside from the ambient sounds of nature floating in from the outside and the occasional clink of cutlery as we ate, the only other background noise was the low hum of the washing machine as it worked. Jacob stood up and gathered the empty dishes into the sink.

“Leave them. I’ll wash them tomorrow,” I said when he reached for the dishwashing liquid. Something told me he was stalling for time, and that made me nervous. Standing up, I reached into the cupboard for two glasses, grabbed some ice, and poured us each some ice tea. “Sit,” I ordered.

When he complied, I sat next to him and turned to face him so that both of his knees were on either side of mine.

“Now, tell me what you all talked about. Did you find out what’s wrong with me?”

Jacob gulped and drained his tea in one go, the ice cubes hitting against the glass when he placed it back on the counter.

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“Jacob, you’re freaking me out here. What’s wrong? Did I come down with a rare magical disease or something?” I laughed nervously, scratching the side of my arm.

“Catherine and Piper, they, uh... Look, I know you don’t want to hear this or dare to believe it, but you are not as powerless as you think, Soph. We don’t know how this happened, but all three of us sensed something within you, and it wasn’t a curse or any form of external magic cast on you. It’s you, Sophia.” He poked gently at my chest right above where my heart was. “Your sister sensed it, and so did Catherine. It’s not as it should be—not exactly corrupted or dark, but it doesn’t feel healthy. Catherine suggested that maybe your magic has been slumbering all this time without a healthy outlet for release, that maybe it morphed into something malignant.”

“You mean like a cancer?” My voice was barely audible. A yawning sense of terror opened its jaws wide, waiting to swallow me whole. With a few words, Jacob had yanked the carpet right under my feet, and now everything was topsy turvy and I was struggling to tell up from down. And yet the wings hope, the fragile and easily excitable wings of hope, fluttered in my chest and threatened to soar into the skies. The feeling that stirred with me back at The Book Coven was roaring with joy.

“No, not a cancer. Our working theory is that the pressure of years’ worth of unused magic just grew and grew until your body couldn’t take it anymore and finally exploded. The fevers, the muscle spasms... It’s your body’s way of defending itself and leaching the excess magic out.”

“Then shouldn’t I be doing magical stuff like blowing stuff up or accidentally turning annoying customers into rats? Not making myself as sick as a dog. None of this makes sense!” I pushed away from the chair and stormed outside, glancing out at my

glasshouse, a beacon of light and beauty nestled against the forest. I sensed rather than heard Jacob walk up behind me and leaned into his body when he hugged me from behind. He'd put his pants back on—thank the goddess!—but he was still shirtless, and the heat of his body seeped into the back of my thin cotton pajama top while the night breeze came from the direction of the woods.

“I know you're scared and confused, my love, but this is not a bad thing. Your magic is likely manifesting itself this way because you never had the proper training to will and shape it into doing what you want it to do. It's just raw energy at this point. But once you learn how to control it, I have a feeling you'll be an unstoppable force. I'll teach you.” He kissed me on the crown.

“You won't be here forever, though.” I sighed. It was high time we hashed this out. “I care about you a great deal, Jacob. I don't know how or when it happened, but I do. And the fact that you have a whole life out there makes a girl gun shy about taking the next step in this relationship,” I confessed in a ragged whisper. It was a lot easier to talk to him this way, when I wasn't getting lost in those ocean eyes and getting tongue-tied or sidetracked by other feelings.

“Then ask me to stay. You know I will.”

“How can I? And why would you give up everything for a woman you just met? There are others in Boston who surely have a prior claim to your loyalty. Your family. Your students. Pritchard.” I spat the name out and broke out of his hold and turned to face him. Jacob leaned into my touch when I cupped his cheek. “How do I ask you to give up the life you built to stay with me here?”

“Because I love you,” he answered matter-of-factly, as if it was to be expected. As if it was obvious, as sure as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. And maybe it had been staring me right in the face, the depths of his feelings for me, and I just didn't want to see it.

“Jacob—” He shushed me, placing his finger over my mouth and smirking at the annoyed look I gave him.

“I never told you why I came into the store today, did I? I leased a place out in Westview. Well, not Westview exactly. The properties there are too expensive for my taste,” he explained, referring to the exclusive and affluent neighborhood where the wealthiest in Mystic Cove lived. It was the same neighborhood we’d been in earlier, at the mayor’s house. “But I managed to get a place nearby...with an option to buy if I want to stay here...permanently.”

My mind went blank, and Jacob must have read my lack of a reaction as bad because his excited smile fell off and he stepped away. “Unless you don’t want me to stay.”

“No, no, no. Of course not! I mean, I want you to stay, but what about Redwood? Are you sure about this?”

“Is the sky blue?” he quipped, and I couldn’t help myself.

“Technically, it’s black. The only reason it appears blue is because when sunlight enters the earth’s atmosphere—”

Jacob swallowed the rest of my answer, claiming my lips with a hungry thoroughness that made me forget my own name. I got up on my tiptoes in an effort to deepen it without breaking it off. His hands went down to my thighs and I jumped up at the same time, wrapping my legs around his waist. I didn’t feel him move, but the next thing I knew, I was perched on top of the porch railing, digging my fingers into his shoulders and letting him take control of the kiss.

“I love you, Sophia. I don’t expect you to say it back right now, but know that I will make you say it one of these days. Hell, I’ll have you screaming it at the top of your lungs for the whole world to hear. You are mine and I am yours for as long as you

shall have me.” Those words felt binding, like vows to a ritual. The air around us shimmered and stirred, the leaves and branches rustled, and I think I heard an owl hooting in the distance. I felt the weight of it all seep through my skin and settle into my bones. It felt permanent and maybe it was the very thing I needed to cast away my trepidation.

“Take me to bed, Buchanan.”

He looked at me with a hungry desire, but then he looked away and took a step back.

“Wha-what’s wrong?” I asked, thinking I must have offended him somehow.

“Nothing. Nothing, Sophia, I promise.” He grabbed my hands and kissed them in reassurance. “It’s just...my ex...”

