



My Inherited House Might be Haunted

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance, Horror

Description: Rhett's inheritance of the gorgeous Victorian house was expected. What was not expected was:

Two familiars

A house full of ghosts

Magic powers?!

A new boyfriend, maybe, possibly, please and thank you

Now if he could just figure out how to handle everything, life would be peachy.

Total Pages (Source): 37

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One

Rhett

I looked up at the house with severe misgivings. It wasn't the first time I'd seen it but now that reality had sunk in...this was the place I had inherited?

Like, no offense to my deceased great-aunt who'd lived here, but I was pretty sure I'd seen this exact house in a horror movie. The one where the protagonists got sucked into, and it turned into this maze they couldn't figure out, and people kept getting limbs chopped off. That movie. I'd popped in and out of this house a few times over the past few months—it wasn't like I was a complete stranger to it—but this was the first time seeing it through an owner's eyes.

Did I want to live in a horror movie house?

On the other hand, this was likely my only chance at owning a home. I owned a small tech repair shop, and it was enough to pay the bills and a few extras, but housing in this area was insane. A normal ranch-style house could go for a million dollars. If I ever wanted to get out of the studio apartment I was crammed into, now was the chance.

The door to the house abruptly opened, and considering the weighty gothic style, it should have done so with an ominous creak. It didn't, surprisingly enough. A woman stepped out, and...um...seriously? What movie set had she just walked off of?

It wasn't so much the long velvet black gown she wore which gave me the

impression. Or the straight black hair falling smoothly over one shoulder down to her waist. Or even the sound of high heels clacking against the stone porch. What kick-started the thought was more the unnaturally pale skin and the bright red lipstick.

Well, hi, miss vampire. No, you may not suck on my blood.

Her eyes lit on me and she noticeably perked up. “Hello. You must be Rhett.”

To be honest, I was a little alarmed someone had walked out of the house I’d inherited. “Yes, ma’am. Who might you be?”

“I’m Cressida Everhart, your great-aunt’s attorney.”

She was an attorney? DRESSED LIKE THAT? Uh. Okay, I shouldn’t judge. I plastered on a friendly smile. “Um, yeah, hi. I was about to text you.”

“Why text when you can ring the doorbell?” she returned with a smile that looked genuinely pleased.

Why indeed. I could think of several reasons.

I carefully went past the wrought iron gate and up the stairs, where we shook hands. I say carefully because the front sidewalk was very uneven and clearly needed to be redone. The house seemed in good shape, though.

Cressida shook hands easily. She felt a little cold, not that I was one to judge. Tragically, I’d been born without blood, or so my siblings joked—I always felt colder than everyone else. “Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“Come in, come in. Let’s not stand out here.”

My mother had raised me to be polite under all circumstances. Her training currently clashed with survival instincts that said to run for it. Something about this house had a creepy feel, and no matter how many times I'd been in it, the impression didn't change. Granted, it was an old Victorian in all black with a red door, so...could be the paint job. But I had a feeling it was something else. I wasn't sure what it said about me that survival instincts lost. I found myself following her automatically.

I'd been very, very close to my Aunt Ruth but, due to physical distance, had never been in this house prior to this year. As a kid, she'd always traveled to me, often scooping me up for grand trips. When I'd gotten older, she'd paid for my college and a car, but I hadn't gone to school here in Connecticut. It wasn't until her health declined that I decided to move here after I graduated. The plan had been to live with her and take care of her, but by the time I'd made it, she'd been in hospice.

And was gone three weeks later.

That still hurt, honestly. Feeling like I hadn't gotten to her in time. Feeling like I'd failed to make the most of what time she'd had left. Looking back, I wasn't sure what had been so fucking important to delay me getting here. I'd been out of school for nearly a year by then but thought I'd had more time. Aunt Ruth had only been happy with my arrival, never saying a negative word about me not getting here sooner, which was so typical of her. Still, her death was a sore spot that grated, and I'd likely always miss her keenly.

Shaking the thought off, I tried to focus once more on the house she'd left to me. It was grand, for sure. My great-aunt had expensive taste. The inside didn't look like the beginning of a maze, at least. It kept the Gothic Victorian look, with the high ceilings and wood paneling with flowery wallpaper. It smelled like beeswax and lemon, which was also nice? I was trying to find non-scary things to focus on.

"I understand you are the only living relative to Miss Fairchild? Aside from your

mother.”

“That’s right.” I shrugged. “My family tends not to have a lot of kids for whatever reason. I have several stepsiblings, but my mother and I are the only relatives she had left. Aunt Ruth specifically willed me the house, so...here we are.” Which had been a sweet gesture on her part, but I’d rather have her alive than the house. No question.

“Excellent. I wanted to make sure. I did have the title redone in your name.” She ushered me into the first room. “I put all the paperwork and such here for you to sign, and I’ll notarize it.”

The sitting room had those elaborate settees and furniture you’d see in a period piece. The whole place was dusty and had the air of not being used, but then again, Aunt Ruth had died three months ago in hospice, so it wasn’t like anyone was cleaning. I hadn’t had the heart to worry about it. Or access to the house, what with it being tied up in estate paperwork.

“My aunt mentioned the house had been used as a movie set?” I couldn’t help but ask.

Cressida clapped her hands together, excited. “Oh, have you seen the movie, then?The Walls Bleed Red.”

“Yeah, I, um, watched it over the weekend.” I’d watched it because I was curious how the house had been used. Did I mention I was bad with horror? Serious miscalculation on my part.

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“Your aunt was so excited when they contacted her for filming. I did the legal paperwork for it. We even played extras a few times. Such fun. I do hope it can be a movie set again.”

“I somehow think it’ll happen.” I mean, the house was too perfect for it.

She had a packet of information on the coffee table, along with a ring of several rather bulky keys. Gesturing there, she urged me to sit.

“As I said, just sign a few papers and the house is yours. Also, here are the keys and stipend information.”

“I’m sorry, the what?” Stipend?

“Miss Fairchild was aware the house needed some work,” Cressida explained brightly. “And she was a rather wealthy woman. So she left money in a trust, with a stipend given to you every month. The trust is set up in such a way that if there’s any major repairs, you can submit a bill to my office and the necessary funds will be dispersed.”

For a full three seconds, I stared at her, honestly feeling like I might be sleepwalking. Because how else did I get lucky enough to have a huge house with a stipend handed to me for just existing? It was so typical of my aunt to look out for me like this. I’d still rather have her over the money, but I couldn’t refuse this last gift she was leaving with me, either. She’d clearly gone through a lot of trouble to make sure I had every advantage. The best way to repay that gift was to use it.

I was also not stupid enough to look a gift horse in the mouth. “That’s really reassuring.”

“I’m sure. My card is in the paperwork, so just call me if there’s questions or an issue.” She leaned in a little, her expression almost maternal for a moment. “This is your house. Don’t let anyone run you out of it.”

“I’ve gone from living in a five hundred square foot apartment to a five thousand square foot house. Plus, this is my aunt’s final gift to me. Trust me, I’ll fight tooth and nail to stay here.”

“Good! That’s the right attitude. Oh, and that’s”—she tapped a sticky note on the first page of the paperwork—“the combination for the safe in the library. I understand it contains some very important keepsakes that your aunt wanted you and your mother to have.”

I looked to the wooden pocket doors in question, which were closed.

Oh, and the doors had an umbrella stand full of swords just outside of them. Because where else would you keep your sword collection, am I right?

“Thanks. That’s great to know.”

I bent and signed, watched her stamp her notary seal and also sign, and apparently that was it. I was now a house owner. I had a feeling it would take a while to sink in.

“Well, do you have any other questions for me?”

“I’m sure I’ll think of several once I start settling in.”

“I’m sure you will.” With that graceful smile, she stood, shaking my hand again.

“Just reach out, as I said. And good luck with the house!”

“Thanks so much.”

I escorted her to the door, then closed it behind her. Whew. This whole situation still felt unreal to me, but yay! House!

Right there in the carpeted foyer, I did a happy house dance. The dance slowed when I remembered I was supposed to move in with my aunt. Dammit, I hated time. Time and old age had robbed me of her and I’d be mad about that for years, no doubt.

All right, first thing—explore. I wanted to really get to know the layout of the house, pick a bedroom, all of that. Oh, maybe I should put all the paperwork in the safe first, as that seemed a smart move. I didn’t know who all had keys to this house in the past, so it might be a smart move to change out locks, too. I wondered if there was a locksmith I could call, and if it would be covered under “house repairs”? Damn, Cressida had been gone a whole thirty seconds and I already had a question for her.

I whipped my phone out of my back pocket to text her and heard, very distinctly, a floorboard creak behind me.

Whipping around, I looked frantically for the source.

No one.

Just an empty hallway full of a lot of family portraits.

Putting a hand to my chest, I muttered to myself, “Old house, remember? There’s going to be creaks.”

The floorboard in front of me creaked again.

“See?” I reassured myself. “Just old house creaks. Not like the house is haunted.”

Now. Time to explore and really figure this old house out.

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I went back to the sitting parlor, grabbed the paperwork, and headed for the safe. I wanted that squared away before anything else. In a house this large, it'd be really easy to lose stuff, and that wasn't my goal with something this important.

The library had massive pocket doors with an engraved woodland scene. Really gorgeous, awesome doors. They slid open easily, and I stepped through, looking around.

Damn. I might have inherited the Beauty and the Beast library.

Okay, I kid, it wasn't that massive, but it was damn massive. I think this library took up the whole front of the house. There was not one, but two library ladders, the ceilings easily twenty feet tall, with bookshelves going all the way to the top. The book lover in me sighed dreamily. Oh, we were going to have fun in here. I'd snag books and sit in that oversized chair in front of the fireplace, a lovely fire going in the hearth, and do absolutely nothing else on the weekends. Just watch me.

Focus, focus. I was here for the safe.

Which was...where, exactly?

I looked around, saw no signs of a safe anywhere in this room, and scratched my head. Might have to call the lawyer over this one. Ooh, or Mom. Mom knew everything. I should probably get her on speaker anyway.

I dug my phone out and called her.

She answered promptly. “Hi, honey! Are you in the house?”

“I am, yeah. It’s a lot of house.”

“It is. I hadn’t seen it in person in years before the funeral, but yes, it’s very massive. Everything was transferred over to you okay?”

“Yup. My name’s on the deed and everything. I’m actually in the library. I wanted to put all the paperwork in the safe but...uh...where’s the safe?”

“Oh, right, she hid it behind a painting of God Speed with a knight and a lady.”

I looked around and spotted it behind the desk. “Bingo. Is the painting on hinges or something?”

“I think it’s on hinges. It’s been years since I was even in that room.”

Mom and I had lived basically on the other side of the US since I was born. My stepdad owned a construction business, so he was pretty landlocked where he was, and my great-aunt was the type to travel everywhere in her retirement years. We’d normally seen each other two or three times a year; our relationship mostly phone calls and texts.

I put my fingertips to the painting and it swung open easily. Sweet. Also kind of fun. I didn’t realize people did this outside of movies.

All right, what was the combo? It had been written on a sticky note—ah, there it was. Eleven, seventeen—omg. “Mom. The combination to the safe is my birthday.”

“Awww. Sweetie, she loved you a lot.”

Grief threatened to hit me again. I really wished I'd been physically closer to her in life. I'd have given a lot to just live down the street from her, or in the same city, so I could pop over on a whim. I shook my head, trying to put it aside for now.

"Well, at least I can't forget it," I joked with her. "Opening now and...wow. There's a lot of stuff in here. All the jewelry is yours, right?"

"Right. There's a few paintings in the house I want as well. She did leave some things for your siblings."

My great-aunt had liked my stepsiblings, too, so she'd left them a few things. "Yup, I got the list. I'll double-check things and then...uh...I really do not want to ship anything to you guys."

"No, no, let's not risk the mail. Your father and I want to visit this Christmas and pick everything up from you then. He said make a list of repairs, too, and he'll help you as much as he can before we have to go back."

"I really appreciate it." And would likely need his assistance. "In that case, for now, I'll just—"

I heard the heavy tread of boots behind me. Like a military man marching along the floorboards. I whirled around, panic shooting through my system. What the hell was that?!

"Rhett?"

"Hang on, Mom." I kept the phone in hand while stealthily easing back to the doors. I peeked either way in the hallway, but there was no one there.

Swords. Swords were in the umbrella stand right at hand. I snatched one up, holding

it aloft. Not that I knew how to swordfight but better to be armed. I just knew,knew, that I wasn't alone. The hairs on the back of my neck stood straight up.

Abruptly, the front door opened. Just like if someone had pushed it open and strode through, not bothering to close it behind them. I stared toward that open doorway and felt my stomach drop. That wasn't normal, right? That door was heavy, and I knew I'd closed it behind the lawyer, so there was no way it'd opened on its own.

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“Rhett, what is going on over there?”

“That,” I said faintly, “is very much the question.”

Two

Rhett

Another sound, this time behind me, and I whirled to face—

—a cat?

A beautiful cat, really. It had long black fur, big green eyes, and sat on the bottom step of the staircase like it had been there for ages and what took you so long to notice, silly human?

Had the cat pushed the door open somehow to get in? Maybe I hadn’t shut it as firmly as I thought.

That didn’t explain the footsteps that sounded like marching, though. I’d heard cats sound like a herd of elephants coming down the stairs—maybe it was the cat? I saw no sign of any other intruder, so it must have been.

“Uh, Mom? Did Aunt Ruth have a cat?”

There was a surprised pause. “Uh, no? Why? Do you see a cat in the house?”

“Beautiful black cat. Just sitting here like it owns the house. But surely that’s not possible? I mean, she never mentioned a cat.”

“I don’t see how a cat would have survived. It’s been three months since anyone was there. Well, maybe the cat distribution system found you. You said you wanted one.”

“I did, yeah. Assuming this one’s friendly.”

I’d grown up with pets in the house, but I hadn’t had any in years. I hadn’t had time to care for a cat while in college and the dorms didn’t allow pets anyway. I’d missed my furry friends very much, and I’d sworn that as soon as I was settled in my new house, I’d get at least one cat and one dog.

My promise to myself had not anticipated getting a cat fifteen seconds after inheriting the house, but here we were.

I came in closer, slow and low. “Hi, pretty kitty. Can I pet you?”

The cat gave a leisurely stretch, then hopped off the stair, sauntering toward me. Without any hesitation, it rubbed its head against my fingers, tail giving a happy flick as it did so.

“Aww, you are sweet. Mom, I think I have a cat.”

“I think you do too.”

Belatedly, I remembered the front door was wide open behind me. Not wanting the cat to escape, I crab walked over there and quickly shut the door. Then locked it for good measure. Phew, okay.

“Well, I was going to get groceries after walking around the house anyway. I guess

I'll pick up cat food and such while I'm at it. Do you want to go through the safe before I do?"

"No, honey, you get situated first. I can wait. You've got a lot to do to move out of your apartment."

"You're not wrong."

Although most of what was in my apartment was either being dumped or picked up by Goodwill. My furniture had been cheap from the day I got it—meant only to help me survive—and didn't begin to compare to the beautiful antiques in this house. Really, the only things I'd be bringing with me were personal effects, clothes, and my own book collection. They were already packed, and I had movers scheduled for tomorrow. Tonight, I'd sleep here. I had a suitcase in my car already.

I looked down at the cat sitting near my feet. Almost on my foot, really, as they had a dainty little paw resting on my tennis shoe. The cat looked up at me curiously, like they were trying to get my measure.

Same with me, little buddy. "In that case, I'm going to hang up. I'll need two hands for this shortly."

"I'll talk with you later. And make sure to video chat your father tonight. He wants a tour of anything that needs fixing."

"You got it. Love you, bye."

"Bye, honey!"

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I hung up. “First, I must figure out gender and name, then all the vet appointments need to happen,” I said to the cat. “Right now, let me go close a safe, then I can at least find you a bowl for water. Sound good?”

Cat gave me a slow blink.

“Aww, you trust me already? Well, I’m a sucker for cats. I guess you can sense that.”

I gingerly knelt and petted my kitty some more, kind of trying to suss out if I could lift and carry my new feline companion. Some cats absolutely did not do the lifting thing, while others wanted to be held like a baby. No logic to be found here, folks.

