



Paws for a Minute

Author: *Milly Taiden*

Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Wolf shifter and Sheriff, Cohen Pierce, dislikes anything that disrupts the peace of his beloved Half Moon Key. He doesn't care that townsfolk think he is grumpy; he is just fine all alone. He is dead set against ever falling in love again. Especially with the town's witch, a woman he doesn't trust despite her mesmerizing eyes.

Alana Wixx might be a witch, but she knows her time in Half Moon Key will come to an end if she can't save the protective magic that keeps the small town secluded and safe. She doesn't want to leave the only home she has ever known, but if the too handsome, but surly sheriff doesn't stop stealing her booth at Moonie's, she just might.

When an earthquake unsettles the quaint and quiet village, Cohen and Alana will have to put aside their booth feud and work together. But there is more to the magic than meets the eye. Cohen and Alana might want to save their home, but as they uncover its mysteries, they lure the biggest threat right into their midst.

Total Pages (Source): 57

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

ONE

MRS. FRANCIS

Mrs. Francis, the eldest and most beloved citizen of Half Moon Key, walked down Main Street, a strut still very much present in her walk. The small town had been her home for all of her long life, except for a few years right after she lost her husband way too soon.

In her grief, Mrs. Francis had left Half Moon Key in search of peace from all her memories. Every little part of their adored small town reminded Mrs. Francis of her beloved. From Moonie's diner, where they had breakfast, to The Spaghetti Bowl, where they had dinner dates, to the beach, where they built sandcastles and swam off the effects of the summer heat.

She hadn't been able to stay away for long. This was her home.

Besides, the big wide world was even more full of heartbreak than Darla Francis was able to take. She returned to Half Moon Key to keep the memories of her sweet love alive.

Mrs. Francis made sure Half Moon Key was a safe place for everyone who chose to make the small town their home. It was her duty to protect them because she was the eldest ... and technically reigning... elder.

There was another reason, too, but Mrs. Francis kept that tucked away close in her heart, right next to her husband's memory.

“Are you going to come in?” a beautiful redhead wearing a flowing blue sundress asked.

Alana Wixx leaned against the door frame of her shop, the cleverly named Wixx. It wasn't only the owner's name, but it also represented part of the store's wares. There were many candles in Wixx.

Some were run-of-the-mill candles meant to make a room smell just so.

Others ... the ones Alana kept behind the counter, behind that emerald-jewel-toned velvet curtain ... had other uses.

Mrs. Francis and the council allowed Alana to practice her magic in town like they had done for her mother and grandmother before her for one reason alone.

It protected the town. The magic was meant to keep intruders and danger out of Half Moon Key. Mrs. Francis and the other elders were growing steadily more concerned that the town had seen its fair share of unwanted action lately.

People were starting to ask questions, and not the good kind that Mrs. Francis could shrug off. In the last year alone, there had been three different battles in Half Moon Key. Had the threats not been taken care of by the able and keen Sheriff Cohen Pierce, those conflicts could have escalated into all-out wars.

“Of course, I'm coming in,” Mrs. Francis said, leading Alana into her own store. “We need to talk.”

Alana flipped the lock on her shop door and jutted her chin to the thick curtain. Ms. Francis knew the drill, of course. She had done this many times before with Alana's mother, Lina, and grandmother, Helena.

What lay behind the velvet curtain was probably exactly what folks imagined when they pictured a witch's personal living room. Old books lined one of the walls, whereas the others were full of shelves, nooks, and crannies where all kinds of things sat waiting to be used. Candles, vials, herbs, and plants, and then the less savory stuff Mrs. Francis didn't need to know about. Witches had their business, and shifters had theirs.

"Before you start on me," Alana sat in one of the chairs, crossing her legs elegantly. "Let me at least get comfortable."

Mrs. Francis had always found the young woman to be wise and mature beyond her years, but it struck her again. Alana Wixx was a woman ... a witch ... with the weight of the world on her shoulders. Mrs. Francis wanted to hug the child she had once known and promise everything would be okay. She couldn't make those assurances. Not with how things were going in Half Moon Key lately.