“Oh my gosh!” I exclaimed. “You have an STD, don’t you?”

“No!” he replied vehemently. “No... Not exactly, anyway.”

“Then what? What does that mean?”

“She didn’t give me an STD, but she hexed me.”

“Hexed you?”

“Yes,” he said. “She was a very powerful witch, and when we broke up, she cursed me to be unable to...get fully aroused ever again.”

I couldn’t help but snicker. “Sorry. Why did she do that?” Then I got deadly serious, crossing my arms. “Did you cheat on her?”

“No!” he said, offended. “But she thought I was. I was gone a lot, searching for the Book of Shadows. She didn’t think I was just looking for the book, jetting all over the world without her.”

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I raised an eyebrow, dubious. “She must have known how important it was to find the book. That can’t be the only reason why she thought you were cheating.”

“I admit that I wasn’t there for her,” he said. “I was so focused on finding the book, I didn’t call or text when I promised I would. And she’d had partners in the past who had cheated on her, so when I wasn’t where I was supposed to be, she thought the worst of me.”

“Does that happen a lot?” I asked. “You get so wrapped up in work that you neglect your loved ones?”

“No,” he said. “Not usually. This book just took over everything. The search took years of my life away. And I made mistakes with the woman who was supposed to be my partner. But I’ve learned from my mistakes, I promise. I wouldn’t never neglect you like that, Sophia.”

I put my arms around his neck. “I believe you.”

We kissed, but he pulled away again.

“I appreciate your faith in me, Sophia. But it doesn’t change the fact that I’m still cursed. I can’t...love you like you deserve to be loved.”

“You’ve never been able to find a cure?”

“I’ve looked, when I had time, while searching for the book. I’ve seen every manner of witch and warlock. No one has been able to break the curse.”

“Hmm,” I said. “Well, have you considered asking someone who isn’t a witch?”

“Who?” he asked dumbly.

“Me, silly.”

“Oh, right. You are a potion mistress after all. Are you any good?” he asked playfully.

I bopped him upside the head. “Well...” I had him wait in the kitchen while I went out to my workshop and brought back a couple of vials. I held up the first one, a beautiful purple liquid that sparkled in the light.

“This one is a love potion of sorts—for men. Think of it like magical Viagra. It’s not permanent, but it will certainly put some...pep in your step.”

He took the potion from me, tilting it up and down as he looked at it. “I’m not sure it will work if it doesn’t overcome the hex.”

I held up the next vial, which was filled with a liquid that shimmered from green to silver. “Then you need a hex breaker like this one.”

“Really?” he asked, not wanting to get his hopes up. “Are you sure it will work? I’ve tried so many magic spells to try and free myself.”

“Believe me,” I said, “many powerful people have been able to undo hexes and curses with this.”

He let out a long sigh. “What could it hurt, right?”

I nodded. “Bottoms up.”

He uncorked the bottle and gulped it down in one sip. He grimaced a bit at the taste; I'd been told it tasted like black licorice. Yuck. He wrinkled his nose and licked his lips.

"Well?" I asked impatiently.

"Well, what do you say we go to your room and see if this thing worked?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. He whisked me up into his arms and carried me into the bedroom.

* * *

We made love into the wee hours of morning, and I finally understood what the romance novels were talking about. No matter how many times we came together, each time felt new and different from the previous bout of lovemaking. We were both insatiable, with no signs of either of us ever getting tired of it. I lost count of how many I love yous were whispered between kisses and breathy giggles, but I'd never felt happier. It was as I was about to doze off that Jacob confessed something else.

"I've been speaking to Hawthorne, and she's willing to give me a teaching position once the academy here is completed," he whispered against my hair.

"What will you be doing until then?" I asked on a yawn. He shrugged, jostling my head as I was resting it on his arm.

"Take you on an extended honeymoon? Show you what the life of an adventurer's like." He laughed sleepily. I, however, found nothing funny in what he'd said. My heart bottomed out as I hastily sat back, gaping at his sleepy-eyed dopey expression.

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“Honeymoon? Are you asking me to marry you?” I forced the words out, fighting back a wave of panic. I loved him, that was not in question, but marriage was something else altogether. The horror expressed on my face woke him up. He also sat up, almost banging his forehead against mine.

“I meant vacation, an extended vacation,” he corrected himself, stumbling over his words. “That is not to say I won’t ask you to marry me one day, but I just had a case of brain freeze. I seriously meant an extended vacation.”

CHAPTER 22

Jacob stayed over at my place all weekend, except when we went to his hotel room to sign him out and pick up his stuff. We also made a stop at his new place, which was already fully furnished and just waiting for him to move in at his leisure. He gave me the grand tour and we went back to my place where he tried to teach me how to use my magic.

“It’s all about control, babe. Picture what you want your magic to do—the shape, color, and even taste you want it to have. Feel it run through your veins and the magic that’s already out in the air and command it to your will,” he whispered behind me. We were seated on the floor of my workshop, a fat candle in front of me that he wanted me to set alight. We’d been at it for almost two hours, and all it had gotten me was a sore butt, sweaty armpits, and possibly my face permanently stuck in a constipated expression.

“It’s not working! Let’s just give up. Maybe you guys are wrong and I’m just suffering from the effects of a curse after all.” I kicked the candle away in frustration

and buried my face in my hands.

Jacob sighed and got up from the floor. I could tell that I was getting on his nerves with my defeatist attitude. Instead of going off on me though, he poured me a glass of water and handed it to me. “Let’s take a break so that you can center yourself. There’s no need to rush. Rome wasn’t built in a day, right?”

“Spare me,” I said without much heat, reaching for the candle and placing it back in its position. “I’m not frustrated because it’s taking me ages to complete an exercise meant for young witchlings.” I sighed, stood up, and shook out the pins and needles from my legs and stretched my hands over my head.

“I’m frustrated because I feel nothing, no stirring of magic. Not a single spark. Zilch. Nada.” I touched the tip of my index finger to the tip of my thumb, making a zero sign. “I was there when Mom and Gran taught Piper this exercise. She blazed that candle up in less than a second.” Granted, she’d also set the carpet ablaze, completely demolishing the candle, but she still managed it on her first try.