Cat did not mind whatsoever being picked up. In fact, as soon as I stood, they rearranged themselves until I had a cat draped over one shoulder, purrs to be heard from miles away. Welp, this one was clearly not feral.

“All right, then.” I walked back to the library, putting the sword in the umbrella stand, as I didn’t see any signs of an intruder and I was already one hand down. Kitty had claimed hand.

The safe’s door was still wide open, and I went to it with the intent of closing it and replacing the painting, but something caught my eye. There was a red-looking diary sitting on the top shelf, and on it was a sticky note that said: RHETT READ FIRST.

What was this?

I picked it up, then turned and braced it on the desk so I could use one hand to flip the

cover over. Now that was definitely my great-aunt's handwriting. The flowing, elegant cursive was something I could identify a mile away.

Rhett,

Welcome home! This book is something I wrote to tell you everything you need to know about the house.

Aww. Aunt Ruth had written me a manual? About the house? That was so like her. I felt the love and grief for that amazing woman tangle like a knot in my chest. Tears stung my eyes, but I blinked them back. I'd mourned her enough. Now, I wanted to celebrate the legacy she left me.

After I battled the tears back, I read the next line.

Now, first, don't panic about the ghosts. They're friendly.

Excuse the fuck out of me. WHAT?!

I paused in the reading because I felt like this was going to be an absolute doozy. Instead, I put kitty down, ran to my car, hauled in suitcases and computer, ran back to the car and parked it in the carriage house—yes, the Victorian was an 1800s build, so there was a very elaborate carriage house—then ran back inside. I got kitty situated with a bowl of water, then for the first time ever in my adult life, sat down and ordered for groceries and cat supplies to be delivered. I just didn't have the patience to go get everything myself, not when there was a mystery at hand.

Then I went back to the library, sat my ass down in the comfy chair, and my entire attention went back to the diary/letter Aunt Ruth had written me.

Right. Let's read that line again.

Now, first, don't panic about the ghosts. They're friendly.

Somehow, reading this a second time still didn't magically make me feel better. Imagine that.

Swallowing hard, I kept reading.

The house is very old, as you know, built in 1802 by Franklin Cartwright for his family. He was a lumber baron and very, very good at what he did. So good, in fact, that his family was able to keep this house up until I bought it sixty years ago. Rather astounding.

Anyway, the family's still here. Franklin, his wife, Abigail, and three children—Sophia, Maddison, and Rupert. They all died in the house—

Oh my god, don't tell me that.

—but like I said, they're very friendly. I've had many a talk with them over the years. I told them you would get the house next, and they seemed fine with that, but you should absolutely say hello so as to not offend them. Oh, and leave the TV on when you leave for work. They get bored. The sci-fi channel seems to be their favorite. Either that or a good mystery show.

I think once you all settle, you'll get along swimmingly.

Now, your neighbor across the street in the blue house is a retired cop, and very friendly. If something happens, I'd go directly there.

Aunt Ruth! Oh my god, don't go from talking about ghosts to casually telling me about the neighbors! What the hell's wrong with you?!

I slumped dramatically over the chair's arm, my head swimming. I'd had a witch friend in high school—I was very aware there were all sorts of things that go bump in the night—but I didn't want to live with them, dammit. By moving into this house, was I going to be doing a lot of seeing? Because I didn't know how to feel about that.

Two dainty paws landed on my thigh.

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I looked down at the cat, who was staring up at me. “Hi. Your food is coming, by the way. Should be here in an hour. Are you mentioned in this book too?”

The cat took my response as invitation, hopping up into my lap and getting comfortably situated before making biscuits against the chair’s pillow. Well, someone was happy.

I gave kitty a pet and read some more, but ghosts didn’t pop up again. Aunt Ruth kept talking about the neighbors and the history of the house. In the back few pages, she had a list of everyone I might need to maintain the place—gardener, handyman, the works. Even a timeline of when to get certain things done, like snaking the lines to make sure they were clear of tree roots.

All very helpful, but seriously, Aunt Ruth? You gave me three paragraphs about ghosts. Three SHORT paragraphs.

If I wasn’t already half crazy, this would push me decidedly over the edge. This woman, seriously. I half suspected she left the diary in the safe as a prank. Aunt Ruth was not above pranks.

I looked down at the purring cat in my lap. “So was the door opening and the heavy footsteps you or a ghost?”

Cat kept purring. Cat did not care.

“Figures you’d be cute but useless. I guess I’ll figure out if this is a prank or not as days go by.”

Deciding to air on caution, I looked about the room. “Uh, hi? I’m Rhett. Aunt Ruth was my great-aunt and she left the house to me. I absolutely do not want a fight with you. I think we can get along fine. Aunt Ruth said to leave the TV on, so I can do that.”

No response.

I felt a little crazy talking to the air. Really suspected this was a prank.

The doorbell rang, a loudooooooooongsound. I startled, then realized it was probably my groceries and cat stuff being delivered.

Shifting kitty out of my lap, I headed for the door. Groceries and setting up for a cat took first priority. I’d focus on settling into the house today.

The ghosts, if there were any, could wait their turn.

Three

Calix

What in the MC Escher hell was this?

I suspiciously looked about my shop, waiting for a candid camera to pop up. Everything appeared as it should be, with the glass jars still neatly lining the shelves and the bulk jars available near the front counter undisturbed. My books were all in order along their shelves. Even the herb-infused blankets and throws were all in order along their racks, looking decorative and enticing.

My shop, for once, was organized. (Rare thing, let me tell you.) And yet, here I stood over my candy jars, eyeing the creature curled up around a peppermint stick and

looking guilty but possessive of the candy.

“You.” I pointed a finger at it. “Out of the jar. Yes, yes, take the stick with you. That’s fine. Well, it’s not, but I can’t sell it with your teeth marks all in it anyway. Out you come. Sit on the counter. I open the doors in ten minutes, so you have till then to explain to me how you got in and what you’re gnawing on peppermint for.”

It crawled out and sat on my counter, the wood so old it was black with age, still clutching at its prize and blinking up at me with sad, liquid eyes. The peppermint was nearly as tall as the one holding it—maybe a foot tall? Its skin was so pale as to be almost translucent, and it had brown eyes with no pupil and thick brunette hair in an untidy fall down its back and to its knees. It was dressed in a ragged fashion—literally a rag wrapped around its body—and it seemed to be all knees and elbows.

Poor thing looked half starved. I felt my already fragile willpower crumbling. I had a weakness for cute things in distress. I gentled my voice and tried to duck down so I didn’t loom so much. “How did you get in?”

It pointed timidly toward the side door, which was open a crack. Because of course the door hadn’t seated properly and had blown open again. I really had to get it fixed. “I see. And the scent of sugar enticed you? Is that it?”

It gave a ginger nod, clutching the peppermint and not looking up at me.

“I’m not angry, you know. Worried, but not angry.” And I seriously had no idea in hell what I was even trying to speak to. At least it didn’t look dangerous.

Turning its head up, it gave me a tentative smile. Wow, that was a mouth full of teeth right there.

Sighing, I stood up and gave my surroundings a look, as if inspiration would leap out at me. Nothing did. When I'd first come to this small town in Connecticut, I'd thought it would be a good place to just be for a while. My sister and I had made the move together, in fact, opening up our businesses side by side. We'd lived in this general area our whole lives but had shifted over to this town specifically because we felt business would be better. It had seemed a good idea at the time, and we'd done our market research. We knew the town would support us—and business was good.

I just hadn't researched the town quite as thoroughly as I should have.

Looking down at the creature once more, I resigned myself to taking care of it today. I had no more time before I needed to open. In the three years since I'd been here, I'd gained a steady clientele, and most of them were early birds. They saw me before they went into work, picking up their necessities and remedies. I couldn't afford to figure out this situation just yet.

"Look, I need to open. So why don't we do this? I'll set you up in a comfy blanket near the cash register, and you can eat that peppermint all you like. And when I have a minute, we'll properly sort this out, okay?"

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I got an immediate nod of agreement. Cheerio.

I snagged my favorite throw blanket—the shop sometimes got a bit chilly—and bundled it into a comfy ball, stuffing it into a semi-empty drawer near the register. It was out of line of sight unless someone leaned over the counter. Then I carefully picked up my intruder with both hands and gingerly settled it onto the blanket before tucking an edge around it. With fall approaching, and it wearing such scanty clothing, they had to be a little cold. It certainly felt chilled to me.

They gave me a sweet smile, acting bashful, and tugged the blanket more snugly around its body before resuming eating the peppermint with gusto.

All right, my stray was settled. I was ready for business. I ducked around the counter and went straight for the door, unlocking it and flipping the sign to Open before turning and retreating to my padded stool behind the counter.

None too soon, either. My first customer hurried in and barely gave me a greeting. “Morning, Calix! I need some Moon Drops, and do you have any of that infused chocolate?”

“Morning, Maggie. And I have both. How much do you need?”

“At least a box of each, please.” Maggie grabbed the box of Moon Drops herself. She looked a bit scattered this morning, with a distinct tilt forward as if her monthly cramps were killing her.

Being a man, I couldn’t sympathize, but I could supply the goods to relieve her

suffering. My shop specialized in helping everyday ailments with a touch of magic. Not that most of my clients were aware of that last bit.

I picked out a box of chocolates from the back row of shelves. I'd learned not to leave these out for regular clients, as kids couldn't seem to resist getting their hands all over them. The chocolates were infused with rosemary, magnesium, and a bit of moon-touched sugar. The sugar was one of the key ingredients, as the crystals soaked up the moon's power and cooled the heat of the body's cramps. My clients craved it badly during their monthly cycle because it eased their symptoms.

I rang Maggie up, putting both items in a bag, but not before she opened the Moon Drop box and swallowed a pill whole. That bad, huh?

She smiled, then took her goodies and ran.

Most of the next hour went much the same, with people dashing in for a quick purchase and then dashing out again. I'd have to do something about my stock of chocolate, as they almost wiped me out in the course of that hour. Maybe a bit of cooking was in order tonight.

But with my morning rush over, I had ten minutes to spare for my guest. The peppermint stick was mostly devoured by now, leaving it in a sleepy sugar-induced coma on the blanket. I took a picture of it and shot it over to my sister. What is this?

Phaedra called me immediately. "What do you mean, what is this? Did you pay absolutely no attention when Grams went over European mythology?"

"In my defense, I was growing that year and I slept through practically everything but herbology."

She sighed, an older sister exasperated with her younger brother. "That is a Brownie."

“Oh. It’s sort of cute.”

“Yes, they are. Why do you have one?”

“It snuck into my shop last night. I caught it licking a peppermint stick.”

“And of course you’re now taking care of it.”

I shrugged, even though she couldn’t see it. What was I supposed to do, throw the poor thing out on its ear?

“All right, well, this might be a good thing for you. If you’re interested in actually inviting it to be part of your household, at least.”

“Uh...why?”

“Brownies are caretakers of a home. Or a shop or wherever. If you come up with a good bargain, it will stay and help you maintain the place. Offering it its own place in your house, with meals and such, is a good way to win over its loyalty.”

I thought about not doing my own cleaning again. Wow, yes, let’s do that. “So three solid meals a day and its own place. Is that all? Oh, and can you tell gender?”

“Yes, that’s all. And you can by asking.”

“Cool beans. Thanks, sis.”

“Wait, did the Brownie get through your side door?”

“Yeah. I really need to get it fixed.”

“You’re a witch,” she reminded me patiently. “Fixing spells are well within your capabilities. Why aren’t you using them?”

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“In this small town? Where everyone notices everything and will ask me who fixed it? Yeah, no. I’ll skip that possible quagmire and hire a handyman.”

“You’re exasperating, Calix. You really are.”

“It’s my job as your little brother. I’m doing an amazing job at it.”

“I want you to take a vacation from it for once. Bye.”

Now where would the fun be in that? But I could tease her more later. Right now, I had a Brownie to settle.

I sat back on the stool and gave the napping Brownie a gentle tap on the arm. “Hey. Wakey wakey. I need to talk to you.”

With a slow blink, the Brownie came awake and stared at me with their head canted.

“Hey, so you can understand me fine, right?”

I got a nod.

“Cool. So here’s the thing. If you’re breaking in here, I assume you don’t have a good place to go?”

The Brownie made a sad noise and wilted in front of my eyes.

Ouch. I think I just poked a sore point. “Sorry, didn’t meant to make you sad. Just

trying to understand. If you don't have a place to go, would you like to stay here?"

Their head came up again, expression hopeful on its mobile features. They made another noise, this one lilting up.

"Yeah, I understand you're a Brownie? I'm a witch. If you promise to help me keep the house and shop clean, I'll give you a space to live in and three meals a day. Sound good to you?"

The Brownie chattered at me, more like a rapid clicking of the tongue—a happy sound—and reached up to grab my hand with their own, shaking to seal the deal. My dark mahogany skin was in high contrast to its translucent skin, and I had to wonder if that skin color was healthy for my new Brownie. Or was it a sign of malnourishment? Something to ask Phaedra later.

"All right, done deal. You tell me what you want to eat, okay? I don't have the faintest clue. And let's work on better clothes for you, yeah? You've got to be cold." I scooped them up, blanket and all, and carried them back into the connecting apartment above the store. The chime would alert me to a customer if someone came in, but I rarely had customers at this time of the day. Usually lunch was my next rush hour.

The door chime promptly went off.

Fucking hell. I raced the rest of the way upstairs, settled my Brownie on the couch with the order "Make yourself at home, be right back," then raced back down.

To find not only the door open, but my crush standing in the doorway looking the worse for wear.

Rhett worked at the computer and phone repair shop next to my store. He'd helped

me out a few times with my shop computer and was a really nice guy—and damn cute to boot. He’d only been here about four months, and I knew his aunt had died only a month after he’d gotten here. I hadn’t yet found the moxie to ask him out on a date. Mostly because I wasn’t sure if he was straight or not. Plus, the timing seemed really bad, as he’d just lost someone precious to him. I was trying to give him some time to settle in first and grieve.

Right now, the twenty-two-year-old looked like something the cat dragged in. His thick brunet hair normally was styled into a pompadour, but today it was just everywhere—like he’d not bothered to style it—and damp from a shower. Those all-American boy looks were ruined by dark circles under his brown eyes, and while he was in his usual Henley and jeans, for some reason he looked rumpled.

“Rhett, you okay?”

He passed a hand over his face. “That is the fucking question. I inherited my aunt’s house. I told you about that, right? Well, yesterday I moved in, and it’s gorgeous, but sleeping in a new space, y’know? With all the creaks and groans of an old house. I’m convinced it’s haunted. Things have been moving, I’m hearing weird noises, the works.”

The nonchalant way he told me he was in a haunted house was a bit alarming. I was used to the otherworldly, but I hadn’t expected him to be. Was that why he was here, for advice and maybe some help?

“Plus, I got adopted by a cat, and I’d forgotten how nocturnal cats are,” he said.

I nodded along sympathetically. Dude looked beyond sleep deprived. A cat settling into a new house and ghosts would absolutely kill any chance of real sleep. “Want an Energy-Tea?”

“I’ll give my left pinky toe for one.”

“A sacrifice I do not need. I’ll repay the favor of computer repairs.” Honestly, it was nice to return the favor, and it made me happy to help him for once. While I did that, maybe I could pump him about some things while giving him tea. There was something about him...something about his aura that was a little off. I just couldn’t immediately put my finger on it.

Four

Rhett

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Calix was a saint. Not only did he give me a huge tumbler of tea, but he also came in and helped me put a cat tree together. I'd chosen to take the kitty to work with me because I'd always wanted a shop cat, and I had an appointment after work to get her looked over.

I should probably be nervous about being a new business owner, since I'd taken this place over a few weeks ago. Honestly, I was too tired to be nervous. I'd had so much to deal with recently: my aunt's funeral, processing her estate, moving from apartment to house—and now ghosts.

The ghosts were really, truly intent on giving me heart failure. Between hearing steps behind me and things being moved about, I felt like I was in one of those haunted house mazes. I'd love to blame some of this on me being scatterbrained. Like the having things moved on me—I would love to blame myself, but I literally saw my coffee mug get put into the sink this morning, so...clearly ghosts.

I'd spent half the night coming awake at every sound, so today, I was too tired for this shit.