"Alana," Mrs. Francis interrupted. "I am here for two reasons. One is partly due to the elders while the other is more personal."

The witch winced. "Might as well start with the elders' latest threat. Are they going to kick me out of town? Find a better witch?" Alana shook her head, making her long hair whirl around her like a manifestation of her known and cliched redheaded temper. "You won't find a better witch out there. Besides, you already know what I am going to say. I warned you. I warned all of you that letting that ... that ..." She closed her eyes, her nostrils flaring. When she gazed back up to meet Mrs. Francis' questioning face, Alana calmed. "Thatman."

Mrs. Francis barely contained her smile and interrupted again. "That man is the sheriff of Half Moon Key. He deserves your respect as a member of the council."

"I told you all that it was a bad idea to hire Cohen Pierce. He is an alpha without a

pack, and he will take over the town. He'll make Half Moon Key into his own playground. All this trouble?" Alana snorted and shook her head again in disbelief. "I can't even believe that I have to explain this to you, but all of the trouble in town is his fault."

Mrs. Francis arched a brow at this, amused. "Oh? Tell me what you know."

Alana narrowed her eyes, but she said, "Mason came to town for one reason, and that was to see his brother. He brought trouble here, and then there was Parker. He also brought trouble."

"Jack isn't here because of Cohen. You can't blame that one, Cohen. I brought Jack to town, as you well know."

Alana pursed her lips. "Fine. Two out of three situations we faced were because of him. You and the others can't blame me for the magic slipping when we have a shifter sheriff running this town like his own personal schoolyard."

Mrs. Francis laughed. "No one has ever accused Cohen of having a playground. I don't think that man played when he was a boy. He's far too serious."

"You're blinded by him. You can't see that he is trouble."

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“And you’re blinded by your hatred of him, Alana.” Mrs. Francis ignored the other woman’s gasp. “I don’t know why you won’t just let him get to know you. He’s not what you think he is.”

“He’s a shifter,” the witch snapped back.

“So am I. So are a lot of people in this town.”

“That’s different, and you know it. Cohen Pierce was meant to lead a pack. He is an alpha. That makes him dangerous to a small town that doesn’t recognize or have an alpha. It’s always been run by a council of elders.”

“Elders die, Alana.” Alphas did, too, but Mrs. Francis kept her widow’s grief buried.

The younger woman gasped at the implication. “Stop. Don’t even say things like that.”

Mrs. Francis shrugged. “I’m not going to live forever, and neither will the others on the council. We will need to be replaced by others eventually. As of this morning, Cohen has already been given a seat in the council.”

“What? No! You can’t do that!” Alana was on her feet, her face flushed red with anger and fear.

“I made him promise me that he wouldn’t banish you from town,” Mrs. Francis explained. “Sit down, Alana. Let me explain to you why it has to be this way.”

Alana swallowed hard and looked away, unable to meet Mrs. Francis's eyes.

"Alana," Mrs. Francis used her motherly voice. It was the same one she used as a teacher, too. Her students were the children she never had, just like the citizens of Half Moon Key were her children. She cared deeply for Alana Wixx. "Cohen Pierce is a lot of things, but he is a man of his word, and he gave me his that he would not throw you out of town. Not ever."

"We hate each other," Alana pointed out needlessly.

"I know you think you hate him, and he is also certain he hates you right back."

"So why do you think, for even two seconds, that he will keep his promise once you're gone? Once all of the elders are gone?"

"You're Cohen's sister-in-law's best friend, Alana. Lila would never let Cohen throw you out because she has Mason's ear."

"Mason is new here," she scoffed.

"And yet, just like Jack, Parker, and Cohen, Mason has been offered a seat on the council. He proved himself willing and able to defend our home."

Alana shook her head. "I've always told my mother that they cheated Nana out of her seat on the council. I never would've allowed those shifters to be on the council if I had a say. They brought the trouble to town, but I will be the one to pay the price."