“Maybe this is not the exercise we should be trying. This is meant to teach control,” I suggested, pushing my hair from my eyes.

Normal, healthy witches and warlocks could use magic anywhere from a few months to a year after birth—or so the experts claimed. Parents had to keep a constant eye on them with “magical leashes,” a spell that allowed parents to control their children’s magical abilities. At least until they were old enough to learn and understand control on their own. This candle lighting exercise was meant to teach control, to modulate magic output and direct it.

Jacob scratched his beard, his eyes wandering to the ceiling in a thoughtful countenance. “You’re right. We need something that will teach you how to draw out your power, or at least draw out the magic surrounding you, before we teach you

control. But for the life of me, I can't think of anything."

"Aren't you supposed to be a teacher?"

"All my classes are high school level juniors, seniors, and a couple college-level classes. And for your information, I mainly teach offensive and defensive magic. History too. I've never had to work with anyone who was starting from scratch. Maybe we should bring in Beverley and Catherine," he suggested.

I grimaced at that. I'd been avoiding my family all weekend, putting off having to talk about my supposed abilities. I still had no idea what caused them to make an appearance after two decades of nothing, but I wasn't about to look a gift horse too closely in the mouth.

"Maybe, but not today, and I think I'm done for now. I'll make us some lunch, and then I need to get to work in here." I waved a hand around the workshop.

"Can I help you? Might as well keep myself busy somehow." He followed me out of the workshop, stealing a kiss along the way.

* * *

Tuesday found me filling in at The Book Coven again, drowning out another one of Lucy's rants. Apparently, she and Bruce had yet to make up. He had apparently moved on from "stick-legs Savannah" to "melon-boobs Melanie." At least her epithets were hilarious, but there was only so much teen drama I could take. Listening to her, I wanted to shake the little wolf and tell her to stop obsessing over this boy. And maybe I wanted to shake my grandmother too. The only reason Lucy was dead set on Bruce and Bruce alone was because they were supposed to be mates.

"...should have seen them, going at each other like animals. In the middle of a

parking lot for everyone to watch! Who does that?” Lucy huffed, stocking a new order of stationery that had come in. “If Melanie’s boyfriend hadn’t caught them, Bruce would have totally bonked right there on the hood of his car.” She gave disgusted—and exaggerated—shudder. “I’ll never be able to sit there again. You know what, mate or not, I am so done with Bruce. Like what the heck, Soph?”

“What the heck, indeed?” I mumbled, flipping through an online magazine behind the counter. It was a good thing the store was empty right now because her voice was gradually turning into a wolf’s growl as she ranted. She was facing away from me, but I knew her eyes had gone wolf, a luminous amber that you wouldn’t see anywhere else.

“Just three days ago, he was in my room three sheets to the wind. Do you know how much alcohol a wolf has to knock back to actually get drunk? And he was telling me all these things. Nice, wonderful things that made me think that maybe we had a chance. He said he had never felt this way about anyone else before. And then the next time I see him he has his hands down that skank’s panties!”

The bell above the store’s door rang as a customer came inside. I almost whooped for joy, thinking that I’d get a break from listening to Lucy repeat the same story over and over and over again.

“Oh crap. The two of you are not having this out here. Luce, take five.” I snapped my fingers to get her attention when Bruce walked into the store, tail tucked between his legs and looking like someone had killed his puppy. I could picture his wolf form, sad eyes with his ears pressed down close to his head.

“What are you doing here?” Lucy barked.

“Can I talk to you for a minute, in private?” His eyes flicked to me and then back to Lucy. This was a guy who knew he’d screwed up big time.

“I have nothing to say to you. In fact, you can take whatever little speech you’ve prepared and shove it up your—”

“Hey! What did I just say? Take five and sort this mess out. I’ve had just about enough of your antics. Either make up or shut up. Chop, chop.” I clapped my hands and shooed them out. Lucy tried arguing with me but snapped her mouth shut when I glared at her.

I had about five minutes of blessed silence before my next headache walked in. I did not know who he was at first, but something about him felt familiar. The hairs on my arms stood on end, a trickle of fear putting me on high alert.

Dirty blonde hair, forest green eyes, and a tall, lanky build. The coloring and body build were different, but the features were similar, including a row of three beauty spots under one eye. This had to be the man Jacob had been avoiding all this time.

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“You must be Sophia Barnes. It’s a pleasure to meet you at long last. The name’s Daniel Buchanan. I’m sure you’ve heard of me.”

CHAPTER 23

I pasted a pleasant smile on my face, burying any signs of recognition. Cocking my head at an angle and widening my eyes, I played dumb. “Good afternoon, Mr. Buchanan. I’m embarrassed to say I don’t recognize you. Have we met before? Are you here about the boutique, an investor perhaps? Or maybe you’re a celebrity. You have the look of one... I, uh, don’t keep up with celebrity culture and all that,” I rambled when I should have held back because the warlock was not buying what I was selling.

“Cute, but I know you know who I am. And you know that I know who and what you are to my cousin. He and our grandmother have been careful not to mention his location in their correspondences, but my idiot cousin just couldn’t contain himself when it came to you.” He walked over to the seating area and sat himself down on the couch, crossing his legs. Daniel was dressed in a tailored three-piece suit, his hair gelled to within an inch of his life, and wore hand-stitched, brown leather wingtip shoes. He waved a hand for me to take the seat opposite his, but I remained behind the counter, wondering if I could reach for my phone without him noticing. I still didn’t have any powers I could use despite Jacob and my family’s best efforts to teach me, and this guy’s magic was like a stealthy python curling around my body and slowly squeezing tighter and tighter. One wrong move and my bones would be crushed to dust.