Work went about as expected. My day oscillated between being crazy busy to really slow, and there wasn't much middle ground. It was the slow hours in the shop that about killed me because it was so, so tempting to curl up somewhere and take a nap.

I hit a lull at about two in the afternoon and chose to call home rather than risk a nap. Video chat, actually, as it was what my siblings preferred.

August picked up on the first ring. We had a six-year age gap between us but it didn't

really matter much. We were still pretty close. In fact, August was determined to come out here for college—which was another two years off—so he could live with me. Which I absolutely didn't mind.

He looked like my stepdad, with dark auburn hair and all the freckles, dimples winking as he grinned. "Heya, bro. How's the new house?"

"Huge. I can't believe Aunt Ruth lived there alone for decades. Really cool, though. She kept it up really well."

"Then why do you look like something the cat—whoa, there's a cat!"

Said cat had hopped onto the counter and sat near my arm, regarding the person on the small screen curiously.

"Yeah, she was in the house. I found her sitting on the stairs."

"Ohhh, she's the cat Mom mentioned. Hi, kitty. She seems sweet."

"She is, very affectionate. Still trying to come up with a name for her."

"Lucy," August said definitively.

Uh. "What?"

"Lucy. Full name, Lucy Fur."

The cat gave a meow and I just about lost it right there laughing. "August, that's terrible, and you! Cat, seriously, you like that name?"

Proving a point, August said it again. "Lucy Fur."

Cat once again meowed back.

“I give up. I was going to go a more dignified route, but if that’s what you’re going to answer to, fine.”

August looked pleased his name had been accepted. “So you are keeping her? I thought you wanted a dog.”

“I want both, really. She’s a really good companion, and I like the idea of a cat to keep the pests at bay, so she’s mine now. I’m taking her to the vet in about two hours.”

“Good. I know she’s fluffy, but she looks kinda underweight to me.”

“Yeah, she’s bone thin under the fur. She’s eating good, though. I think she was abandoned and had a hard time surviving on the streets. She’ll be a pampered princess from now on.”

“Cat distribution system working good, then.”

At that moment, Lucy Fur chose to hop down to the carpet, then raced for the back door. Bemused—I’d never seen this cat move quickly anywhere—I followed her. “Hang on, August, she’s reacting to something.”

Lucy Fur went to the back door and started pawing at the doorknob. Uh. I didn’t really want to let her out. But maybe something was back there?

“August, hang on. Gonna put you down for a sec.”

“Sure.”

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I propped the phone up on one of the many supply shelves I had in the back, then bent to scoop up Lucy Fur into one arm. I didn't want her taking off. Only then did I cautiously open the back door, as I had no idea what the cat sensed or heard out here.

Huh, I didn't see anything.

A shuffle sound came from my right.

I quickly looked in that direction and found a...dog? It was hard to tell under all of the mud and grime, but it looked like a dog.

Lucy Fur wiggled out of my arms and jumped to the ground.

"Shit. No, Lucy, get back here!"

She ignored me, going right up to the dog and touching noses with it.

Uhm. Were these two friends or something? My shop wasn't that far from the house, so it was possible.

The dog gave a little tail wag, so he was friendly with cats, at least.

Lucy Fur turned and led the dog back to me. I kid you not, she had him right on her tail like there was a leash attached. She slipped past my legs and into the shop like she'd done her job, and this was all me now.

I looked down at the dog, and honestly, this was the biggest fucking dog I'd seen in

real life. He was waist tall on me, easily, and had to be a hundred pounds. He also looked really matted, anxious, and not sure if he was welcome here.

“Oh, you poor guy.” I extended a hand carefully to him. “Hi. Are you a good dog?”

I got another little tail wag and he sniffed my hand before pushing his nose into my palm.

“Oh, you are. Will you come in? I’ve got beef jerky and water. That sound good to you?”

“Bro, what is going on over there?”

I spoke to the phone but I focused on getting the dog inside. “Lucy apparently has a canine friend. She guided him right inside the shop.”

“Get out.”

“Is there a dog distribution system?”

“Apparently so if your cat’s in charge. Uh, well, congrats on your new dog?”

“You’re funny.” I picked up the phone so I could show him. “But see his condition?”

“Yikes. Poor thing has been on the streets for a while. Tell you what, I’ll hang up. You’ve got your hands full. But call me later tonight. I’ll think of a good name for the dog.”

“Thanks, bro. Chat at you later.” I hung up absently, pocketing the phone, because he was right about me having my hands full. I encouraged the dog to come with me into my very small kitchenette/break room. I filled a bowl of water and set it down, and

the dog immediately drained it. Shit, poor thing was likely dehydrated.

The jerky was half empty, so I fed the dog some of it because he was starving. Not too much, though. I didn't want him getting sick. Then I filled the bowl again.

Okay, let's put things into priorities. This dog needed a vet too. Probably more than Lucy did.

I called the vet, explained the situation, and the woman on the other end was very sympathetic. She moved the schedule around and said to bring them both in—they'd make it work—which I really appreciated.

Hanging up, though, I realized I couldn't take him in this condition. He'd destroy my car, he was so filthy. And him hanging out in the shop like this wouldn't do any good either. Uhhh...shit, what to do.

Wait. Didn't Calix live above his shop?

I quickly called him.

"Hey, man, what's up?"

"Calix, you're not going to believe this. My cat apparently has a dog friend. She just had me open the back door to let him in."

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Calix huffed out an incredulous laugh. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m totally not kidding. Dog’s sweet but filthy. Can I please, pretty please, use your tub to give him a bath?”

“Of course, man, bring him over. Tell you what, while you’re washing him, I’ll grab some supplies from the pet store next door.”

“I owe you, man, thank you so much.”

Calix was seriously the nicest guy I’d ever met. Also one of the hottest men I’d ever laid eyes on. I think he was about five years older than me? He had this kind of African shaman air to him, what with the alternative store he ran and the style he had. His black hair was always in these braids past his shoulders, with all sorts of crystals and beads woven into them. Most of his shirts showed a good section of his chest, too, and it was all mahogany skin and muscle. Honestly, he looked like a fantasy character brought to life in many ways. If I had any inkling he was interested, I would have tried flirting by now.

I looked down at the dog, which had finished yet a second bowl of water and was looking up at me expectantly.

“Under all that dirt and grime I think there’s a really handsome dog. Let’s find out, shall we?”

Five

Calix

Of course my apartment wasn't clean when my crush needed to come over. Of course it wasn't. It was inevitable that when a hot guy was in my vicinity, I did not have my shit together. Probably why I was still single. If I was lucky, I could handle the worst of it before he actually breached my doorway.

I told Rhett to just come up the stairs over the phone, then I threw a Be Back Soon sign on my store door, raced upstairs, and abruptly remembered I had a Brownie to deal with.

"Uh, dammit, hi. I swear I didn't forget you, it's just that my neighbor has a dirty dog that he's bringing up for a quick bath and can you hide somewhere?"

Brownie gave me a thumbs-up, hopped off the couch, and dove into the nest of blankets on the window seat.

"Perfect. Sorry for this, really. As soon as he's gone, I'll get you better settled."

Brownie waved from under its nest of blankets and seemed wholly unbothered. I really had to get a name and better clothes for my new friend, but one emergency at a time.

I heard a commotion at the door, raced that way, and found Rhett there with both dog and cat in tow. Not that he'd carried the cat up here, but apparently cat went where Rhett went.

I'd thought this when I'd first met the cat, but now seeing how she was shadowing Rhett, I felt it even stronger. I'd bet you anything that cat was a familiar. Why she'd chosen Rhett I did not get, as from what I could tell, Rhett wasn't an active magic user. Although that aura of his did make me question my assumption. I was very,

very curious on why the cat adopted him.

Also not sure if it was my business to poke my nose into, but curious regardless.

“Thank you so much for this.” Rhett looked fit to be tied and as if he wasn’t sure what to do next.

“No problem, no problem. Hi, puppy.” I extended a hand in greeting.

I got a tail wag in response, with the dog pushing his nose into my hand for scratches. Which I gingerly gave because he was really filthy. I’d never seen a dog this bad off. “Uh, wow, you really need a bath. Rhett, bathroom’s this way.”

“Lead on.”

I could see Rhett take a look around my apartment as he walked through. It wasn’t large, about nine hundred square feet in total, with two bedrooms and one bathroom. I used one of the rooms for my “making” room, where I crafted all my spells and specialty items. Hydroponic planters were everywhere I could make a surface, growing all sorts of herbs that I used both for the shop and myself. In between all the plants I had knickknacks, open books on witchcraft and candle spells, and bohemian style furniture with thick pillows and blankets for comfort. It was very lived-in.

I preferred the term lived-in over messy.

The bathroom, at least, was suitable for guests over. Also roomy, which was good, as this was not a small dog. I pulled out a wide tooth shampoo comb first, handing that to Rhett. “Try to get those tangles out first. I’ll run next door and grab supplies.”

“Thank you.” Rhett gave me his blinding smile that did very unfair things to my heart. “I’ll pay you back, just tell me what the total is.”

“Sure, no problem.” I’d be this man’s sugar daddy in a heartbeat but probably shouldn’t say that out loud, huh? “Be back in a jiffy.”

I sped my way out of the apartment, hitting up the pet store. We all had shops in a little strip mall, including a nail salon and local restaurant, but I’d never been in the pet store before. I’d never needed to before now.

I beelined for items as much as I could. Grabbed a bone—dog would need a treat after bath—shampoo, collar, and leash, then on a whim grabbed two bowls and some wet dog food. Poor thing looked half starved, so food was probably a good idea. I was in and out of the store in five minutes flat.

I hadn’t expected much to happen in five minutes, but once I was back in my apartment, I stalled right inside the door.

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Uh.

Why was...I couldn't be seeing that right. I blinked, looked again. No, I was. Rhett's black cat was on the window bench, where she had one paw curled around the Brownie and was giving it a tongue bath. The Brownie did not look the least bit alarmed about this, but rather was leaning shamelessly into the cat with their eyes at half mast, like it was some kind of wet massage.

Um, okay? I whispered, "You all right?"

Brownie waved me away. Shoo, you're interrupting the moment.

Right, so, cat was DEFINITELY a familiar because otherwise that whole scene would not be happening.

You know what? I'd deal with that later. Yup, that became a Later Me problem. Right Now Me didn't have the bandwidth. As long as those two were having a good time, who was I to interfere?

"Calix, you back?" Rhett called from the bathroom.

"Yup!" Right. Priorities. I had a hot man and a dirty dog who needed my attention.

I dropped everything but the shampoo next to the door, then went into the bathroom. Rhett sat on the bathroom rug, working on tangles. He'd made good progress while I was gone. Dog didn't look quite so matted. There was also dirt absolutely everywhere on the floor.

“Sorry for the mess,” Rhett apologized. “I’ll clean up later.”

“Naw, don’t worry about it.” I had a Brownie. Dirty bathrooms no longer scared me. “Here, I’ll start water going. I picked up bowls and a can of wet dog food, too.”

“Thank god. All I had to feed him was beef jerky, which probably wasn’t the best thing.”

“Yeah, he’ll feel better with real food in his stomach. Not that he probably had an issue with jerky, did you, bud?”

Dog wagged his tail at me. I swear, this dog was smarter than some people I knew. Then again, if the cat had brought the dog in, odds were good the dog wasn’t a normal dog either.

Seriously. Rhett was more special than I gave him credit for if he had two familiars. I really had to figure him out better. Because unless I was mistaken, his aura had gotten a little stronger?

I shook the thought off and got the water running in the shower.

Rhett got the worst of the tangles out, but honestly, the dog needed a professional groomer. Best we could do was get him mostly clean. He wasn’t too keen on getting into the shower, but then, most dogs weren’t fans of baths. Still, he went, and we gave him lots of praise while soaping him up.

Now, anyone who’s had a big dog knows, a bath involves the whole family. No one escapes unscathed. I promptly got wet, shrugged, and ditched my shirt because there was no point in having that on.

When I turned back from tossing it into the hamper, I realized Rhett was checking me

out while pretending he wasn't checking me out. The blush kind of gave him away. Now, I take pride in my physique, as I do work out to maintain it, but it wasn't so much pride as interest when I realized he liked what he saw. Oh yeah? You gay, honey? Because I can work with that.

"Feel free to ditch your shirt too," I encouraged with a wink. "It's see-through anyway now."

He glanced down at his shirt, which was wet and plastered to him, and grimaced. "Um, yeah, might as well."

"You can borrow something of mine." It'll give me an excuse to flirt with you again later.

"You're seriously helping me out, Calix."

"My pleasure." Could be both our pleasures if he'd agree. Must work on that.

I slid in closer to him, pulling the hem of his shirt up, and he allowed me to take it completely off. I made sure to do so with fingers grazing his chest. The tinge of pink on his cheeks deepened, and he couldn't quite seem to meet my eyes.

Oh honey, if you keep looking at me like that, you're going to end up in my bed very, very soon.

Focus, me, got a wet dog to deal with.

I took one side of the dog, he took the other, working water and soap into the thick fur. I maaaay have let my hands bump into Rhett's every now and then, fingers overlapping, and I got a shy smile every time it happened. Oh yeah, he was interested. Not sure why he wasn't taking a hint. Maybe I should hint harder. I had to

get this man on a date somehow.

The dog turned his head and gave my chin a kiss.

“Aww, aren’t you a sweetheart?” I booped snoots back, still lathering away. “What are you going to name him, Rhett?”

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“Honestly, I suck at names. My brother had to come up with Lucy’s name.”

“Lucy?”

“The cat. Full name: Lucy Fur.”

I cackled, hands coming to a standstill for a second. “Oh my god, I love that name.”

“Me too. She likes it, already answers to it, so I’m set there. I’m taking all name suggestions.”

“I’ll ponder.”

We rinsed, but it was obvious the dog could use a Round Two, so we dove right back in. Round Two would have to do, as there was no more shampoo left in the bottle. Dog definitely looked and smelled better, though.

Rhett worked his way to the dog’s head, then paused there, looking him over this way and that. “Does he look white to you?”

“Except a few grey patches, yeah. Who’d have thought there was a white dog under all that dirt?”

“Seriously. You’re handsome, did you know that?”

Dog’s whole body wagged. You couldn’t tell me dogs don’t speak English—this one certainly did.

But if he was white, then... “How about Myst? Short for Mystique. Since it’s a mystery where he came from.”

“Myst. Yeah, that has a good ring to it. How about it, boy? Myst a good name?”

Myst barked, which sounded incredibly loud in a tiled bathroom. That was my ear.

“I’m taking that as a yes.” Rhett grinned and continued scrubbing. “You’re such a good boy, Myst. You are being so good for us. We’ve almost got you cleaned.”

We really did. I fortunately had a detachable shower head, so we were able to rinse him off without too much trouble. Of course he escaped the shower the second he could and gave a mighty shake, sending water everywhere. Dogs, man.

“I don’t have a hairdryer,” I apologized, “so we’ll have to work with towels.”

“It’s fine, he’ll airdry. It’s a warm in my shop anyway.”

“Fortunately.”

I could feel time ticking away, but we still grabbed towels and dried him off as best we could. I grabbed a fresh shirt Rhett could wear, too, which he pulled on after drying himself off. Loved the look of that man in my clothes. I needed it to happen more often.

Then I fetched the collar, got it on Myst, and I could tell Rhett was relieved he could put a leash on the dog.

I was relieved my Brownie had disappeared under the blankets again by the time we made it out of the bathroom. That would have been so, so awkward to explain. Assuming my brain could come up with an explanation when it was fixated on trying

to get Rhett on a date.

Rhett gathered up the bag full of dog goodies, leash in the other hand. He paused near the door, giving me his bone-melting smile. “Thank you so, so much. I’d have been lost without your help. I’m serious about coming back and cleaning the bathroom.”

“Rather than the bathroom”—I sidled up closer, easily within touching range, giving him my best bedroom eyes—“how about dinner tomorrow as thanks?”

I saw my offer hit home by the pleased little grin he wore, his breath hitching for a second. Score. I had him.

“Dinner sounds great. Text you later?”

“Sure.”

He still had that little grin on his face when he called, “Lucy, come on. We got to get back to the shop.”