"You're not a trusting woman, Alana. I've always known this, and that's why I nominated you to take my place on the council. You will get your say in how our town is run now."

The redhead's eyes filled with tears that were both happy and mournful. "How? How were you able to manage this?"

"I didn't," Mrs. Francis replied. "At least I wasn't the only one who agreed you had to have a seat at the table."

"Who?" Alana narrowed her gaze. "Who spoke for me?"

Mrs. Francis grinned and shook her head. "Honey, if you think that man hates you, you're more hopeless than I thought."

Without another word, Mrs. Francis left Wixx and its bemused owner. The elder had more town business to see to, and she had so very little time left.

TWO

ALANA

Alana stood in front of her store, eying the display window with a critical pout. Her full lips were pulled forward, her gaze narrowing.

It was all wrong.

The blue of the sheet on the bottom of the display clashed with the blue that was used to make the background. She ripped down the swatches of material with a sigh of frustration.

"What did that sheet ever do to you?" A man laughed behind her.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Mason Pierce, the sheriff's brother and Alana's best friend's mate and fiancé, stood there with a grin. Alana was used to his teasing tone, very reminiscent of an annoying but loved little brother.

"The sheet isn't the right color." She gestured to the display window. "This is all wrong."

"I'm not sure what you're going for, but it looked just fine to me. Something bothering you?"

Alana took a deep breath, rolling the sheet into a ball in her hands. "Mrs. Francis was here a little while ago. She told me about some council news."

Mason beamed at her. "Cool, huh? That means we'll be running this town when we're as old as Mrs. Francis."

She flinched. "You think I want to be dealing with your brother when I'm Mrs. Francis's age?"

He threw his head back with a laugh. "That's exactly what I think, dear Alana. It's what everyone believes, too."

Alana rolled her eyes. "There is something seriously wrong with our society if they think that your brother and I are secretly into each other. We dislike each other. Severely. Deeply. That's not for show. It's not going to change, Mason, because your brother is incapable of change."

He didn't reply but instead took the sheet from her hands and pinned it back up against the back wall of the display case. Once it was secured, he took Alana by the shoulders, and together, he made them take a few steps back. With their feet planted on the curb, the sun hit the window just right.

The two shades of blue didn't clash anymore. In fact, they looked like they were made to fold together in her display case.

"All you needed is a change of perspective." Mason winked before walking away in the diner's direction.

"That's very cute, Mason! Very cute. But just because you got me to like my own display window, it doesn't mean you're right about yo..." She stopped short, suddenly realizing that she was shouting in the street. A few people had stopped to listen to what she was going to say, so she clamped her mouth shut.

Mason turned to smile at her. "I wonder what you were gonna say, Alana. I'll see you tonight for some wedding planning stuff."

Alana returned her attention to her display case, quickly setting the rest of the decorations as she had planned. She needed to keep her hands and head busy, especially after she had spent the morning thinking about Cohen.

No, that was wrong.

She hadn't spent the morning thinking about him. It was the opposite. Alana had done everything in her power not to think of Cohen Pierce, and that was very different.

* * *

There were a few people walking along Main Street, but they were locals, and most

people from Half Moon Key didn't use her store for anything more than a candle supply shop.

They rarely used what her store was really all about. Only a few did, and that was a secret Alana would take to her grave.

Witches had a love-hate relationship with small towns.

Sometimes, these insular communities would protect a witch as one of their own.

Others turned on their witch when things got bad in town.

It had happened so many times before. Alana knew witch historians had enough material to wade through for at least a hundred years. And that was without what would eventually happen to her, and the jury was still out on that.

Either Half Moon Key would continue to protect her, or they would turn on her. Her situation in town was tenuous, especially given the magic she had to continuously maintain. The upkeep on big magic was always tricky, but she had to maintain a spell that wasn't even hers.

It was two generations deep, and she could feel its power draining.

Too much power for her to conjure all by herself.

Alana knew she would eventually have to tell the council that the protective magic on the town was breaking, but the moment she did, she knew they would cast her out. She was nervous before, but ever since Cohen Pierce's arrival in town, Alana sensed danger.