He chuckled darkly at my display of defiance and continued on with his monologue

as if he were chatting idly about the weather. “You see, after meeting you, Jacob couldn’t resist telling our grandmother that he’d met his mate. They were both pretty chuffed about the news. I, of course, was more annoyed than anything while spying on their conversations. All I really cared about was finding the Book of Shadows, but he wouldn’t stop talking about this random woman he met. He had an anti-tracking spell to block me from finding him. I was at my wit’s end until he name-dropped you and I had an epiphany!” He snapped his fingers. “A few keystrokes on the computer and I managed to track you down among the sea of Sophias and Sophie Barneses out there—but only one of them had her residential address listed in Mystic Cove, a haven town with a very prominent coven.”

“I am afraid you’ve lost me. What is it you want from me?” I shuffled closer to the cash register. I’d dropped my messenger bag down there instead of stashing it in the office when I’d arrived in the morning. Daniel acted as if he didn’t hear my question and continued speaking.

“And you wanna know what the clincher was? Gemma Jones, of all people, called me in a huff about running into Jacob here. She hates your guts, by the way, and is certifiably crazy, so keep an eye out for her.” His head was turned away from me. I made the mistake of thinking he was too absorbed in his self-satisfied monologuing and so assured in his power over me that he paid no attention to my movements.

Boy, was I wrong. I went to stretch my leg, to drag the bag closer to me by the straps when invisible hands held me in place, unflinching and unmoving no matter how hard I struggled against them.

“Let’s not do anything hasty now, Miss Barnes. I’m just here to talk. Nothing more and nothing less. All you have to do is listen, that’s all I ask.”

“Talk all you want, but I’ve already told you that I have no connection with Jacob. Have I met him? Sure. He’s been here a few times to buy some magic texts my

grandmother keeps in stock, and I've seen him around town a few times. Beyond that, I don't possibly see how I can help you."

He stood up and walked over to me. With a flick of his hand, the spell holding me in place was released. "So he hasn't told you where he hides our great-great-grandfather's Book of Shadows?"

I remained mum on that, and Daniel smiled. "I thought so. You may school your features into indifference, but the eyes don't lie. And your exquisite blues are especially expressive. My cousin may have fed you falsehoods and exaggerations about me, I wager. And all the while painting himself the hero, the white knight only looking out for the family's best interests. Am I wrong?"

I only replied with more silence. His pleasant demeanor went tight, the smile on his face forced. I tried to figure out what angle he was going for here. If he already knew that Jacob and I were together, did he really think he could turn me against him?

"Whatever your quarrel is with your cousin, take it up with him."

"He's not a good man, Sophia. He may fool people with that boyish charm of his and his impeccable manners, but Jacob Buchanan's heart's as black as they come. We come from the same stock, after all, but at least I know where to draw the line. Did he ever tell you that he tried to bring the dead back to life once?"

My stomach bottomed out at that revelation. Daniel giggled, a bell-like sound that did not suit a man like him at all, a maniacal sort of glee etched on his face. He clapped his hands—he was enjoying this. Taunting me, testing the limits of my loyalty to Jacob. My trust in him.

"Got your attention, did I? Do you want to know why Jacob never bothered to propose to Gemma even though both of our families were sure they'd get married?"

Although, I suppose now that he knows you're his mate, it would never have worked out between them. They say fated mates are destined to find each other across time. But then again, he was so sure Rosie was his mate when we were younger. Maybe he's just using you to bring her back," he mused, scratching his eyebrow thoughtfully. "Maybe you're not his mate after all." He gave me a shark-like grin.

"Who's Rosie?" I asked despite myself. I balked at the thought of anyone performing necromancy. It was taboo and the darkest of magicks out there. To bring someone back from the dead went against the dictates of nature, and witchcraft at its core was about revering the mother goddess. Nature herself. Using the ebb and flow of life energy circulating within our bodies and that which was generated by the earth itself. It was about celebrating life. Death magic was corrupt. Bringing back someone from the dead was disrupting the natural order of things.

"A childhood friend of ours. A gifted witch, gone before her time..." he answered. The pain and grief in his eyes were genuine, and the only real emotion he'd shown since he'd stepped in the door, except his disdain for Jacob.

"She and Jacob were obsessed with each other. Do you know the cost of bringing someone back to life, Miss Barnes? Trading a life for a life, yours to bring Rosie back. Do you still think Jacob's as pristine as he claims to be? If so, then why is he hoarding the Book of Shadows for himself? He's probably scouring the pages, in search of a spell or ritual that will bring back his one true love back, whole and radiant as she always was."

"You expect me to believe this rather convenient story of yours? Next, you're going to ask me to bring the journal to you before Jacob does this unspeakable, taboo act, am I right? You could have just gotten to that instead of making up this elaborate story."

"It's not an elaborate story. You are a Redwood alumni, aren't you? I'm sure if you

look in past yearbooks and old school records, you'll find all the information you need. Don't just take my word for it."

The door opened, Lucy coming back from her break. She barely gave Daniel a second glance before going back to the box she'd been unpacking either.

"I can see that you don't believe me. I won't be asking you to retrieve anything for me, Miss Barnes. I merely came here to warn you. Ask him next time you see him. Ask him to tell you about Rosalind Parker," he said with a tight-lipped smile. He rapped his knuckles on the counter and left.

CHAPTER 24

I didn't go home after closing the bookstore or contact Jacob except to send him a text giving him a heads up about Daniel's sudden arrival in town. I assured him that I was fine, but that his cousin was looking for the book and then immediately turned my phone off. It was immature and cowardly of me, but I needed to be alone. I needed to think and make sense of what Daniel had told me. Jacob would be stopping by my place later in the evening as he usually did after spending the day doing some minor renovations at his new place, so I didn't go back there. Chairman Meow could fend for himself for one evening. I didn't visit any of my family members either. One look at me and they'd know something was wrong. I ended up going to the beach, walking along the stretch of coastline until I was as far from the crowds of beachgoers. The sand felt good beneath my feet, my sandals dangling from my fingertips. Gentle waves crashed along the coast, soaking the hem of my maxi dress and covering my toes in seafoam. I stared out at the sea, blinding in its beauty and the color reminiscent of Jacob's eyes. The balmy sea breeze carried with it a briny scent, and seagulls coasted the air currents in the sky above.