Lucy hopped down from her window perch and sauntered toward her human, which was decidedly not cat behavior. I’d never seen a cat come when called. Me, she ignored, and rubbed up against her dog before proceeding toward the door.

“That’s apparently our cue. Think of where you want to go, okay?”

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“I will.” With dessert afterward. I was totally the type to put out on the first date.

I shut the door behind him, then punched the air in victory. Yes! Finally, finally I had a date with that man. Hopefully this didn’t blow up in my face later.

Brownie peeked out from the blanket and gave me a wave.

“Yeah, you’re good. Thanks for hiding. Uh, we need to get you sorted before I go back down.” I should probably put on a fresh shirt too. Not that the ladies, gents, and gentlefolk coming into my store wouldn’t appreciate the view, but still.

Come to think of it, clothes for Brownies were not something they made in stores. How the hell was I going to rectify this?

I whipped my phone out and texted my sister. Clothes for Brownie?

Took her two seconds to answer. Doll clothes.

My sister was a genius.

Six

Rhett

Not going to lie, I was nervous taking Lucy and Myst to the vet. I wanted them to be okay with every fiber of my being, but I just wasn’t sure about that, considering Myst’s obviously neglected condition. My stomach was in knots when I pulled in to

the parking lot.

Myst had clearly been someone's dog at some point in time because he had no issue loading up in a car. I'd need to search lost pet posts online later but I had a feeling no one was looking for this dog. Not with the state he was in. I didn't really want an owner to show up, mind you. I was already half in love with this dog, but I felt it was my duty to at least check.

Anyway, I had Lucy in a carrier—she had many, many words to say about this, and while I didn't speak Cat fluently, I assure you none of those words were clean—and Myst on his leash, and we walked into the vet's office with me trying to open the door with my butt. Not classy, but it got the job done.

A heavy-set person with a beard, the longest purple nails I'd ever seen on a human being, and bright blue hair pulled up into a high bun greeted me with a professional smile. "Hello, who's this with you?"

"I'm Rhett. I've got a checkup for Lucy and Myst?" I didn't know why I'd phrased that as a question.

"Oh sure. Which one's Myst?"

"The dog."

They pulled up something on the computer screen and typed something out. With those nails. Honestly, no idea how they managed, but it was damn impressive. "All right, I've got those names logged in. You just go straight to room one. Someone will be in there in a moment."

"Sure, thanks."

Myst didn't look all too keen on being in here and kept walking closer and closer until he was practically glued to my leg. Poor dog. I didn't like going to the doctor's either, so I sympathized.

I set Lucy on the table and kept Myst with me. I barely got settled on the chair when the door opened again and a very large woman in blue scrubs and short, curly blonde hair entered.

"Hello, hello," she said with a charming German accent. "I'm Doctor Gardener, welcome. I understand we have new babies."

"Very new babies," I confirmed. "Lucy—the cat—I found her in my house on my staircase a couple days ago."

She blinked at me, then laughed. "That's a new one."

"Tell me about it. I think the front door blew open and she took advantage, but I have no way of proving it. I do know she and Myst are friends. She alerted me when I was at work to open the back door and then escorted him inside."

"When was this?"

"Three hours ago."

"Ha! You live interesting life."

"Truth. Um, since they were both strays, can you check for a microchip?"

"I can, yes." She opened the door a crack and called out, "Bring me a scanner!"

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Then she closed it and said, “Let’s start with dog first. Hi, Myst. Hi, you good dog?”

Myst, as far as I could tell, didn’t know what “stranger” meant and went right up to her to get love and scratches. Which she obliged. She looked him over but glanced at me. “He’s wet?”

“Myst was absolutely filthy when I met him. I gave him a bath but didn’t have a way of drying him.”

“Ah. He just felt damp, so I wondered. Thank you for washing him. Don’t need more work here.”

“I didn’t want more work for me, either.”

She felt him over, looked in his ears, put her scope against his ribs, and listened for a moment. Then frowned as she leaned back. “He is not in great condition. Bony, malnourished, dehydrated. I’m glad you found him when you did. Let’s start with IV. I’ll give him first round of basic shots today too. Good news is, he does not have ear infections or any signs of illness.”

“I’ll take that good news. What should I do to get him back up to weight?”

“Three small meals a day. Help his body adjust to real food again. I’ll send you home with prescription food.”

I was very grateful for that. “Please and thank you.”

She looked Myst over again, this time with a certain weighing of the eyes. Then looked at his teeth again. “Hmm, I wonder if he was tossed out because he got so big? But he’s not done growing.”

I beg your fucking pardon? “Uh, he’s not full grown?”

“No, no, he’s not even full year old yet. See how feet are too big for body? He’s growing into feet still.”

“Holy Mother.” I looked Myst over and had to wonder. “Just how big is he going to get?”

“He’s Shiloh shepherd, from the look of him. Males generally make it to about one hundred and fifty pounds. Here, let me take leash. I want to weigh him on scale outside.”

“Sure.” I handed over the leash obediently.

Then sat there, head kind of spinning. I’d had dogs before in my life, always the family dog, but they were kind of more on the portable scale. Like, fifty pounds or so. A hundred and fifty pounds of dog was a lot to love. I’d read stories before where people were assured by a breeder that a dog would only get such-and-such size, and then when they realized the dog would be much bigger, abandoned it. I didn’t blame Myst for that. It wasn’t like he was in control of his genetics. I did blame the stupid humans, though.

Well. The house I’d just inherited sat on four lots, so I had a little under an acre that was all fenced in. Plenty of room for Myst to run around and play. Maybe I should invest in a doggy door? If he was a puppy still, I didn’t want accidents.

She came back in, the frown deeper now. “He’s only sixty pounds. Way too light.”

“Damn. I thought he was heavier than that. I guess the fur deceived me.”

“Feed him,” she ordered me. “Three meals a day, plus snacks.”

“You got it.”

The nurse tech came in with a scanner. I held my breath as the scanner was waved all over his head, legs, and neck but there was no beep. Phew. He was my dog now.

Dr. Gardener pulled a treat from her front pocket and gave it to him. “You good boy, Myst. Very good boy. Amanda, take him back for IV and first round of puppy shots. Test for heartworms. Clip his nails, too.”

“Sure.” Amanda the vet tech took the leash and said in a happy voice, “Come on, puppy, come with me. That’s right, come with me.”

Myst hesitated at the door, looking back at me. I urged him on. “Go on, boy. You’ll be back to me in a few minutes.”

Again, I swear the dog understood me as he huffed but went.

“All right, now kitty.” With practiced motions, Dr. Gardener unlatched the top of the carrier and lifted Lucy out.

Lucy did not like this. Lucy hissed at her.

“Oooh, spicy kitty.”

Feeling like I should help, I stood as well and laid a gentle hand on Lucy. “Don’t live up to your name, please. She needs to check you out.”

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Lucy gave me a look that said she did not agree.

Dr. Gardener managed to look at her teeth, scan her for a chip—also a negative—and do a general check. She didn't look happy when Lucy was put on the scale, and I wasn't really, either. Lucy was seven pounds. That was a little light for an adult cat.

“She, too, needs to eat. Same deal as Myst, okay? I'll send you home with food.” Dr. Gardener gave her a pet and offered a treat. “You're a very beautiful kitty.”

Accepting the praise as her due, Lucy took the treat and stopped eyeing the vet like she was contemplating criminal action.

“Overall, she's in better shape than dog. You said she went to the door to let Myst in? I bet she adopted him. She recognized he's a puppy. Cats adopt everything.”

“Oh, yeah, I know. I've had cats before.”

“Good that you're experienced owner. I trim nails for you?”

“Please.” I sucked at that. I always trimmed them too short. “Uh, how old would you put her?”

“I say about three years old. Maybe two. But she's fully adult.”

“Good to know.”

By the time we wrestled Lucy into submission and got her nails trimmed—and trust

me, it was a wrestling match, and we scrawny humans barely won—Myst returned. He looked better and worse, with the IV leaving fluid humps in his back. I knew from experience with a past dog that those humps would go down as his body absorbed the fluid.

“He’s an angel,” Amanda assured me. “The calmest dog I’ve ever worked on. He was so good for me, even with all the shots. I did find two ticks on him that I removed, and we shaved some mats under his armpits for free. We’ve got a professional grooming salon attached to the office if you’d like to book an appointment.”

“That sounds great. I bathed him as best I could, but he really needs a pro.”

“Sure thing. You can do that at checkout.”

“Can you microchip them both today?” I didn’t want to put Myst and Lucy through yet another thing, but I also didn’t want to make multiple trips to the vet’s office. Or risk them being lost.

“Sure, sure.”

The microchip was a fat needle, a quick in and out, then I was handed paperwork. Lucy was taken back for shots and tests, returning in a very unhappy mood. I had a feeling she’d be getting her revenge on me over this treatment later. We went over feeding schedules, when they should both be back for round two of the shots, and all of that. I felt much better now that I knew both of them would be fine with a little TLC.

Myst was a puppy still. Wow. I was still trying to wrap my head around that.

I checked out, picked up some locally crafted toys for both dog and cat, accepted the foods given to me, then loaded everyone into the car with one of the vet tech’s help.

Thanking her, I loaded in myself and felt like I took the first real breath all day. Not that it had been a bad day, far from it, just hectic.

Although it looked like I scored a dinner date with Calix because of it, so no complaints. I felt cautiously optimistic we might work out and actually date. I hadn't had a boyfriend in ages, and damn, that man was fine. Anyone would want him.

My phone chimed and I pulled it out. Speak of the devil, it was Calix.

How did vet visit go?

Awww, he was so sweet to check in on us. I typed back, Mostly healthy, everyone's okay, just underweight. Myst is a puppy.

Calix: Get out.

Me: I'm not even kidding. Vet said he's less than a year old and still growing into his feet.

Calix: OMG. How big is he supposed to get?

Me: Basically twice the size?

Calix: Shiiiiit.

Me: Yeah, tell me about it. It's not a bad thing, he's just going to be a big boy.

Calix: Home security system.

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I laughed at that. He wasn't wrong. No one sane would cross this dog even now, much less when he was fully grown into those large paws of his.

Lucy, sitting in the passenger seat, hissed at me.

“Yes, yes, I'm sorry for dawdling and not taking you home. Forgive me, Princess. I'll repent and get you home ASAP.” I rolled my eyes at the dramatics. Cats, man.

Still, I had a smile on my face as I started up the car. It had been a very busy day, but you know what? I wouldn't change a single thing.

Seven

Calix

Phaedra showed up at closing time with a bag full of goodies, her sewing machine, and her patented you-must-be-joking look. She wore that a lot with me. To be fair, I often did things that warranted it.

My sister had apparently gotten her hair redone, as it was now in blue and black braids going down to her waist, and she was in a cute little blue sundress, which made me wonder.

“You got a date with hubby or something?”

“Later tonight,” she confirmed. “I've got two hours to straighten this all out.”

“Uh, we’re actually doing fine?”

“Uh-huh,” she said with blatant disbelief, which was just hurtful, then handed me her sewing machine before beelining for the couch. “Hi, Brownie, my name is Phaedra. I’m this idiot’s sister. How are you?”

Brownie gave a smile and wave.

She sat on the couch next to it, still all smiles. “I brought some things for you. What’s your name?”

The Brownie gave an uncertain shake of the head.

Phaedra’s frown grew more pronounced. “Honey, can you not talk?”

Brownie pointed to the throat area and gave a mournful shake of the head.

A light went on in the back of my head. “Is that why you were eating a peppermint stick? Your throat’s sore?”

A nod this time.

Well damn, now I did feel like an idiot. “Hang on, I’ve got a remedy for that.”

I darted for my kitchen and went to the cabinet that held all of my infused medicines. I used to get laryngitis regularly every two years, almost like clockwork, so I kept infused honey on hand to help heal the throat. I pulled a small teaspoon of that out and carefully brought it back to my new friend.

Phaedra had already pulled out several Barbie doll-sized outfits, most of them looking like they’d fit fine. I guessed she’d brought the sewing machine to do

alterations with. She had everything from dresses to pants and even a green jumpsuit.

The Brownie liked the look of the jumpsuit very much and tugged it on with Phaedra's help. It was a tolerable fit, if a bit too long in the legs.

"Hmm, good thing I brought the sewing machine. Looks like we need to hem those up a little."

Brownie took them back off, a tad reluctantly, and Phaedra took both it and the sewing machine to my (rather crowded) table.

I changed places with her and offered the honey. "This should help heal up your throat. Uh, if you don't have a name, can we think of one?"

Brownie seemed excited over this and eagerly nodded.

Phaedra, not even glancing back in our direction, advised, "Once given a name, a Brownie considers it a contract with the human. Also, they like nature names. You also have a girl on your hands."

"Both good to know." Nature names, huh. I watched my Brownie happily eat the honey, then lick the spoon clean. Reminded me of when I found it with the peppermint stick. "How about Pepper?"

Brownie stopped licking the spoon to give me a wide smile and enthusiastic nod.

“Pepper good? Awesome.”

The sewing machine started up. Phaedra was a really good seamstress, so I wasn’t worried.

“How about you try on some of the others? Can’t have just one pair of clothes to wear.”

Pepper went through the selection and tried on the jean and shirt combination. Which also seemed to fit rather well, although the shirt was baggy.

Changing outfits again, this time to the summer dress, I felt it only right to say something. “Thanks for cleaning the bathroom, Pepper. I do appreciate it. I know it was a mess after we washed Myst.”

The sewing machine abruptly stopped. “Myst?”

Ah, right. She was behind in the news. “So the tech guy next door—”

“Oh, the one you’ve been drooling over?”

“Drooling is such a strong word. Accurate, but still. Anyway, he got adopted by a cat. Said cat came to work with him and then had him open the back door to the shop, only to promptly lead in a neglected puppy.”

“You’re kidding.” Phaedra started laughing. “Now that’s fun. I take it he borrowed your tub for a puppy bath?”

“Yup. Really sweet dog, just absolutely filthy. But I’m beyond grateful for it even if it did destroy my bathroom. I finally, finally found a chance to ask the man out on a date.”

“Ha, about time! You’ve been crushing on him for months now.”

I was pleased with myself. “We’re set to go out tomorrow night. I’m trying to think of a good place to take him.”

“How about Magnolia Grill? It’s got lots of vegan options too if you need some.”

True, I had no idea if he was vegetarian, vegan, had food restrictions or what. Plus Magnolia Grill was on the upper side of being fancy without being need-a-suit formal, so it was a great place for a date. “That’s a suggestion I’ll take. Wait, is that where you and hubby are going tonight?”

“Yup. Which is why I thought of it.” She stood from the machine and came over to Pepper. “Try this on.”

Pepper promptly shucked the dress and pulled on the jumpsuit, which now fit perfectly. As expected of my sister.

Pepper was so excited, she immediately gave Phaedra a hug around the hand.

“Aww, you’re welcome, sweetie. Now, I’ve also brought a dollhouse with me. Do you want to use that as your own mini apartment?”

From the way Pepper’s eyes shone, my sister had offered a lottery ticket with winning numbers.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Phaedra pointed to the door. “It’s in my trunk. Car’s not

locked.”

My Beast of Burden training kicked in. “Yes’um, I’m going. Wait, how big is this thing? Where am I supposed to put it?”

“We’ll figure that out while you’re fetching it.”

I should have expected her answer.

Eight

Rhett

Saturday turned out to be one of those perfect weather days. Blue skies, fluffy white clouds, warm without being hot, and a light breeze. I opened up all the windows in the house to air it out some, then spent a few hours unpacking and settling into my new bedroom. I’d chosen the one at the back of the second floor because it overlooked the garden, and frankly, the view was spectacular. Plus, it had a built-in window seat that a certain creature decided was her perch.

Who was I, a mere human, to argue?

Myst followed me around while I did all of these chores, perfectly happy to shadow me. He was such a sweet dog. I was still outraged that someone would throw him out because he’d gotten “too big.” Whatever the hell that meant. I maaaay have splurged last night on Amazon buying him all the things, so come tomorrow, he was going to be spoiled rotten.

Somehow, I didn’t think he’d mind.