Things were shifting.

She could feel it in the lake water, and she could see it in the stars.

Something different and new was happening.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Shifts and change were not good in Alana's experience, and she was already devastated at the thought of losing the only home she had ever known.

A few tourists waved at her and asked about her store and the services she had. It took Alana about two seconds to convince the group of women to go into her shop, beyond the velvet curtain, for a reading. The money she made from readings was hardly enough to make rent, but it kept her in touch with her magic.

If her Nana and mother could see her now, they would probably disown her for the shame she now brought onto the family name. There was no luster to the Wixx name anymore. People didn't come to Half Moon Key to be read by a famous Wixx witch anymore.

It had everything to do with the damn spell that Alana had to keep alive and tightly wound around the town.

Alana's clients left quickly after their reading, giggling as they paid and left, promising to return one day soon. Alana didn't believe them because she had seen more than she let on, but she had learned the hard way that not everyone wanted to know the truth. They only want the good and pretend the bad isn't possible. Not to them. Not in their lives.

Completely distracted by her inventory task, Alana didn't hear the little bell of the door ringing out a visitor's arrival.

"You look a little angry at that book," Lila said by way of greeting. She pointed toward the counter where the store finances were scribbled neatly.

“It’s not the book I’m mad at,” Alana grumbled.

“You know you would have more business if you set up a tent at town events.”

Alana arched a brow. “You’re joking, right? Do you really want me to advertise that I am a witch?”

Her best friend waved her off. “Everyone already knows.”

She shook her head. “No, no. They suspect. I don’t care if the shifters know. They already do. They can smell the magic on me, but it’s not them I’m concerned about. I know the shifters hate me, but if the humans of Half Moon Key were to turn on me too? No way. I wouldn’t last a second in this town.”

“You’re always so dramatic, Alana. Seriously. You need to cool it with this whole the-town-hates-me thing.”

Alana tapped her head. “I’m a witch. I don’t have to believe they hate me to know it’s true.”

“No one in town hates you. Not even Cohen.”

Alana clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes. “We are two intelligent women who run our own businesses. We’ve never needed men before, and we don’t need them now, your pending nuptials aside.”

“I’m not marrying Mason because I need a man by my side. I am marrying him because I love him, and he makes me happy. You know what that’s like, Alana. Loving someone.”

“You can marry him all you want, but my point stands. We are two smart ladies, and

we don't need men. You have Mason, fine. Good for you. But that doesn't mean I need to be matched, and especially not with a man like Cohen fucking Pierce."

"You know you only swear when you're talking about him, right?" Lila giggled.

"I do not."

But she did. Alana knew that to be true, but admitting it to Lila would only cause her more grief, so Alana held fast to the denial. "Did you only come here to give me crap about Cohen?"

Lila shook her head. "Of course not, bestie. I came here to see how you're doing. The last time we had a wedding planning event on the calendar, you came down with such a terrible case of food poisoning that I came to make sure you only ate safe foods today."

Alana pursed her lips. "I could still get something from your restaurant."

"Very unlikely if I keep you on buttered toast all day," Lila shrugged.

"You wouldn't." Alana laughed. "You wouldn't dare do that to keep me from bailing on tonight."

"I would, and I will. You are not getting out of this, Alana. I know it's hard for you to be in the same room as Cohen. If you say it's because you hate him, then fine, whatever. You hate him, but he is my brother-in-law. I am spending the rest of my life with Mason, and it would be so cool and wonderful if my best friend and new brother could get along.

"Our wedding is just the first event in our lives that you'll have to share with him. When Mason and I have kids? You'll both be uncle and aunt. You'll be godparents

and invited to every birthday and baseball game. Make peace with him, Alana. Please. If not for your sake, then for mine.”

Alana took a deep breath. “You can’t do that,” she grumbled.

“Do what?”

“That.” She motioned a hand to her friend’s sad face. “You’re standing there like a wounded little bird, and you know I would do anything for you. Even be nice to Cohen Pierce.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“I think you mean Cohen fucking Pierce,” Lila teased. “Thanks for making an effort for me, Alana. It means a lot.”