There was a sailboat bobbing up and down in the distance, its sails the only thing visible about it, but its motion was oddly hypnotizing. Without conscious thought, I

settled down on the wet sand, feeling the saltwater soak through my dress, and watched the boat, a rocking dot on the horizon with its bright red sails fluttering in the wind, and let my riotous thoughts run amok.

Rationally, I knew that Daniel was playing me, that he was trying to manipulate me, but a small corner of my brain began to doubt. It was stupid, yeah. But years and years of viewing every warlock as the enemy, years of being made to feel like rubbish by a select few of them, could not be undone overnight. That small corner whispered darkly in my ear, wondering if Daniel was speaking the truth.

People didn't fall in love this quickly, did they? It was a thing of fiction...except that I was well and truly enamored with Jacob only three weeks after meeting him. And Gran was sure we were mates. But like I'd said before, she was not an all-knowing sage. And who's to say you only had one soulmate for the rest of your life? Life was as unpredictable as it was cruel. What if your mate died before you met? Did that mean you had to spend the rest of your life alone? No. You meet someone else, fall for them, and they become your new mate. Sometimes these things weren't as magical or one and done as my grandmother made it out to be. Maybe it was that way for wolves and other paranormal beings, but not humans. And the only thing that set us apart from normal humans was magic. Other than that, we were the same.

It was stupid of me to doubt Jacob this easily when he'd done nothing to make me second guess him. He'd been upfront with his feelings about me almost from the jump. Nor did he hide that his family had a murky past that involved the use of dark magic. He'd told me of the archaic traditions his family still held on to, and he did not hide the fact that Daniel was not a good guy. If I wanted to know about this Rosie girl, all I had to do was ask. He'd tell me the truth, right? Right?

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So what if he'd been in love with her? That was in the past, and I wasn't so petty and insecure as to begrudge him of his past. Our pasts shaped us into the people we become. I was Jacob's present and future. Even as I assured myself that I had nothing to worry about, that Jacob was not faking his feelings all for some elaborate plot to bring his dead lover back to life, I did not get up from my seat and look for him until the sun had long disappeared past the horizon and the moon hung heavily in the sky.

* * *

I had a dozen missed calls and twice as many messages from Jacob. Each message was more frantic than the last, demanding to know where I was and if I was okay. I spent a few minutes in my car, still parked at the beachfront, reading through the messages before I bucked up and called him. He answered instantaneously, sounding frantic.

"Fia? Sweetheart, where are you? Are you safe?" He rattled off a series of questions, not letting me get a word in edgewise until I shouted over the phone to be heard.

"Jacob! I'm fine, I'm fine. He didn't do anything to me. He just came into the bookstore, said a bunch of nonsense, and left."

"Then how come you haven't been answering any of my calls or texts? No one's seen you since you closed up shop. And that girl, Lucy? She said she saw you get in your car and drive off."

"Yeah, I, uh... I just needed some time by myself. To clear my head and think." I sighed, inserting the car keys into the ignition.

“Why? What did my cousin say to you?”

I debated brushing it off, but I needed to know. Hand on my throat, I closed my eyes and asked, “Who’s Rosalind and what is she to you?”

Shocked silence from Jacob’s end, and then, “She was my and Daniel’s best friend. She died when we were sixteen.” His voice was subdued.

“Is that all she was to you, your best friend?”

“Why? What did Daniel tell you?”

“That she was your true mate and that you want to use Tiberius’s journal to bring her back to life. Sacrifice my life for hers,” I replied on a shaky exhale.

Jacob swore. “So that was his end goal all along. He’s lying, Fia. You can’t believe a word he says. Look, I’m at your place right now. Come home and I’ll explain everything you need to know about Rosie and put your mind at ease.”

CHAPTER 25

He was waiting for me on the front porch, scratching Chairman Meow behind the ear while the spoiled cat napped on his lap. He stood up the second I exited the car, earning a displeased meow from the cat before he trotted into the house through the pet door.

“Hey,” I greeted weakly, not moving from behind the car door. Jacob ate up the distance between us in a few strides and dragged me into a tight hug followed by a swift kiss.

“Don’t ever scare me like that again. I thought that he had done something to you.”

His voice was a ragged whisper, the depth of fear and love evident in his eyes, in his reverent little touches, spearing me with guilt for ever doubting him.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to cause alarm. He didn’t come to you?”

Jacob shook his head, his hands on my face, in my hair, running down my arms. He didn’t stop touching me, maybe to reassure himself that I was there, I was real, and I was safe.

“He’s smoke in the wind. I tried using a locator spell, but he’s avoiding detection. He didn’t check into the Scarlet Season or the ski resort. I’m not entirely sure where to look, but as long as you’re fine...” He exhaled and pulled me into another hug. I swallowed the apology on the tip of my tongue. I’d said sorry too many times already.

“He wanted to turn me against you and I almost let him. I should not have let his words get to me like that,” I confessed, pulling away from him and tilting my head up to look at him.

“Daniel can sound pretty convincing when he wants to. The best lies are sprinkled with truth. Come, I’ll tell you everything you need to know about Rosalind.”

We didn’t go into the house, but continued sitting out on the porch. Jacob pulled out his tablet from a messenger bag I hadn’t noticed by the front door and brought up some pictures.

“This is Rosie.” He pointed to a beautiful redhead with a sunny smile standing between two boys. Daniel was on the right, his and Rosie’s hands intertwined, and Jacob on the left, a wide smile on his face and his arm thrown around Rosie’s shoulders.

“That’s the library at Redwood.” I recognized the monolith of a building in the backdrop and the uniforms they wore.

“Yes. Once upon a time, the three of us were inseparable. She was my best friend, as I said, but she and Daniel were in love—beyond reason, I often thought. Had Rosie grown into adulthood, I have no doubt they would have found that they were mates.”

“What happened?” I squeezed his knee, sensing that this was something he hated talking about. He’d never even hinted at losing someone this important to him before now. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he gulped audibly and ran a hand through his hair.