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As the hours passed, though, I started to get a little nervous. Not bad nervous, more excited nervous. My date with Calix was coming up. We'd agreed to have dinner at five, with him picking me up. We'd been helping each other out with our stores, so I knew he was a good guy. I just hoped we meshed well on a personal level.

All right, now it was time to pick a good outfit. I was not wearing the jeans and holey shirt that I'd been doing chores in. No siree.

I took a shower—being, ahem, thorough in some areas in case I got lucky—then with a towel wrapped around my waist, went back into my bedroom. Time to pick out a good outfit. Okay, what was dressy enough for a date without it being overly dressy?

The dark wash jeans I'd bought two weeks ago still looked crisp and new. Those would work. Shirt, though, which shirt? I had a couple of good candidates. There was a forest green dress shirt with short sleeves, fitted to display what muscles I had. My sister had gotten it for me, and she had a very good eye for fashion.

I also had a navy blue shirt with longer sleeves that rolled up, the underside of the sleeves a very cool plaid pattern for contrast. Honestly, I felt torn between the two, as I looked good in both.

Needing a second opinion, I held up each of them in either hand. "Myst, whatcha think?"

He sat at my feet, looking up at me with this face that said "You're wonderful no matter what."

“While you are cute, you are not helpful. All right, next. Lucy?”

Lucy eyed me from her window perch, flicked her tail, and went back to watching birds.

“Figures you’re no help either.” I looked at both shirts. Should I just toss a coin?

I kinda leant toward green for some reason. I knew this color looked good on me. Maybe I should just go with—

The blue shirt was abruptly seized by some invisible force and flung onto the bed.

Without shame, I can admit I screamed like a little girl.

Also jumped five feet in the air. Who said white men can’t jump? We just needed the proper motivation.

I was out of my room in two seconds. Literally, I had never moved so fast in my life. Then I stopped in the doorway because one, I wanted to know if something was going to follow me, two, I was doubting what I’d just experienced—mostly because it was too surreal—and three, pants.

Mostly one and two, not going to lie.

Myst whirled in place and growled at something I couldn’t see. He could see it, though, clearly, as he stared straight at one spot right next to my four-poster bed. His lips were curled up, haunches raised, and he stayed in a guard position for what seemed like hours but was more like ten seconds before he suddenly relaxed.

Lucy sat up as well, staring hard, but relaxed when he did.

“Is it—is it gone?” I asked them nervously.

Myst wagged his tail, back to being a happy puppy.

“You sure?” They could clearly see what I could not, so I was trusting them on this one. Apparently a ghost had decided to weigh in on my date options. Which, fine, I had asked for help, but a heart attack was not helpful.

Part of me reaaaaally did not want to go into that bedroom. Part of me did because, again, pants. Plus, I had, like, twenty minutes before my date showed up. I was not letting whatever this was screw up my date. I had priorities, dammit.

I eased into the room, one foot at a time, until I reached pants, boxers, and socks laying on the comforter. The second I was in range, I pounced, scooping them all up and hightailing it back for the bathroom. Phew, okay. Nothing weird had happened.

Myst followed me in, like the cute stalker he was, and watched as I quickly pulled clothes on.

Still nothing happened.

Likely one of the ghosts. Aunt Ruth had said to talk to them, so I gave it a go. “Uh, thanks for the advice? Please warn me you’re nearby next time. You nearly gave me heart failure.”

There was something that could have been a sigh, or a laugh—it was too faint to hear.

I gave Myst a pat on the head and tried joking. “At least they helped me decide on a shirt, huh, bud.”

Myst leaned in for more scratches. Not a care in the world for him.

I breathed in and out a few times, steadying my nerves. I still had to style my hair, I had maybe ten minutes before Calix was here, which meant I had ten minutes to get my shit together.

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I got this.

Probably.

Nine

Calix

I'd offered to pick Rhett up at his house because I was old fashioned that way. I knew Rhett had moved into his inherited house this week, but I hadn't gotten details.

I did not expect a glorious, Goth-style Victorian.

I absolutely, positively did not expect to pull into Ruth Fairchild's driveway. Or her former driveway.

Oh boy, did I not expect that.

Holy fuck. I hadn't put the pieces together, not until this moment, but now it all made sense. Of course Rhett had an aura. He was Ruth Fairchild's nephew! She was one of the more famous witches of this area. Of course he had two familiars. My question was, why did he own a tech shop? Why was he asking for help on clearing out some ghosts? He acted like he didn't know magic at all, which was really, truly strange.

I was also really jealous he got this house. I'd love to live here. Victorians were my absolute favorite style of architecture. It was lovingly maintained, too. The flower beds were perfect, with their red roses and trimmed hedges. A black wrought

ironfence surrounded the yard, but there was a section of driveway open to the road before the gate cut off access. Likely for delivery purposes.

I pulled in there, parked, and spotted part of a carriage house behind the main house. Wow, even that looked in perfect shape.

Faintly, I heard the sound of barking from inside. Ah, Myst must have heard me. Still couldn't believe he was a puppy at that size and with that kind of deep bark.

I tugged my vest into place as I headed toward the front door. I'd opted for a midnight blue dress shirt, tan vest, and black jeans for tonight's date. I looked good—I knew I did. I just hoped Rhett appreciated the view. Butterflies flitted about in my stomach as I walked up, and I paused at the door, composing myself before pushing the very ancient looking doorbell.

An impressive soundinggooooooooongrang out.

The door opened promptly and I about swallowed my tongue. Rhett looked good enough to eat, and here I was, a very, very hungry boy. I needed someone to say bon appetite so I could get my mouth on him.

“Hi, Calix. You're right on time.”

“I do try.”

He smiled as he greeted me but there was something off. Something about his body language, which looked stiff, and the smile looked strained around the edges. Hmm? What was this?

Then I realized Lucy was standing in between his legs, facing backward, like a guard dog on alert with her master. Myst was also on guard, one eye behind Rhett, even

though he was turned so he could greet me. What was this?

I gave Myst a scratch on the head, but I attuned to my surroundings better. Oh.

Figured a building of this age would be hella haunted.

Now, I wasn't the strongest when it came to sensing ghosts, that was more my mother's gift, but I could sense them. And if I wasn't mistaken, my date had not one, not two, but a whole house of ghosts all gathered in the foyer watching curiously. I could vaguely see the outlines of their spirits gathered in close—just the transparent silhouettes of them. To be honest, I sensed them better than I saw them.

Had Ruth Fairchild also been a medium? I'd never heard, but I couldn't explain why there were so many ghosts here otherwise. Seriously, you'd think this place was a waystation for Ghost Express with the amount of them in this foyer. Typically I didn't advertise I was a practicing witch. Not everyone was welcoming of that sort of thing. Right this second, though, I felt like Rhett would be open to me telling him something. I was fairly certain Rhett was magical. Besides, if we were going to date, better to get this out in the open right now.

“Uh, Rhett? You realize you've got a lot of ghosts playing peanut gallery right now?”

It was like all of the tension in his body just whooshed out. “Oh, thank fucking Christ, you can see them?”

“Half see, half sense. As a witch, I'm very sensitive to the energies around me, see.”

“Oh.” He blinked, absorbed that, then nodded. “That makes perfect sense. Truth told, I can't see them. But they've been picking things up, or moving shit, or making stomping noises so I know they're there. Aunt Ruth said they're all friendly. They haven't done anything bad yet? Just kinda spooking me out of my skin.”

“Well, yeah, of course. You can’t see them, can barely sense them, so makes sense it’s unnerving. Tell you what, let’s go get dinner. You can tell me more about this whole situation, and I can help you come up with a game plan so you’re more comfortable living in the house.”

Rhett stepped forward abruptly and hugged me. Just full-on bear-hugged me.

I liked having a cute male hugging me very much, so I hugged back with a smile.

“You like my plan, I take it.”

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“I fucking love your plan. Yes, please.”

“Then let’s do it.”

I kind of reluctantly let go and turned my attention to the two animals patiently waiting on standby. “You two watch the house. Be back in a few hours. And the rest of you, behave. I don’t want to evict you either.”

Lucy flicked an ear, indicating she had heard me, but she didn’t turn her head. Her attention was on keeping the ghosts off her human. Myst gave a tail wag and nudged Rhett against the thigh with his nose to get more love. Then again, he was a puppy, so it made sense he didn’t really get the full gravity of the situation.

Rhett quickly locked up, then followed me down to the car. We hopped in, and all the while, I had two thoughts bouncing around in my head and getting tangled up. I was super glad that he’d taken the news of me as a witch with aplomb. I really, really wanted to give us a chance at building a relationship. Second thought was, how to deal with the ghosts? They did seem friendly at first glance, but I think boundaries needed to be established so Rhett didn’t keel over from a heart attack.

Feeding the man was definitely the first step.

The drive was short, so we didn’t get much into the conversation. I let that be for a minute and let him breathe out some of his nervous tension.

Rhett was noticeably calmer once we were seated in the restaurant. My sister had given good advice, as the food was excellent and the place had a calm, quiet sort of

atmosphere, making it easy for conversation. With the pleasant evening temps, we requested seating outside. No one else was on the patio, so we had an excellent view of well-maintained flower beds and each other. Just how I liked it for a date.

Once we had our orders placed, I zeroed in on Rhett. “I have so, so many questions for you.”

“I bet.” He flashed me the smile that made butterflies flit about in my stomach. “Where to start?”

“The house?”

“Sure, might as well. So my Great-Aunt Ruth and I were really close. My mom and I were basically the only blood relatives she had. My mom married my stepdad about, uh, ten years ago? So I have stepsiblings she was also fond of, but blood relations, it was just the three of us. I spent summers traveling the world with her, and once I was finished with college, I moved out here with the intention of helping her. Her health had rapidly declined the last three years of her life, see. But the timing sucked. By the time I got out here, she was in hospice and I only got three weeks with her. I spent most of my free hours in the hospital visiting.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I could tell it grieved him that he hadn’t had more time with her. I wasn’t sure whether or not to mention I had known her. It might seem too weird? “She must have been an awesome lady.”

“She was cool as hell. The house, as you might have guessed, was hers. She left it to me upon her passing.”

That did explain how he managed to own a house likethat.

“It took a few months after she died to get all the estate things settled, and then I

moved into the house this week.” Rhett made a face and sipped his water. “Which was when I discovered it was haunted as hell.”

“She didn’t say anything to you about it?”

“Oh, she said something. She left behind a book of instructions for me about the house, and she wrote exactly three paragraphs about the ghosts. Starting line was ‘don’t worry about the ghosts, they’re friendly.’”

I choked on a laugh. “Wow.”

“Wow indeed. She clearly had developed some kind of rapport with them, but I have no such rapport.” Rhett scratched a cheek. “I had a friend in high school who was a witch, and she could see ghosts, so I’m not too surprised that you can. Anything you can do about them?”

“Lots. Although honestly, my mother’s sense of them is much stronger. I think it’s best to have her over before we make any plans. I will go back with you tonight, though, and communicate with them. At least set some boundaries so you’re not coming out of your skin.”

“Much appreciated.” Open relief flooded his face.

So he’d known someone who was a witch as a teenager, eh. That explained why he was so easygoing with me. But I was really getting the sense that he didn’t know about himself, which was confusing. I’d have to work my way around the question and see if my assumption was right. At the moment, I was very thankful he was so open-minded. Not everyone was.

“My turn for a question.” Rhett sipped more water before speaking. “Why the store?”

“Hmm, really, I’ve always thought a store a good idea. Sourcing stuff for spells is an absolute pain sometimes. And we practitioners didn’t have a place to really gather in this city, which is also a pain if we’re trying to do any group workings. Your Aunt Ruth was someone I knew, actually, as she was the most famous witch of this area.”

Rhett’s eyes bugged right out of his head. “She was a witch?” he asked, voice raising.

That confirmed things for me right there. Rhett had no idea what he was. Why had Ruth hidden it? “A very good one. She was generous to the whole community, always willing to help. I didn’t know her as well personally, having only been around her maybe a dozen times? But she hosted a lot of events and stuff at her house until about four or so years ago. Health issues prevented her, I guess. Part of the reason I opened the store was to give the community a communal event space again. I decided at eighteen I wanted to open a store and crowdsourced it so I could open one. My dad did force me to take some accounting and business classes so I didn’t do anything stupid, which in hindsight was wise of him, but what surprised me was therestof the city latching on to me. See, I do sell infused products—Moon drops, for example, that help with a woman’s cycle. Some of what I make is really popular and word spreads like wildfire. I make more money off those products than I do the stuff I thought I’d sell.”

“Now isn’t that how it always works? Nothing goes according to plan.”

“Preach.”

“Are you a kitchen witch, then?”

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I did a double take. Damn, he really did know something of my world if he was asking that.

Rhett laughed, eyes sparkling. “I just shocked you. I told you, I had a good friend. We lost contact when I went to college, but it’s not like we had a falling out. She told me a lot.”

“She must have told you a ton. And yes, I do consider myself a kitchen witch, mostly because I’m constantly making up something. I’m also a fire witch, though, as fire is my best affinity.”

“Dude, that’s metal as hell.”

I preened. “I do try. My turn. When you first came into the shop four months ago, I was under the impression you were an employee only. Then Robbie just disappeared. What’s the full story there?”

“He did.” Rhett rolled his eyes heavenward. “Robbie’s one of those guys who’s all for a get rich quick scheme. He didn’t really have any technical background, which was why he was hiring guys like me to do the job. He had no idea how to fix more than basic tech issues. After he hired me, he popped in and out of the store, but he wasn’t really running it. I saw him less and less and then he just...disappeared. I didn’t see him again. Couldn’t reach him by phone. I think he just washed his hands of the place and walked out.”

My eyes crossed at that. “My god, that’s so irresponsible.”

“Tell me about it. Once I realized what he’d done, I sat on it for a hot second, then called my stepdad. Asked him for advice. He instead asked me a question—was the shop making decent money? And it was. Honestly, it makes a pretty good living. So he said, why not take over? And I couldn’t think of a single downside to doing so.”

I blinked at him. “So you just...did?”

“Basically. I contacted the landlord for our building, explained the situation, asked if I could take over the lease. Macy didn’t really care who paid the bills as long as someone was.”

I could totally see that. Macy was in her sixties and preferred playing with her grandchildren over everything else.

“With her blessing, I then went down to the county clerk office and filed a business license. Thirty-five dollars later, I was a businessman.” Rhett shrugged like this was no big deal.

The sheer moxie of him was amazing. I wasn’t sure I would have done the same in his shoes. Also, Robbie, what the hell? How stupid can you be to walk away from a business that was doing well?

“So how long have you owned it?”

“About two weeks.”

“Do you think Robbie was out of his depth and that’s why he walked out?”

“Man was totally out of his depth. But here’s the thing. Eighty percent of the clientele who walk through my doors don’t actually have a complicated problem. If I take the computer or phone apart, clean it, and put it back together? It works fine.”

“Wait, dirt is that destructive with machines?”

“A-yup,” he confirmed, popping the P.

Robbie, seriously, you stupid. I’m glad he was stupid, though, don’t misunderstand me. I wouldn’t have gotten this close to Rhett otherwise.

“Well, I’m glad you did step up.”

“Easiest thing in the world, honestly.” Rhett’s expression turned soft and sweet. “Also some of the best luck I’ve ever had. I’d never have met you if not for that. And I’m really, really happy to know you.”

If this man got any sweeter, my heart wouldn’t be able to take it. My voice came out husky. “Me too, Rhett. Trust me, me too.”

Ten

Rhett

After dinner, Calix suggested walking through the park and getting ice cream for dessert, and it sounded great to me. We hit up the ice cream shop first, each getting cones, which was why I dared what I did.

The second we hit the park, I slipped my hand into his. Calix’s hands were attractive in their own right. He had long, pianist fingers, blunt at the tips, with strong cords that flexed whenever he moved.

Yes, I fantasized about his hands on me, don’t judge.

Calix immediately twined his fingers around mine and shot me a smile that

threatened to melt my kneecaps. I smiled back on reflex and wished like hell my house wasn't filled with nosy ghosts. I couldn't invite him back to my place because of it. I was very, very upset about this too.

The park was peaceful, and basically empty, which wasn't a surprise at this time of the evening. I liked the privacy because it let me focus on him.