“You’re just lucky I love you like the sister I always wanted.”

Alana didn’t mention that she would never be pleasant with Cohen. Not until he made the first move. She might not have much, but Alana Wixx had her pride, and though it didn’t keep her warm at night, it was all she had.

THREE

COHEN

Cohen Pierce sat in his truck, gripping the steering wheel with enough strength to crush it in his strong hands. He eased a deep breath out, getting ready to leave the safety of his truck.

You know you want to go in, his wolf goaded. Come on. It’ll be fun.

Cohen was surprised that he and the animal living in his head didn’t have the same idea of what was fun.

Going to war over a booth was not fun, but fuck it all if he was going to let a witch tell him where he could or could not sit. He was the sheriff, and that came with built-in respect, didn’t it? Well, it didn’t in Half Moon Key for everyone. Almost. There was one holdout who drove him nuts.

Cohen got out of his vehicle and opened the diner's door before quickly scanning the diner, his keen eyes searching out a specific shade of red.

There she was.

Cohen's back straightened, but there was a sudden swagger to his steps as he made his way over the redhead.

"I should've known you were gonna beat me to my spot." He took off his hat and placed it on the table with a loud thunk.

Alana glared at the hat as if it were a snake, but she crossed her arms before looking up at him. The force of her scowl would have sent lesser men running away with their tails tucked between their legs, but Cohen wasn't scared of the witch.

Witch.

He always knew there was something different about Alana Wixx, but now that he was on the council and knew exactly what kind of creature the woman was, Cohen was dead set on keeping his distance from her.

Cohen didn't like witches. It didn't matter that Alana was the first one he met. He had a dislike for anything that could mess with the powers of nature the way it had been done in Half Moon Key.

Power like that made him nervous because he didn't fully understand it, and no matter what Mrs. Francis said, he wasn't willing to learn. He needed to keep Alana Wixx at a distance, but he couldn't explain this to Mrs. Francis without revealing way too much of himself.

Anger and hatred were simpler, much better defenses.

Mason had needlessly pointed out, “You break the laws of nature every time you shift into your wolf,” but it wasn’t the same. Not according to Cohen, anyway.

A witch was a witch. A shifter was born to be both man and animal. Alanachoseto play with forces beyond others’ reach, and that was terrifying. Cohen had been alive long enough to know that those with access to great power always abused it.

Always.

The fact Half Moon Key even had a witch on retainer was proof of that alone; even though the town was governed by a council of elders instead of the usual alpha, the power had still gone to their heads. They hired a witch to cast all kinds of protective spells on Half Moon Key.

A Wixx witch. Alana’s grandmother, then her mother, and now Alana herself.

It gave the witch ideas about how the town was run, and she had no trouble telling the sheriff just how poor of a job he was doing. Every. Fucking. Time. She saw him.

Did it stop him from being in her presence? No. He wanted Alana to know he was watching her carefully. He wanted her to know that he didn’t buy into this power she held over the elders. He wouldn’t be fooled by her pretty face.

Not that she had a pretty face.

Nope.

“You realize there are free tables, Sheriff? Or are you set on making my life miserable today as you do every other day of my life?”

He chuckled dryly. “You know this is my table, Miss Wixx. I wouldn’t have to sit

this close to you if you made better choices.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

She raised a brow at this. “We are clearly no longer discussing the booth.”

It always amused him that she caught on to his double meaning. Surely that could only mean that Alana understood those double meanings for what they were: a warning.

Sometimes, Cohen feared he was too threatening with the witch, but what was he supposed to do? Ignore the power she could have over his town? His home? The people he chose to serve and protect? No.

Him?

Fuck. That. Noise.

Cohen couldn't let this suspicion of her go. Ever.

What lay beyond it was probably too dangerous anyway. This was safer.

“We can discuss the booth until we're blue in the face if that will make you happy, Miss Wixx, but I should tell you I vehemently oppose your seat on the council.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Noted.”