“She drowned while on vacation with her parents. A freak accident, one you’d never expect to befall someone who could have probably used magic to get herself to safety. We refused to believe that something as mundane as drowning killed Rosie. She was top of the class in our year. But, apparently, a sudden storm caught their family as they were yachting off the coast of Italy. Her parents told us that she fell overboard and that the medical examiner stated that there were signs of blunt force trauma to the back of her head.”

“She was knocked unconscious and couldn’t fight her way from under the waves,” I surmised. Jacob nodded, curling his arm around my shoulder and pulling me close.

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“I was devastated, but Daniel... The news of her death obliterated him. In hindsight, his obsession with the dark arts started after Rosie’s death. I can’t believe I didn’t see this before. I always thought that the reason he was looking for the Book of Shadows was out of some misguided attempt to subjugate humans and other races. But bringing Rosie back to life—” He cut himself off when his tablet started buzzing.

“I should have known.” He swore and pushed to his feet. “That’s a signal from my home alarm; someone just broke into my house.”

“Daniel?”

Jacob nodded. “He must have been waiting for me to leave the house. To think he broke through my protective wards and the security system... I need to get going.”

“I’m coming with you.” I ran after him. He stopped in his tracks and started to protest, but I grabbed him by the wrist and tugged him along. “There’s no use arguing. I may be as helpless as a baby chick right now, but two mages against one sound like better odds than you going alone.”

CHAPTER 26

Jacob’s home was in shambles. Drawers and cupboard doors were left open and furniture was upended. Jacob ignored it all and ran straight to the room he used as his home office. It was much neater than the whole house, but that was because the safe had a giant hole in it. Something had eaten away at the steel as if a vat of acid had been splashed on it, but I could smell faint traces of sulfur, which was usually a telltale sign of a spell having been cast.

“He has the book!”

“Well, he couldn’t have gone far.” We’d arrived within fifteen minutes of the alarm notification going off. “And unless Daniel lugs around the remains of his dead girlfriend with him, he won’t be casting any resurrection spells soon.”

“Good thing I placed a tracking spell on the journal. I need a map of the town,” Jacob said more to himself than me and went to the sparsely packed bookshelf in his office. He pulled out a thin book I recognized as the tourist guide to Mystic Cove sold at The Book Coven. “Grab a knife from the kitchen for me, will ya?” he asked, opening the book to the double spread of the town-wide map.

I rushed into the kitchen and searched for a knife block, but there was no cutlery in sight. His kitchen was bare except for a few appliances and a fridge that must have come with the house. So why did Jacob send me out here when there wasn’t a single knife in the kitchen? My eyes searched frantically around the ransacked kitchen. Drawers were hanging open from their respective cupboards, some of them tossed carelessly on the ground.

“Soph?” he called out from across the hall, an impatience in his voice he’d never used to call my name before. I started to tell him that I couldn’t find any type of blade when a silver glint caught my eye—a dark-handled athame. Every self-respecting witch or warlock owned such a blade. I had a whole collection of athames I’d bought online but never had the chance to use. The blades were not meant to draw blood. Rather, they were used to channel energy when performing rituals. But it was the only thing we had at the moment.

“You need to stop by Home Depot one of these days because this is the only blade you have in your house.” I stuck the tip of the blade in the top corner of the Mystic Cove fold-up map that he had spread across his desk.

“There’s nothing to be done for it. I’ll cleanse it later.” He pulled the athame out and sliced it across the skin of his palm without a hiss of pain or wincing. There were other faded marks across his palm from previous spells like these. His face was a stoic mask of concentration as the dark crimson blood pooled at the center of his palm. Muttering an incantation under his breath, he tipped his hand over and let three drops of blood fall onto the map in the general area of where his house was located and we waited.

“Why didn’t you use a tracking spell to find the Book of Shadows the first time around instead of having Gran track it down?”

His eyes remained glued onto the map where his blood started to stir and trace a red line down Main Street, leading out of town toward Beckford. “That would have required me to have had the book in my possession before. This tracking spell is keyed to my blood. I drew a tracking sigil on the back cover of the book as soon as I found it. Blood calls to blood,” he explained.

“I don’t think that’s what that phrase means. Where’s he going, he turned off the highway— Oh no! I think he’s heading to the coven circle!”

“But why would he go there? Rosie was buried in Concord, her hometown. What could he possibly get by going to your circle?”

“A large battery source of magic?” I left the “duh” unsaid, but Jacob heard it all the same.

“Necromancy requires some serious juice. He could be planning to drain it straight from the source.”

“Jacob, if those ley lines become corrupted, who knows what will happen to our town!”

His lips went thin as we both thought of all the danger that was about to befall all of us if we let his cousin mess with the ley lines.

* * *

I could not stop bouncing my leg and drumming my fingers on my lap as Jacob sped down the highway, taking us to the coven circle. By some miracle, we did not run into any cop cars and the roads were clear of traffic, so we were making good time. And maybe it wasn't good luck so much as magic. I wasn't entirely sure whether Jacob was using it to make sure that nothing got in our way. If I was annoying him with all my restless fidgeting, he did not show it. He was solely focused on the road ahead of him, hands clenched on the wheel. Occasionally, he would huff out a sigh of frustration and his eyes would flick over to me, but he remained silent.

He was worried about me, and truth be told, I was worried about what I could possibly do to help. I'd put up a brave front, telling Jacob that two against one had better odds, but I was a liability more than anything. Too bad I realized this too late when we couldn't possibly turn back. But I didn't want Jacob to be too focused on protecting me to actually face off against his cousin, so I brought the athame with me. And although I had not renewed my protective tattoos yet, they should still be able to cushion some of the blows I was bound to receive.