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“So you had a witch friend in high school.” Calix said this in a ruminating tone while looking at me. “And she obviously told you a lot. Did she tell you there’s many creatures in the world that don’t fit with modern conceptions?”

“Oh, like faeries and stuff? Sure. I never saw one myself, but she warned me of what to look out for. To avoid getting myself in trouble, y’know.” I shrugged to show it didn’t alarm me any. “I was absolutely fascinated as a teen. I’d pump her for all sorts of information.”

“And you believed all of it?”

“Sure. For one thing, Kanna was one of the most truthful people I knew. For another, I saw her do things that just weren’t explainable except by magic. Hell, she gave me healing potions and stones several times when I was dog sick and they were the only thing that made me feel better. Just because I don’t see it, doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist.”

“You really are one of a kind,” he murmured, giving me the same warm look from earlier. “And I’m so glad for it.”

I had a feeling people had either dismissed him or scoffed at him, and I aimed a mental kick in the direction of those people. Calix had a beautiful soul. He was a man who wouldn’t hurt anyone on purpose. Any person who had an issue with him just had issues, period.

He didn’t need it from me, but I reassured him again anyway. “I think what you and other witches can do is absolutely amazing, and I wish I had the talent.”

“You can learn, you know.”

I blinked at him. “Eh? Come again?”

“You’re clearly magical. You have not one, but two familiars.”

My feet just about tripped over each other and I stopped dead on the sidewalk. Words, needed words, but huh? The hell?!

Calix stopped with me, a half smile kicking his mouth up on one side, like he had expected this reaction.

“Lucy’s a familiar. I guarantee that. I’ve seen her do too many things that a normal cat just wouldn’t do. The fact she brought Myst in with her—who’s already guarding you—cinches it for me. They’re both familiars.”

“Geh huh, whaaaa?!”

“So articulate.”

I scowled at him for the teasing. “But I’m not a witch!”

“Hmm, maybe? Maybe not. I’m not sure what you are. I know you have to besomethingto have two familiars just land in your lap.” Calix tilted his head to the side, eyes shrewd on me. Like he was studying me and trying to figure some mystery out. “It could very well be that you’re not attuned to the world around you, so you’re not able to see the ghosts yourself. Tell me something. Your witch friend, when she handed you a spelled stone, what did it feel like in your hand?”

“Uh...hot, generally. And tingling.”

“Ah-ha. Only another magician would be able to feel anything distinctly. You’re a natural. A little training, and I’d bet the world would open up to your third eye.”

I couldn’t have heard him right. I absolutely couldn’t have.

But he looked dead serious.

“How are you sure about Lucy?” I don’t know why that was the first question to pop out of my mouth, but there we had it.

“Hmm, well, there were multiple things, but the clincher for me was when she was at my apartment. I have a house Brownie—uh, you know what those are?”

I nodded dumbly. “Yeah, the little creatures that attach to a house and take care of it.”

“That’s the one. When I came back from the store, I found your cat and my Brownie curled up on the window bench and Lucy was giving it a bath.”

She...she’d done what, again?

“No way,” I breathed.

“Now, any normal cat would have tried to attack it because of hunting instincts.”

Man made a really good point. A normal cat would have done exactly that.

“But your cat treated the Brownie like a friend and groomed it. Lucy’s got to be a familiar. No way around it.”

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“Damn, that’s a good argument. But Myst?”

“With the way he was guarding you at the house? And he’s only a puppy.”

Also a good argument.

“Plus, magic tends to run through families. With your Aunt Ruth such a strong witch, it would be stranger if you weren’t.”

Hard to counter that argument, too. Um. I wasn’t entirely sure how to feel about this? I’d always been a tech and science kind of guy. Not that I didn’t believe in magic, I just didn’t believe it had much to do with me. Hearing otherwise was throwing me for a loop.

Calix’s tone gentled. “I’m not pushing an agenda here. You can pursue this or not, it’s up to you. I’m just telling you what I’m seeing. If you don’t want to open up to the world, that’s okay. Not everyone wants to. Just sleep on it.”

Man dropped a bombshell like that and then expected me to sleep tonight? Hell no, I’d be tossing and turning like a rotisserie chicken all night.

Calix leaned in and kissed my forehead, his lips soft and warm against my skin. “Eat your ice cream before it melts. Don’t stress. And I’m going back home with you tonight to set some boundaries for your ghosts so you don’t have a heart attack.”

I obediently licked my ice cream. He was right about it threatening to melt all over my hand. Still...priorities. “Will you stay with me tonight, then?”

A flash of heat in his eyes made my heart skip a beat.

“I’d be more than happy to.”

With that reaction, odds were good this wouldn’t be a chaste sleepover. And with him setting boundaries, I wouldn’t need to worry about the ghosts.

At least some part of today would go according to plan.

And I was really, really looking forward to it.

Eleven

Calix

I took Rhett back to his house after we finished our ice cream. Before we got into fun things—and please let there be fun things on the table—we had ghosts to deal with and boundaries to set.

Not into voyeurism, sorry.

Rhett didn’t look nearly as nervous now, but that was likely because he had backup—namely me. His confidence in me was flattering, to say the least.

The second he had the front door open, we were greeted by both Myst and Lucy. Well, Lucy was lounging upon the stairs, tail idly flicking, acting as if she just happened to be here upon our return. She wasn’t waiting on us or anything.

Cats, am I right?

Myst begged for scratches, tail wagging, clearly happy people were home again. I

leaned down to give him a good scratch behind the ears.

And then there were the ghosts. They were literally packed into the foyer like sardines in a can. Rhett had mentioned there was a family here, but it had to be more than one family. Or several generations of a family.

I cleared my throat and addressed them squarely. “Look. I’m not a medium, I can’t hear you or see you clearly, but I can tell that you’re there. Let’s communicate as much as we can. Tap my right hand for yes, left for no.”

One of the ghosts immediately moved to square up with me, ready for the high fives. Coolio.

“First, you’re aware Rhett is Aunt Ruth’s nephew?”

Tap of the right hand, yes.

For Rhett’s sake, I translated. “Yes, they are.”

Rhett blew out a breath, hand over heart. “I’m glad. I wasn’t sure.”

“Are you curious about him? Is that why you’ve been following him around?”

Another tap.

“Yes.”

Rhett seemed to feel better about that, too. “So you guys don’t mind me living here?”

“They don’t,” I said when I got a firm tap of the left hand.

Rhett’s brilliant smile flashed. “That’s great. I don’t mind sharing the space with you guys, either. Just, uh, can we set some boundaries? Don’t follow me into my bedroom or bathroom. Rest of the house is yours to roam about in.”

There was a pause, and I could tell they were discussing this amongst themselves as the shapes of people flitted about. Then several ghosts tapped my right hand.

“They’re good with that,” I relayed.

“Awesomesauce. It’s all I need. That and don’t sneak up on me. My heart can’t take it. Um, is there anything you guys need?”

Several taps against my right hand. “Yes to that. Okay, at this point we need a medium to talk properly. My mother is one. Can you wait until I can bring her here?”

Again several yeses.

“Good. Then I’ll invite her over here soon. For now, just give us some space. I have a man to sex up.”

Don't quote me, but I think they laughed at that, and then they all dissipated. Likely going to different parts of the house.

Rhett closed in behind me for a back hug, nose scraping the side of my neck before he whispered against my ear, "My bedroom is upstairs."

Oh hell yeah. "Don't have to tell me twice."

I swear to god, if even a single ghost tried to take a peek at us, I would sage the whole house with prejudice.

Twelve

Rhett

I paused the sexing up for the five minutes it took to let Myst out to go potty and lock up the house. I led the way upstairs, and Calix behaved like a perfect gentleman right up until we were in my bedroom with the door closed. Then it was like a switch was flipped. He backed me into the wall, the hunger in his eyes so stark and naked I felt a nervous thrill go up my spine. I had never in my life had a man look at me that way, and my god, could he stare at me a little longer? Please and thank you.

I had to put hands on him. I reached for him even as he closed in, sliding both hands around his neck and drawing him in for a kiss. The rough texture of his hair tickled my fingers, and I found myself gripping some of the locks even as his mouth found mine.

The first touch of his lips sent a thrill right through me. I kissed him back earnestly, and while I was happy with the kiss, I still craved more. I needed all of him.

My hands abandoned his hair so I could get the vest and shirt off him. He'd looked

handsome in them, but right now, I needed skin.

I could taste his smile in his kiss. He liked my eagerness. Calix's hands joined mine as he shrugged off the opened clothing, then attacked my shirt. It was a relief to let clothes hit the floor and feel his warm skin pressed to mine.

He slid his tongue into my mouth, and I welcomed it eagerly, tangling with it, swallowing his moans of enjoyment. Damn, he gave amazing kisses, and I could kiss him all day. Then his hand covered my dick through my jeans, bold and hot, and it was my turn to moan.

Jeans. Jeans had to go. Jeans had to go now.

I yanked them open, then Calix's, because the restriction of pants right now was downright criminal. Calix immediately capitalized on it and got his hand directly on my dick, pulling it free and stroking it, and oh my god, he was a witch all right because the way he handled me was downright magical.

Part of me really wanted to drag him to the bed so he could fuck me senseless, but I wasn't sure if I could let go of him long enough to manage it. The idea of pulling free of him for even a second made me want to whimper in protest.

Calix broke the kiss to whisper against my mouth. "Hand jobs? Then we can find the patience to make it to the bed."

I nodded fervently. "Yes."

With his pants pushed down to his thighs, I could finally return the favor. Calix had an absolutely beautiful dick—so long and with such a nice girth to him. I wrapped my hand around him, and damn, he was hot to the touch. His mouth found mine again, dominating the kiss as we found a rhythm, stroking each other.

Calix's free hand wrapped around my waist, holding me close, and I loved it. I loved how he wanted me as close as he could get me. I snuck a hand back into his hair again, needing to hold on to something as this man sent my body ever higher with pleasure.

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Being with him was unlike any other sexual experience I'd ever had. It felt like intense heat kept sweeping through me, a tidal wave of pleasure crashing through my system over and over again. My breath caught in my throat but I couldn't stop kissing him. Our chemistry was so intense, sometimes I felt like sparks lit between us where our skin touched. It was a thrill like no other.

My climax built so hard and fast I barely had any warning signs before it swept through me. I arched into his arms as I came hard all over his hand, my cry of pleasure absorbed into his mouth. Blackness ate at my vision, and I honestly lost control of my body for a second. Next thing I knew, I'd collapsed against his chest, his arms wrapped tight around me. I think he came, too, as he felt warm and relaxed against me, as mellow with the afterglow of good sex as I felt.

His chest jerked with a laugh, though?

I lifted my head up to look at him, then realized the lights were out. Uh. Huh? I'd turned them on the second we came into the room.

"Did we somehow turn the lights off?" That was kind of funny. How did we even do that? We were nowhere near the light switch.

"You did, yes." Calix's laughter had a sort of incredulous note to it. "When you climaxed, the bulbs exploded."

Uh...what? "They did not."

"See for yourself."

I tilted my torso so I could see around his shoulder. Damn. He was right. The bulbs were in pieces, with most of the glass spread out over the foot of my bed. That was going to be a mess and a half to clean up.

“How did that even happen?” Light bulbs didn’t just explode for no reason.

“Well, cutie, when a technomage like yourself loses control of your powers, things are bound to happen.”

I turned my head to stare at him. He wasn’t making sense. “A what?”

“Technomage.” He lifted his hand to brush hair off my forehead, eyes warm but also excited. “You are, without a doubt, a technomage.”

He had to be kidding.

Oh my god, he wasn’t kidding.

Thirteen

Calix

Rhett appeared stunned enough by this realization that I knew he had to sit with it a minute, maybe sleep on it, before anything started making sense. I basically took charge in cleaning us both up and getting clothes on, then took him downstairs to the kitchen. Food was best for a body in shock. I put him on a barstool at the island and made him a cup of tea, then pushed it into his hands.

It was like the warmth of the ceramic jolted him a little, and he finally started asking questions.

“How can you possibly know?”

I shrugged. “For one thing, I felt your power building before you climaxed. I didn’t expect it to go that direction, mind you. For another, it reached directly for the electricity in the room. It didn’t do anything else. The path it took tells me you must be a technomage, as any other magician’s power would have reached for a different medium.”

He nodded slowly, and I could tell his quick mind was busy absorbing this information and slotting it in somehow. Rhett took a slow sip of the tea before setting it back down on the granite.

“Why now and not before? I’ve been around technology my whole life.”

“And likely have been using your power your entire life. You have to understand, outbursts like this aren’t the norm. It’s not like I have a fireworks show going on when I’m doing magic in my apartment. When I work, my magic comes through at a steady, even pace, and it’s channeled through directions I control. Your power has likely done the same. It’s why everything tech you touch is so easy for you to fix.”

His eyes lifted to mine, studying me. “So Robbie isn’t an idiot?”

“Oh, Robbie’s an idiot. You’re just very gifted.”

“Heh.” Rhett took another sip of tea. “Chamomile?”

“Good for relaxing and calming the body.”

“You are such a kitchen witch.”

“Guilty. Feeling better?”

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“Yeah. I mean, I need to sleep on this, but...yeah.” Rhett’s eyes searched mine again. “You were surprised earlier. Because my magic exploded?”

“Hmm, well yes. Also to have my wild theory confirmed. Technomages aren’t common. I’ve only ever heard of them. I suspected with you because of your profession and the fact you have two familiars, but seeing it with my own eyes was something of a shock to the system.”

Speaking of, here came both familiars now. They were certainly quick on the uptake. Lucy hopped onto the bar and made herself comfortable between Rhett’s arms, her paws resting on his forearms as if she had every right to be there. Myst tucked himself against Rhett’s side, head on his thigh. I could see Rhett visibly settle with both of them there.

Good familiars were worth their weight in gold. I sent a quick intent into the universe—if I could have my familiar soon, that’d be lovely.

Rhett groaned, head dropping so it rested on Lucy’s fur. “What am I supposed to do with this information?”

“Well, I’d sleep on it first. After we get all the glass off your bed. Cutie, understand that this is amazing, but at the same time, it doesn’t really change much of your life. It just means you’re aware of it. That you can hone your magic to better suit your purposes. We’ll put up a few safeguards so you don’t break more bulbs, practice with your magic so you’re better attuned to it, and go on with life.”

He lifted his head to look at me, and I could see a spark of something. Excitement.

“So there is a way to control this consciously?”

“Of course. Magic is all about intent. We’ll need to do some research, perhaps get in contact with the coven to see if they can help, because I honestly don’t know much about your type of magic. I can only give you some basics that all magic users do.”

“I...yeah. Yeah, talking with some experts would definitely make me feel better about things.”

“Then we’ll do that tomorrow.”

He’d already had so many surprises tonight, so I didn’t have the heart to tell him that his Aunt Ruth had likely been a medium as well. No one had a good relationship with this many ghosts without being one. That was a revelation for later. I had a strong suspicion magic ran in the family, hence why she’d left the house specifically to Rhett. Why she didn’t tell him he was magical himself was anyone’s guess. Perhaps she’d been waiting for him to grow properly into it before breaking the news.

At any rate, he wasn’t alone. I was here to help him start this journey. Well, myself, Lucy, and Myst.

Rhett looked down at Lucy, stroking her back, eyes narrowed with suspicion. “You were already in the house when I inherited it. Did Aunt Ruth send you to me?”

The cat gave a slow, lazy blink of the eyes and started purring at him.

“Why am I not surprised?”

If that was true, then...Ruth had apparently had a plan on how to tell Rhett about himself and introduce him to his own magical heritage. She’d called a familiar from beyond the grave, which was insane.

Damn. Just how strong did magic run in this family?

Fourteen

Rhett

Calix did sleep over that night. After exploding light bulbs and all, we just slept. Still, it was very nice. Calix was warm and cuddly, and I enjoyed having him in my bed very much.

Also, not sure if it was because of his talk with the ghosts earlier or if it was his presence keeping them at bay, but nothing woke us in the middle of the night. No strange sounds, no banging, none of that. Just beautiful, peaceful sleep.

I needed this to be a regular thing.

Calix and I showered together. A long shower, if you know what I mean. Damn, I loved that man's hands. He put down some kind of protective barrier first so I didn't blow out the bathroom light, too, which I appreciated. Rather hard to get in the mood if you're worried about glass flying at you.