The forest looked completely different in the dark, not as enchanting and refreshing as it had been when we were here last. The trees blocked out any of the moon's light, growing all the way to the heavens. Some of the skeletal branches loomed over us as if they wanted to snatch us up. I kept expecting one of the trees to suddenly develop a set of eyes and a mouth and start speaking like in *The Lord of the Rings*. Leaves and twigs cracked underfoot, roots stretching out in all directions and tripping me up even with the orb of light floating above our heads that Jacob had conjured up. The light did not illuminate much, so I was basically following his silhouette, my hands held out in front of me and trying not to make too much noise. I made a whimpering sound

in my throat when something large and hairy ran across my foot.

“You okay back there?” Jacob whispered, reaching his hand back out for me to take.

“Yeah, I just had a close encounter with a mutant rat thing,” I replied hoarsely, curling my fingers tightly around his. His shoulders shook with silent laughter.

“We’re almost to the clearing—” He slowed down without warning, making me run into his back.

“You hear that?” I started to say when the wind carried with it the sound of someone chanting in Latin. Daniel.

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Jacob and I started jogging. I almost tripped over an exposed root and twisted my ankle, but I skinned my knees and scraped the heels of my palms instead. I should have changed out of my dress and sandals.

When Jacob turned back to help me, I urged him to keep going, shouting over the roar of wind that came out of nowhere. Whatever Daniel was doing, it was having an adverse effect on the weather. The skies had been clear of clouds all day with no sign of rain, but thunder rumbled in the distance. The air smelled of ozone, its very particles charged with an energy distinct only to magic. A sudden flare of light went out, washing everything in a pure white light and near incinerating my retina. I navigated the rest of the way to the clearing half-blind and felt my heart drop when I saw the wisteria on fire—and not with normal fire.

The brilliant flash of white from earlier had been the tree going up in a blaze of magic-charged flames, oversaturating the air with an abundance of life force. My hair started floating like the time I touched a plasma ball at a science center.

Jacob and Daniel were throwing energy bolts at each other, the Book of Shadows lying at the foot of the wisteria tree. Daniel stood between the book and Jacob, his eyes an unnatural color. At first, I thought they'd gone completely black, but it was a deep, putrid green—the color of decay. A web of vein-like marks pulsed on his skin in the same color and a speck of it shone in the heart of the white flame—and it was growing bigger.

Jacob threw another energy bolt at his cousin, which Daniel easily deflected and sent careening into the forest, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake.

“You don’t need to do this, Danny! Let Rosie rest in peace and stop this madness before you do something that we’ll all live to regret!” he pleaded with his cousin, his hand wreathed in blue light. Another energy bolt. The fact that the two of them were constantly producing them without recharging their stamina was a feat in and of itself.

“The only thing I regret is not finding this book before you. I could have brought her back much sooner, saved her from the pits of purgatory.” Daniel sounded unhinged. And he was yet to spot me hiding behind a tree.

I wondered if I could circle around and grab the book while Jacob distracted him. If I returned it to Jacob, he could shut down whatever spell Daniel had unleashed. Keeping low to the ground, I used the trees as cover and circled around behind Daniel. The only problem was that once I walked past the copse of trees into the clearing, he would notice me instantly.

“You don’t know what it’s like to lose your mate, Jacob! She haunts my dreams every night, begging me to save her from that horrible place. I can’t let her suffer any longer. I am bringing her back here where she belongs!” He thumped at his chest.

I felt bad for the guy, I really did, but that did not give him the right to do what he was doing.

“You’re not making any sense,” Jacob roared, approaching his cousin cautiously, stopping when Daniel tossed another bolt in his direction. “She wouldn’t want this for you, man. Rosie would not ask you to sully your soul by using black magic.”

“We’re Buchanans. We come from a long line of dark mages. Our souls were tainted long before we were born.”

Jacob remained impassive even when he saw me sneak out of the woods. I tried to

summon my own power. I could feel it in me, but it refused to manifest. So I figured I would rush Daniel and tackle him to the ground and Jacob would do the rest. Taking a deep breath, I prepared to get a running start.

CHAPTER 27

“Not so fast, Miss Barnes. Did you really think I did not see you skulking about in the darkness?” Without sparing me a glance, Daniel stretched his hand out and I was floating three feet off the ground, an invisible hand choking me.

“How about I break her neck and we’ll see the lengths you’ll go through to have her returned to you?” he taunted Jacob, clenching his fist, the phantom hand around my neck. I tried to pry it off, which was easier said than done because there was nothing to touch. Blue sparks flickered and fizzed out.

“No!” Jacob roared, his eyes going preternaturally bright. “Let her go, Daniel, before I make you.”

Daniel laughed. If evil had a sound, it would be that disjointed, maniacal cackle. He was unfazed even in the face of Jacob’s wrath. More thunder clapped overhead, but this time with forks of lightning that struck the ground dangerously close to where he stood.

It felt as if Jacob was calling the power, leeching off the burning wisteria, but before he could unleash it on Daniel, his cousin sent him flying. Jacob crashed into the thick trunk of one of the trees with a resounding thwack, his head bouncing against the tree before he fell lifelessly onto the ground.

Someone screamed. I only realized later from how sore my throat was that I was the one screaming. And that I’d somehow broken free of Daniel’s hold.

“You monster, you killed him!” Something crackled, and before I realized what I was doing, blue flames shot out of my hands and surrounded Daniel. At that moment, I’d fully intended to reduce him to ash and bone, thinking he’d killed Jacob. An indescribable, all-consuming rage spurred me on, but at the end of the day, I was still a fledgling, a level one to Daniel’s level one hundred. I had the stamina for a prolonged attack, but he was already breaking through the barrier and redirecting the flames back to me. I had no clue how to defend myself except to keep pushing the power outward even though it was draining me like water through a sieve.

“Do send my regards to my cousin when you find him in hell. I think both your lives shall be a sufficient price to bring my Rosie back to me.” Daniel raised his hands, palms facing up like he was about to pull the sky down on me, but before he could finish whatever he was doing, his eyes rolled to the back of his head and he fell back on the ground, knocked out cold.

“Jacob?” I cried. He was leaning against the tree, one hand clutched to his ribs. I ran over to him, tears blurring my vision as I kneeled beside him, peppering him with kisses. “You’re okay! I thought I’d lost you.”