Eventually, once the water started running colder, we pulled ourselves out, put on pants, and meandered down to the kitchen. Since I was the host, it being my house and all, I took charge over breakfast.

"Cereal? Oatmeal?"

"Oatmeal would be great. I'll start the coffee." Calix wandered over to the coffee maker, as comfortable here as he would be in his own apartment.

I really loved that he was.

Oatmeal didn't take long to make, and we sat at the bar to eat our breakfast and down our caffeine.

“So...Rhett. How do you feel about my mom coming over today?”

I swallowed the coffee in my mouth before replying. “That would be awesome. I really want someone who can communicate properly with the ghosts.”

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“For sure. I think she might be able to help with your abilities, too. My mother’s a walking encyclopedia for everything magical.”

I was a little more hesitant to agree to that, but honestly? After what happened last night? I’d rather not have more electronic things exploding while trying to get my game on. That just seemed a poor life decision. “Sure.”

“Okay, let me call her.” Calix put his spoon down, got his phone out, and called.

His mother answered after only a couple of rings. “Hi, honey!”

“Hi, Mom. Uh, you got a second?”

“Only if you’re going to talk about your date.”

Calix gave the weary sigh of a child used to his parents’ antics. “Said date is sitting right next to me and you’re on speaker.”

She gave a happy squeal. “Oh, date went well, then!Hi, Rhett.”

Should I be concerned she knew my name...naw, I was going to roll with it. “Hi, Mrs. Brown. Can I ask a favor of you?”

“You absolutely can.”

“Um, my house isveryhaunted. I just inherited it from my great-aunt, and I don’t know what to do.”

Calix chimed in. “Here’s the thing. He inherited Ruth Fairchild’s house.”

There was a startled intake of breath and a lengthy pause.

“Oh. My. God. You’re Ruth Fairchild’s nephew?!”

That reaction told me a lot and yet nothing at the same time. “Uh. Yes?”

“Oh my god! Okay, I’m coming over right this second. Calix, text me the—wait, you’re in the house, aren’t you? Ruth’s house?”

“We are, yeah.” Calix looked as confused as I felt.

“Then I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.” The call abruptly ended.

I looked at Calix. He looked at me.

“So...your mother knows my aunt well, I take it?”

“Better than I thought she did, clearly.” Calix rubbed a hand over his forehead, expression utterly perplexed. “I get the feeling I do not have enough coffee in my system for the conversation we’re about to have. Want another cup?”

All things considered? “Yeah. Please.”

Fifteen

Rhett

Calix’s mother hit the door with the energy of a typhoon. I barely squeaked out a hi before she hugged me. She had the same excitement as being reunited with an old

friend she hadn't seen in a decade.

“Hi, honey. I'm Loretta.”

Then she stepped back and looked me over from head to toe. I did the same. I could see how Calix was her child—same eyes and nose, but she was very petite in build and kept her hair barely an inch long. She wore no makeup that I could see, big gold hoop earrings, and nails that would put any emperor's to shame.

“You are definitely Ruth's nephew,” she said finally. “I can see the resemblance.”

“Eh. Really?”

“I'll find a picture of her when she was younger, then you'll see what I mean. Now, let's go sit—oh.” Loretta's gaze went down to Lucy and Myst—both of whom were hanging out nearby—and flared wide. “Oh my. Two familiars. Rhett, just what are you?”

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It was a little disconcerting when two witches asked you that in the span of twenty-four hours. Just putting that out there now. “Um, your son thinks I’m a technomage?”

Her head snapped back up, jaw dropping somewhere around the equator, and she spluttered out syllables.

“Yeah.” Calix slung an arm around my waist in support, which I appreciated, as my head was still spinning with all of these revelations. “Kinda my reaction. But I’m pretty sure of that. He, um, accidentally overloaded the light fixture in his bedroom and it exploded.”

“That’s a good indication,” she managed, still staring at me like I’d turned fluorescent pink without warning. “Rhett, I understand you run a fix-it shop for electronics?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Likely why your energy hasn’t gotten out of hand before this point. It was being used in very controlled ways. Holy...I need to sit down.”

“Kitchen,” Calix stated, switching to get an arm around his mother and steer her toward the room. “I’ve got tea on the stove.”

“Tea. God yes, I need tea.”

I didn’t know what else to do but follow, so follow I did. We ended up at the island, on the barstools, with Calix making us all a cup of tea. Chamomile. Which I guess made sense, as his mother and I both could use something calming.

She promptly drank half a cup, took a deep breath, then gave a decisive nod. “Good call, Calix. All right. First, Rhett, let me explain more about your aunt, as you seem to be rather in the dark. She created and ran the coven in this town for a good fifty years. She was a very gifted witch and medium, one who guided all of us at one point or another, and we often held meetings here in this very house. Young witches who were shunned by family were even allowed to stay here until they got their feet under them. There’s not a witch within a hundred miles who doesn’t know Ruth Fairchild’s name.”

I kept waiting for these words to make sense. “I didn’t know about any of that.”

“I know most of Ruth’s family didn’t appreciate her talents. She likely didn’t say much to you because of it. But if she gave you this house, and no one else, it’s because she saw the potential in you.” Loretta’s eyes narrowed. “I can see why she hesitated to say anything. It’s hard to know when a child is young how their magic will develop. Speaking prematurely often does more damage than good. Technomages are very rare. Your aura has a definite spark to it, but it’s hard to look at someone and sayoh, you’re a such-and-such. Generally speaking, it’s their actions that shows what type of magician they are.”

“Makes sense.” And it did. It also eased some of the doubts I’d been harboring. “She did write me a journal of sorts, explaining a lot of things. But not much about magic. I guess because she didn’t know how to explain it and she wasn’t sure what type of magician I am.”

“That’s my guess. I’m sure she knew that we—by we I mean the magical community—would meet you eventually, see your potential, and guide you. Much as she guided all of us. It’s definitely our turn to return the favor.”

My head still spun with information but emotionally, I was just relieved. I didn’t know it when I took over this house, but I had a strong network of support already in

place, one created and fostered by Aunt Ruth. Actually, the word relieved didn't convey the depth of the emotion. I really, truly did not want to figure everything out on my own.

"Um, that said, where do I start...?"

"Let me see you in action." Loretta handed over her phone. "My phone's battery has been draining faster than usual. Work on that."

Oh, that was usually an easy fix. I accepted the unlocked phone, doing my usual checks—background apps being too demanding, software update doing hinky things, etc.—and found the culprit pretty quickly. I cleared it out, then looked up. "Should be fixed."

"Fascinating," Loretta murmured, her eyes roving all over my torso, but especially my hands. "Calix, you seeing this?"

Calix had both forearms planted against the top of the island, eyes fixed on me, like I was a whole show going on. "Oh, I see it. Dayum."

Hi, it's me. The lost one. "Someone want to fill me in?"

"I have no doubt that whatever you just did is standard practice for fixing the problem," Loretta assured me. "But the second you started working, your magic kicked right in. I bet when you fix something, it stays fixed. Am I right?"

"Er...yeah, usually. Unless something's really bad with the hardware, but that's also usually pretty obvious." Her real point kicked in and I blurted out, "Are you telling me my magic is literally mending this phone?"

"Oh, it likely mends any electronic you turn your attention to. No wonder you've got

a good business going.” Loretta slapped the countertop, grinning from ear to ear. “You’re a fucking natural. If anything, we only need to work on you recognizing when your magic is active so it doesn’t go haywire on you accidentally. I bet you blew the light bulbs while you were having sex.”

My face went beet red immediately. I could feel the heat of the blush.

Loretta cackled again. “Don’t be shy. It happens a lot with magic. Heightened emotions and all that. We’ll definitely get some safeguards up so you don’t need to worry about it.”

I absolutely did not want to have a sex talk with the mother of the man I was sleeping with, but... “Thanks. It is a worry.”

“Shouldn’t be anything to it. Part of it is just recognizing when your magic has come online and redirecting it.” She leaned in and lifted a hand to shield her mouth while whispering, “Sex altar. Just saying.”

Calix sighed noisily. “I’ll take care of it, thank you.”

Loretta cackled again. This woman clearly had no shame.

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That was all well and good, but I had another major concern on my mind. “Um, but if Aunt Ruth was also a medium, then was she collecting ghosts here? And why?”

“A very good question,” Loretta said, already standing. “Let’s go ask them.”

Sixteen

Calix

My mother was clearly on a roll. She was high energy and all smiles. Me having gone on a date probably had something to do with it, as Rhett was the first date I’d had in over a year. Plus, he was cute.

Mom went into the study/library/room of awesomeness like she’d been in there a hundred times. She likely had. I took more time with it because it was my first visit to this room. Holy hell, it was like Belle’s library from *Beauty and the Beast*—floor-to-ceiling bookcases and an honest-to-god library ladder. I must marry this man just so I could lay hands on his library.

Mom reached the desk and turned, expression thoughtful.

“Rhett, have you gone through the desk?”

“Uh...no?”

Rhett joined her and seemingly looked at the desk with new eyes. I could tell the thought hadn’t even occurred to him. Then again, he’d been busy moving, acquiring

familiars, and playing with me, so...understandable.

“I went through the safe because I was directed to look there for my mother’s inheritance. I know all that’s in there. But the desk? Didn’t occur to me.”

“Hmm. Because they’re saying Ruth’s second instruction book for you is in there.”

By “they” I assumed my mother was referring to the many ghosts packed into this room. They weren’t all clear in my vision—some were a stronger opaqueness—but we clearly had a good twenty of them here.

“Second book?” Rhett was around the desk in a second flat, opening up drawers. “Where—oh, is it this purple one?”

“Indeed. Purple is a witch’s color.”

“Ahhhh. Is that why the back door is purple?”

“Likely so. We all came in and out of that door.”

It was old school, a purple door, but it was still something we went by. A purple door meant a witch was safe to enter. Kind of like a secret handshake, I guess.

The book in question was one of those old-school journals in purple leather, complete with golden ribbon attached. Rhett opened it and read through the first page, a slow smile taking over his face.

“Aunt Ruth, you’re not to be underestimated. So, she did know.”

I did a double take. “She did?!”

“She did. She knew but didn’t think I’d be open to hearing about my powers yet, and at the time she wrote this—holy hell, she wrote this when I was sixteen. She says here that she didn’t think I’d fully grown into my ability yet, so she was waiting until I was a proper adult to teach me. Awww. Dammit, she had no idea she wouldn’t have a chance.”

His voice choked a little, grief making the words rough.

Anyone who looked at Rhett when he spoke of his great-aunt knew in a glance how much he loved her. The fact she’d left everything to him also said a lot. I couldn’t let that sad face go, so I came in closer to put an arm around his waist, giving him some much-needed comfort. Rhett immediately leaned against me with a soft sigh.

From this angle, I could clearly see the book, and I also observed something else. My mother’s name and phone number were in purple glitter ink and shaky cursive, with several emphatic arrows pointing to it. It had clearly been written down at a later time, as it was a more vibrant ink compared to the other words written in black.

“Mom. She wrote your contact info down.”

In a second flat, Mom stepped around to read over Rhett’s shoulder. She looked misty eyed but also delighted, like it was the best compliment in the world.

“I told you, didn’t I? She knew we’d rally around you and take care of you. Rhett, I highly encourage you to read this book.”

“Oh, I will. Trust me, I will.” He closed the book, hugging it to his chest. “But not right this second. Let’s talk to ghosts first.”

“Agreed. There’s really far too many.”

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Lips pursed, Mom turned and oriented herself to the nearest ghost at her elbow. “You, sir, what’s your name? Sebastian. Lovely to meet you, I’m Loretta. Oh? Sure, I’ll tell him. Rhett, they do all apologize for startling you. They thought you knew coming in what your aunt was doing.”

“Apology accepted, but whatwasshe doing?”

Also my question.

“Helping ghosts pass on.” Mom had her intent face—the one she wore when channeling her medium abilities and listening hard. “Huh. All right, so once a week she’d get together with Chelsea, and they’d do a massive passing ritual. The ghosts have spread the word amongst themselves to come here if they’re having trouble passing on, so they’ve been collecting all this time. Sebastian, when was the last time you saw Chelsea? Oh,three months ago? Oh my, I wonder if she’s just been passing ghosts on her own.”

Likely. Chelsea was an A-type. She wouldn’t let any task sit.

“What is this, ghost-to-ghost networking?” Rhett muttered.

I snorted a laugh. “Instead of Grindr it’s Hauntr.”

Rhett laughed outright and my mother rolled her eyes.

“You’re not helpful,” Mom informed me.

“Excuse you, that is not my task in life. I am to be cute and entertaining.”

She sighed again—the sigh of a woman who wondered if she was at fault for giving birth to me. I got this sigh a lot. I was immune to it.

Rhett batted those pretty eyes at me and quietly said, “You’re very cute, so good job.”

I couldn’t resist his look. I leaned in to graze a kiss over his mouth. Even such a simple brush of lips on lips was electrifying to me. A thrill like none other. Above his mouth, I murmured, “Why thank you.”

Momahemed. “Boys. Not now. You can fuck each other senseless later.”

Rhett winked at me and then focused. “All right, so who’s Chelsea?”

“She was your aunt’s last apprentice. Chelsea’s a very, very gifted medium and witch but also a Reiki master. People constantly come to her for house hunting, bad attachments, and whatnot, as she can cut the cords and then pass the spirit on.”

“Ho. So she’s like a ghost buster on steroids?”

“Pretty much. I can see why she and Ruth would team up to help ghosts pass on. Their talents combined would be the perfect combination.” Mom turned—a ghost clearly saying something to her—and listened hard for a second. “Ah. Almost everyone here wishes to pass on, or so they’re saying. Rhett, how about I give Chelsea a call? She’ll surely know more about all of this anyway.”

“I think that sounds great.”

“Okay.”

Mom whipped her phone out and started calling.

I took a moment to whisper, “Are you good with continuing this? Letting ghosts stay here and passing them on, I mean.”

“Yeah.”

I blinked, surprised there was no hesitation in him. No reservations. I certainly would have had to sit and think about it.

A sweet smile tilted his mouth up. “Because it’s too sad. Dying and not knowing how to move past this world, having to depend on the kindness of strangers, it’s too sad. How could I sleep at night knowing I could help them but chose not to because it’s not convenient? My Aunt Ruth would come out of her grave to smack me if I even considered not doing it.”

He was likely right in that regard.

“So I’m all for it, really. I want to open the house back up for witch parties, so why not?”

Considering how eager he was to learn of his abilities, this made sense, too. Also, witch parties sounded absolutely magical in many ways. I must make sure I was invited to these. If Aunt Ruth had known how open he was to magic, she might not have delayed like she had.

The phone call was finally picked up.

“Loretta!Wow, long time no speak. What’s up?”

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“Well, I’m standing in Ruth’s house. That’s been inherited by her technomage nephew. And is also overrun with ghosts. Ghosts waiting to be ushered off to the other side. That ring any bells?”

Instead of an apology, there was a squeal of delight.

“Rhett’s here?Yay!I’m inviting myself to this party. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

Call ended.

Rhett stared at the phone with bewilderment. “Is there anyone in this town who doesn’t know me or my aunt?”

Mom beamed at him. “Nope!”

I knew she was mostly kidding, but in this moment, it didn’t actually sound like a joke.

Well. I wondered what madness Chelsea would bring with her. I guess I was about to find out.

Seventeen

Rhett

Chelsea arrived carrying all the things. She had a hamper on her hip and a tote bag on the other shoulder, and despite the burdens, she was beaming from ear to ear. I wasn’t

expecting this giant of a woman who looked like a pro volleyball player, but I was glad to see her regardless.

I came down the outside stairs and met her halfway, reaching for the hamper. “Hi, I’m Rhett. Chelsea?”

“That’s me!” She grinned wildly, revealing slightly crooked teeth. “Rhett, first off, sorry about Ruth. We were all devastated when she passed on, even though we saw it coming.”

I still teared up thinking of my Aunt Ruth, and I could tell Chelsea was perfectly sincere, so it was harder to hold the tears at bay. “Thank you. She was my favorite person.”

“Mine too. She gave me instructions to help you, once you got your feet under you, so I’m really glad for the call. Now, in the immediate sense, this is all the stuff I normally set up with.”

“Got it. Let’s head in. I still don’t fully understand everything you and Aunt Ruth were doing here.”

Chelsea waggled her eyebrows in an outrageous way. “Magic.”

“Hardy har har.”

Loretta already had the front door open and waved us back inside. “Chelsea, you were certainly quick. What all did you bring with you?”

“Everything I need to pass ghosts on. Ruth and I had a setup to pass multiple ghosts at once.”

“Oh, delightful. We’ve got a full house in here. It needs some clearing out.”

“I bet. I’m glad you guys called. I wasn’t certain how to reach Rhett other than just swinging by the house and hoping he was home. Oh!” Chelsea stopped and leaned down, extending a hand toward Myst. “You’re adorable. Who are you?”

“That’s Myst,” I introduced.

“Your familiar? He’s darling.”

Seriously how did all the witches around me see this in a single glance? “Well, he’s one of them.”

“One of?” Chelsea glanced back at me, but it was at that moment Familiar Two entered the scene, and you could tell from her face she immediately cottoned on. “Ah. Got it. And this is...?”

“Lucy.”

“Nice to meet you both. You want to follow us to the back patio? We got witchy stuff to do.”

I swear both dog and cat perfectly understood her as they immediately fell into step on either side.

Chelsea clearly knew this house well, as she led us all confidently back through the kitchen and onto the back patio—which was rich lady patio level, with the pagoda, hot tub, planter boxes, and all. It was really pretty, and I had no intention of changing any of it.

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Chelsea nodded at the hamper I was still lugging. “That has all of the candles. Start setting those up to form a pathway. Start here and lead toward the arbor.”

Calix joined me in taking out tea lights, and then he set them on the paved stones about six inches apart. I followed what he was doing on the other side, mirroring it, but also keeping an eye on what Chelsea was doing. She’d taken purple chalk out from a pocket and drawn a circle, then started writing other things inside of it.

Loretta called from inside, “I’m bringing people out with me!”

“Go ahead!” Chelsea called back. “Almost done with setup!”

Eh. We were?

Then I realized her magic circle was directly under the arbor. And the arbor had a distinct waver to the air, almost like a heat wave, but it was more solid than that? Hard to explain, but it felt like power. A tingling sense kept sweeping over the fine hairs of my arms.

“Doorway,” I murmured to myself, belatedly realizing what I was seeing. “She created a doorway with the arch.”

“Exactly.” Calix came in closer to throw an arm around my shoulders. “You catch on quick.”

“Why the lights?”

“Lights help fuel the spell, but it also brings in elemental energy to help open the door. Between that, her Reiki training in ushering the dead on, and her witch ability to physically open the door to the next plane, it’s like a solid pathway for ghosts.”

A triple whammy, if you will. Damn. No wonder ghosts told each other to come here. They were absolutely guaranteed a path to the afterlife without problems. I’d come here too.

Calix fetched out lighters from the bottom of the basket and we both bent, lighting each of the candles. It took us ten minutes, and by the time I straightened, Loretta had a whole herd of ghosts out with her. I knew that for a fact because the second one of those ghosts stood in a walkway, they became visible to my eyes. Most of them gave me a smile and a wave before jaunting along merrily on the path. The second they reached the arbor, they disappeared completely.

“Damn.” I let out a low whistle. “This really is effective.”

Chelsea came around the arbor to stand at my side. “It’s a nice system. The arbor gives them the feeling of a doorway, something that makes sense to them. We tried putting the walkway somewhere else but it’s like they got confused on what to do at the end. But the arbor gives them something to go through and it connected perfectly.”

Interesting. It did make sense. I’d get to the end of a walkway of lights and stop too, if I were in their shoes. Putting the arbor at the end was smart of them.

I stood there watching as ghost after ghost went down the walkway, each patiently waiting their turn before going. Well, with a few exceptions, as we had couples and families wanting to go together, which according to Chelsea was perfectly fine. The more I watched, the more uncertain I was about the whole setup. Why was it temporary like this?

“Uh, Chelsea? Any reason why we can’t just leave permanent outdoor lights up?”

She blinked at me, head canted in confusion. “You want these on the ground permanently?”

“Well, wouldn’t string lights overhead work? As long as it goes toward the arbor.”

She had her mouth open on a protest only to pause and look thoughtful. “We never tried it because again, energy. But if a technomage like you sets it up...”

Loretta joined me on my other side. “I think it’ll work fine. The need is light. It doesn’t matter if it’s on the ground or in the sky.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong”—and I likely was, since I knew basically nothing about how this all worked—“but if you made your sigil into, say, a light box or something I could connect to aswitch like the light strings, then we could set this up to where it automatically turned on every night for maybe an hour? Would that work?”

Both women looked at me like I had just spouted wisdom of the ages.

I think that meant it was a good idea?

“My god,” Chelsea whispered. “Yes. I think that would work. Especially because your power would be fueling it. It wouldn’t solve the issue of the ones who are having trouble passing over though.”

“But you could swing by once a week to help them,” Loretta pointed out. “Just as you used to when Ruth was alive. But this way, those who can pass on with only a little help can just go. Rhett won’t have to live with dozens of ghosts all the time.”

Please and thank you. Really wasn’t keen on that.

Chelsea beamed at me. “You really are a technomage.”

I personally thought this was obvious, but maybe it wasn't. Maybe I just thought along tech lines. “Happy to help. Uh, in return, who can help teach me?”

Chelsea patted my shoulder, still beaming. “No worries, man. I've got you.”

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At least someone did.

Eighteen

Calix

While Rhett and Chelsea cleared the house of ghosts, I skedaddled back to my apartment. I had two goals: pack an overnight bag so I could stay (and sex up) Rhett and make sure Pepper was fed and okay. It had been over a day since I'd seen her, after all.

Rhett had said I could bring Pepper over with me, if I wanted, which I thought was a fine idea. I was sure she'd love a whole house to clean and putter around in. Sometimes I think she got a little bored up in my apartment because it was on the small side and she just didn't have a lot to do to keep her occupied.

I opened the door, calling as I came in, "Hey, Pepper, I'm home! I'm actually home only for a few minutes. I'm heading back to Rhett's. Would you like to—"

I rounded the foyer area and into the main room and that's when I realized Pepper was not home alone.

Brownies.

Yes, plural, because in the single day that I'd been gone, I'd somehow acquired more Brownies. One...two...three...four more in fact.

The hell?!

Pepper squeaked out a hello and hopped off the window bench, running for me with her face shining in excitement.

I caught her up in the crook of my arm automatically, balancing her with my other hand, as she was only palm sized. “Uh, who...? Is this your family?”

She nodded eagerly, still beaming, then she turned her head and gestured toward the Brownie with a long grey beard.

“I am Grey,” he introduced with a bow. “My granddaughter was lost from us when she found your shop.”

“Oh! Uh, Calix. Nice to meet you.” This now made much more sense why I’d found her in such a desperate state. A lost child—it was obvious in retrospect. “I called her Pepper, but what’s her name?”

“She is too young for the Naming yet, so Pepper is fine.”

I had a feeling there was a whole cultural/procedural thing with naming a Brownie, and you know what, I wasn’t getting into it. Maybe later, when I had spare processing power.

“Sure, thanks. Um. So are you here to get her, or...?”

A Brownie with equally grey hair up in a bun and a ragged dress on stepped closer to me. “We were searching for a safe house when we lost our granddaughter. She assures us this place is very safe, and we are welcome here, but...”

“You are more than welcome,” I assured her. “Trust me, you’re a delight to have

here.”

All four of them relaxed immediately, smiling in return.

“Who else do we have here?”

The old woman gestured toward herself first. “River. This is my daughter, Willow. My son-in-law, Woods.”

“Nice to meet everyone.” I could see in a glance the family resemblance. Pepper looked very much like her father, just more delicate in features. “Um, when you say safe house, do you mean any house safe to go to?”

Grey shook his head. “We were told of a grand witch’s house in this town, but we’re struggling to find it.”

Call me crazy but I had a really good hunch which house they were looking for.

“Big black Victorian house that’s famous for passing ghosts along, by chance?”

They lit up with eagerness, crowding around my legs.

“You know of it!” River tugged at my jeans. “Please, where is it?”

“Oh, I know exactly where it is. The owner’s a technomage. His great-aunt was a witch, hence the rumors of it being owned by a witch. Tell you what, why don’t you come with me? I’m packing a bag so I can stay overnight with him. I’ll introduce you all, and you can bargain with him to claim the house as your own.”

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“That sounds splendid. Pepper, come down. We must help him pack.”

I set her down, then led the way into my bedroom. Let me tell you, five Brownies can pack you in a minute flat. I barely got a word in edgewise. Then I gathered everyone up and loaded them into the car. I debated calling Rhett to give him a heads-up, but this was one of those moments where I really wanted to surprise him. His reaction was sure to be kodak gold.

I drove back to his house, slinging my duffle bag over my shoulder and carrying Pepper in because if she had a history of getting lost, I wasn't leaving any opportunities open.

Myst opened the door for us—now when did he learn to open doors?—and we waltzed right in like we owned the place.

“Rhett!” I called. “I bring visitors!”

Rhett popped out of the study, his great-aunt's instruction manual/journal in his hand. He must have been reading while I was out. His eyes flew wide at the sight of five Brownies, jaw dropping. Dammit, I should have had my phone in hand. It really was priceless seeing how stunned he was.

I gave myself a second to enjoy the sight before explaining.

“This is Pepper's family. She was separated from them while they were looking for your house. They'd heard it was a safe house to be.”

“Oh! Oh, right, sure.” Rhett came in closer, going down on one knee and offering a hand. “Hi, I’m Rhett.”

Grey reached up to clasp a finger and shake. “Grey. This is my wife, River. My daughter Willow and my son-in-law, Woods. Calix said you knew our Pepper.”

“I sure do. Well, I know of her. She helped me with my familiars once. Hi, Pepper.”

Pepper gave him a shy wave and smile.

Grey straightened, turning very businesslike. “Sir Mage. We would like to offer our services.”

Oh wow. He wasn’t wasting any time.

I opened my mouth to coach Rhett on how to respond, but he wasn’t looking at me.

“I believe I understand what you’re offering. As long as I provide room and board, you’ll clean and maintain the house, is that right?”

“That is correct.”

“That’s an amazing offer. Honestly, this house is a bit big for me to manage on my own, especially when I have the shop, too.”

“You have a shop?” Willow stepped up next to her father, sounding intrigued.

“I sure do. Right next to Calix’s shop, actually.”

The Brownies all looked at each other, a silent conversation going on between them. Then Grey nodded, like he was in agreement, and turned back to Rhett.

“We will clean and maintain your shop as well. Calix’s apartment and shop are already under contract with us, so it won’t be hard.”

“That seems like...a lot. Even with five of you. It actually feels unfair, in a way.”

Rhett glanced up at me, and I encouraged him with a silent wave of the fingers. He was doing fine. I clearly did not need to give my input.

“How about this? You can choose which bedrooms you want as your own upstairs. Mine is the back bedroom, the one overlooking the garden, but the others are yours to do as you like.”

Grey did a double take. “You’ll give us a whole room?!”

“Rooms,” Rhett corrected, emphasizing thes. “Two married couples with a child? I’m sure you want space from each other at times. You can decorate them as you like, just move whatever furniture you don’t like to the basement or attic or something. Plus you have free range of the kitchen, and I’ll give you five hundred dollars worth of spending money every month. Just tell me what you want, and I’ll buy it for you. Deal?”

Grey latched on to Rhett’s hand before he could even finish that last syllable. “Done.”

Wow. He’d been generous by Brownie terms. No wonder Grey was latching on to him. Hell, I would have too, in his shoes.

Myst came over, nosing at the Brownies, tail wagging. Woods reached up to pat him, seemingly entranced by this giant beast.

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“Your familiar is offering to show us around. May we?” he asked in a surprisingly deep voice.

“Please do. This is home now. His name is Myst, by the way. I have another familiar, Lucy, a fluffy black cat. Oh, and don’t mind the ghosts, they’re mostly passing through.”

“We will handle it,” River assured him. “Thank you, Master Rhett.”

“Pleasure having you.” Rhett beamed back at her.

I set Pepper down and she moved off with her family, who were obviously giddy about exploring this huge house they could now call home. I was relieved my apartment and shop weren’t going to be abandoned because I’d be sad to go back to cleaning. Pepper had clearly told them of our agreement and the family chose to honor it. I was glad.

Rhett threw his arms around my waist, hugging me, his eyes warm and tinged with laughter.

“I thank you for bringing me a live-in cleaning crew. God knows I need them.”

“You’re welcome. Honestly, I got the surprise of my life when I came home to find a whole family of Brownies.”

“I bet.”

From somewhere in the back of the house, River's voice rose in a sharp command.

“GHOST! DON'T YOU DARE LEAVE THAT WINDOW OPEN! I WON'T BE CHASING FLIES BECAUSE OF YOUR CARELESSNESS!”

Rhett and I both started laughing, hanging off each other.

“Well,” Rhett choked out, “one thing's for sure. With Grandma River around, the house will be kept in immaculate condition.”

“And the ghosts don't stand a chance against her,” I agreed, still laughing.

If nothing else, the Brownie vs. Ghost wars should be entertaining.

Epilogue

Rhett

Three months later

I sat in the library that evening, curled up in my favorite armchair, with a glass of wine in my hand and a purring cat in my lap. Calix was in the kitchen making something yummy—I could tell from the smells alone. Nothing better than a sexy man in my kitchen cooking.

For some reason, I felt a little pensive. A little sad. Well, I say “for some reason” but I knew the reason. Today was Aunt Ruth's birthday. It was a reminder to me of all the other birthdays I'd celebrated with her. I missed her fiercely even on a good day, but today? It was more poignant.

I looked up at the oil painting of her above the fireplace and spent a moment

mourning this incredible woman. At the same time, I felt like I should thank her. So much had happened in my life, all positive, because of her generosity.

“So, Aunt Ruth? Turns out I’m a technomage after all, like you guessed. I’m still training, but your apprentice is doing a damnfine job getting me up to snuff. Thank you for Chelsea. She’s really becoming one of my best friends.”

I was on a roll now and needed to say this aloud. To acknowledge it, hoping she could somehow hear me.

“The house has been so welcoming to me. It has a spirit of its own, I’ve found. It doesn’t talk to me, but I sometimes get impressions from it. With practice, I hope to get better at understanding what it’s trying to say. The Brownies interpret for me often. Oh, speaking of, thanks to Calix, it’s now got a whole family of Brownies to take care of it. I’m not even allowed to clean. They get pissed at me if I try. It’s glorious. I’m so spoiled, and I never want it to change. I feel like I’m a Disney princess some days.”

Myst came in to flop at my feet, then went belly up. Shameless creature. I used a foot to give him belly rubs and got a wagging tail for my efforts.

“I have two wonderful familiars, a loving boyfriend who moves in with me this week, and a successful business that’s grown so much I’ve actually hired a person to help me in the shop. And while the house is hella haunted at any given time, you set it up this way for those who need help to pass on. It’s been wonderful, seeing people stuck in time finally reunite with family and friends. Some days, I sit on the patio with Chelsea and just watch, encouraged by the thought that there’s a life after this one.”

The front doorbell rang and Calix called, “I’ve got it!”

Good, because I wasn’t moving. I was under various levels of fur paralysis.

I kept my ear trained toward the door though and heard Calix greet someone, a beep, and then the sound of a heavy cardboard box being lugged inside.

“Cutie, what did you buy?” Calix called to me. “It’s heavy as hell and marked fragile?”

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I tilted my head back to answer him. “That’s the new custom sigil light, probably. It was due to arrive today.”

“What sigil light? Are you expanding the ghost path again?”

“No, this is for something else.”

“Uh...okay? Where do I put it?”

“Gimme a second.”

That was my cue to get up, apparently. I shifted Lucy to the back of the armchair—her normally preferred perch anyway—then carefully stepped over Myst to avoid stomping on my dog—who was too lazy to move until he realized I was moving, and then all of a sudden he found his motivation. Typical.

Before leaving the study, though, I lifted my glass toward the portrait.

“Thanks, Aunt Ruth. For the magic.”