“That depends on what your definition of okay is, sweetheart. I’m seeing two of you right now, and I think I’ve broken a few ribs.” He groaned. When I asked him whether he couldn’t heal himself, he shook his head. “But I can coach you. Remember what I said, shape your magic. Will it to do what you command. All you need do is picture my body healing and the rest will sort itself out...kind of.” He added the last bit when I gave him a disbelieving stare. I did what he asked anyway, feeling the magic flow through my body and arrowing it to the palms of my hands.

Heal him. Please heal him, I repeated in my head, pouring everything I had into making him okay. The fresh scent of lilacs and violets filled the air. The smell of my healing magic.

“Wow, babe, your healing magic smells like Febreze,” he joked, his laugh trailing off into a series of coughs. My lips trembled with the suppressed need to laugh, but I glared at him instead.

“Hush, you, I need to concentrate, else you’ll be healing from your injuries the old-fashioned way,” I chastised him. Five minutes later, he was nearly good as new, so I had no compunction about throwing my hands around him. “I thought I’d lost you,” I breathed into his hair.

“As if I’d let you get rid of me that easily.”

“I love you too, Jacob Buchanan. You are mine and I am yours for as long as you shall have me. I don’t want you to go another day doubting my feelings for you.” I repeated the vows he had said to me the night we made love for the first time with a goofy smile on my face.

“I never did. But we might as well make things official.” He took my hands in his, his eyes locked on mine. “Marry me, Soph. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want yours to be the first face I see when I wake up in the mornings when I wake up and the last when I go to sleep. I want our souls bound together so that we keep finding each other in all the other lifetimes to come.”

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White noise filled my head and I could hear Gran scolding me, asking what I was hesitating for. “Yes,” I laughed and cried. “I want all of that and more. With you. I’ll marry you.”

He leaned in to kiss me, but I pushed him back. “Daniel.” I looked back at his unconscious figure.

“He’s in an enchanted sleep. I won’t wake him up until we’re somewhere safe and the Book of Shadows is hidden where he can’t find it.”

I got up and held my hand out for him, pulling him up and nearly breaking my back. “Then let’s get cracking. We have a future to get to.” My cheeks hurt from how wide my smile was, and I did not think I would be stopping any time soon.

EPILOGUE

JACOB

Two years later...

I had a mountain of paperwork waiting for me at the office, but I could not be arsed to look over any of it. I was starting to regret accepting the deputy headmaster position offered to me by the school board of the Hawthorne Institute instead of a regular teaching position. Sometimes I suspected I was doing the work meant for the woman whom the Mystic Cove School of Magic had been named for. Catherine Hawthorne had given up her position at the local high school to head up this academy that she’d worked so hard to bring to her small town.

But like me, once classes began, she'd found that she much preferred being in class, shaping the minds of young witches and warlocks and putting her knowledge to use—something she felt she hadn't been able to do enough of at her old job. So, she was often found in a classroom rather than the headmaster's office, and all her admin tasks were passed on to me. I planned on bringing in an assistant so that I could pick up a few classes myself, but for the moment, I had to be content with ditching my work and making my way down the halls to my new favorite class.

Potions and Herbology with Mrs. Sophia Buchanan. Technically, she was to be addressed as Professor Buchanan, but I preferred the former title to the latter. My wife had taken to her powers like a fish to water, though there had been some mishaps along the way. Looking at her now, you'd never think that she'd lived the majority of her life without being able to use magic. But, of course, her skills with potions and knowledge of herbs and plants were second to none, which was why Catherine had offered her a teaching position. She was still part owner of The Midas Touch and pitched in when she didn't have any classes, but most of her time was spent at the school and in our home.

This day's class was taking place in the greenhouse. Soph mentioned something about teaching her class how to brew a sleeping draught. A smile stretched across my face as I wondered how many of her students were still awake. Her voice rang out from the greenhouse as I exited the administrative building and walked a short distance to the greenhouse, which was almost as big as the admin block itself. She spotted me almost immediately when I snuck into the back of her class, a familiar scowl on her face, but she ignored me and continued teaching. As I suspected, half of the class was slumped over their workstations, snoring away. The bell rang about fifteen minutes after I came in. With a snap of her fingers, the students who'd been knocked out jolted awake.

"Everybody, clean up your workstations before you leave, and I'll see you next week. Have a nice weekend." The replies she got had varying levels of enthusiasm and energy.

“Are you ever going to stop sneaking into my classes?” she asked me when I walked up to her desk, rubbing her barely visible baby bump. We were coming up on three months soon, and then we would tell everyone, but for now, the two little bundles of joy in there were our precious, little secrets.

“Nope. I like watching you teach. It feeds all my hot for teacher fantasies,” I said quietly so that the students would not hear us. Soph rolled her eyes and took off her apron while I helped gather her stuff.

“Actually, I came here to convince you to bunk the rest of the day with me—” It was only lunchtime. “—and we can get started on our anniversary weekend early.”

We would be married two years to the day this coming Sunday, and I’d never been happier. The events that happened at the Coven Circle were well and truly behind us. My great-great-grandfather’s Book of Shadows was hidden where no one would ever think to find it, under layers and layers of protective spells.

Daniel had been stripped of his powers. It wasn’t something that happened often or easily, but my grandmother and father—albeit reluctantly—both agreed it had to be done. He was living out his days in a psychiatric facility after we all realized that Rosie’s death had messed him up more than we knew.

All in all, life was good, and it would be better once our little ones arrived.

“I can’t. I have another class after lunch,” she groaned, which turned into a yawn.

“Cancel it—orders from the boss. C’mon, you know you want to. We can order in some Chinese and maybe cupcakes from that new bakery you love so much and I’ll even give you a massage. Spoiler alert, it has a happy ending.” I winked.

“You’re a horrible influence.” She laughed.

“So, is that a yes?”

Uncaring of the students still in the room, she tugged on my tie and lowered my face to hers, giving me a chaste peck on the lips.

“It’s always a yes with you. For as long as you shall have me.”

The End