“That's it?” He was shocked she wasn't rising to his bait with more gusto. It almost made him ache to see no anger ... no passion ... in those green eyes of hers. “You're not going to shout down the roof for the way I am behaving?”

“Nope.”

His frown deepened. “What is happening? Did you not get enough witch’s brew this morning?”

She took a deep breath, her eyes cutting toward Lila, who was staring down at her best friend. Cohen thought he immediately understood what was going on, and Alana confirmed his belief a moment later.

“Lila wants me to play nice with you because you’re gonna be her brother-in-law, but as you know, I don’t like you, Mr. Pierce.”

“Sheriff Pierce,” he insisted.

“I do not like you, but my best friend is marrying your brother for whatever reason. We are going to be in each other’s lives for a very long time, and I don’t want to be a bad example for my nieces and nephews.”

Huh. He did not like where this was heading. At all. Every single fiber of his being was telling him to run for the hills, to run in the opposite direction with as much speed as he could.

Alana Wixx was bad news.

But if he had to be nice to her? If he saw her smile?

How could he hold on to his hatred of her if she was sweet and kind? He wouldn’t be able to. He was a hard man but hardly a monster.

“What is this?” The accusatory tone of his voice was plain.

“I think we need to agree to certain terms,” Alana responded, straightening her back.

“Terms?” he repeated as if the word were new to him. “What kind of terms?”

“When we are out in public, we will be civil to each other. You can feel free to continue to hate me in your heart, but be civil.”

“You keep saying that word ... civil.”

“Do you not know what it means?” she immediately flinched. “Sorry. Old habits die hard. Yes, civility will be difficult, but we can do it for Lila and your brother.”

“Which of the two asked you for this?”

“Does it matter?” she asked. “They want a good life, a peaceful life. I am willing to do my part for them. Are you?”

Cohen pondered this for a moment. Did he like Alana Wixx? No. Did he want to like her? That was a big fat no. It was much easier to keep her at arm's length. Cohen didn't know what to do with the woman's eyes and hair, her heart-shaped lips, or those fucking dresses she had to wear all the time.

Simply put: Alana Wixx drove him nuts. There would be no end in sight, either, because the witch was right. Their lives would soon be much more interwoven once Lila and Mason went through with their wedding.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“Civil,” Cohen finally repeated. “But only for the benefit of Mason and Lila.”

“And whatever children they might have, yes.”

For a reason Cohen would never know, he lifted his hand over to Alana. She eyed it with suspicion, but after deciding that he wasn’t trying to poison her with his own limb, she shook his hand.

The second their fingers touched, Cohen lost all sense. Time stood still, and there was no other sound in the world than his beating heart and Alana’s little gasp of shock.

She felt it too.

“Stupid electricity in this town should really be fixed,” he grumbled, hoping to explain away the way his fingers were still tingling from her touch. Of course, this kind of oddity was precisely why he disliked Alana Wixx so much.

He immediately rubbed his hand on his pants to remove the sensation, but somehow, it went right down to his bones. Cohen wanted to punch something to finally be done with Alana’s touch. If she noticed that he was completely affected by her, he didn’t show it.

“So that’s it then,” she said, her voice barely audible as if the shame of putting aside their bad blood was costing her a whole lot. “We are not going to fight.”

“No name-calling,” he agreed.

“You do know that you call me all kinds of terrible things, right? I only ever call you by your name.”

It was his turn to arch a brow. “I beg your pardon?”

“Well, it’s true. I call you Mr. Pierce.”

“But you know that I prefer to be called Sheriff Pierce,” he cut in, not letting her finish her thought. “You omit that on purpose.”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. Does it matter anymore? I’m going to call you Cohen, and you call me Alana. It will remove the desire to tease each other.”

Fuck me. Did she have to use those specific words? Desire to tease? He could show her teasing, all right ...

Of course, he couldn’t say that. It would only fuel the fire of their hatred, amongst other things. “I don’t feel any desire toward you,” he bit out roughly.

Alana rolled her eyes. “Well, thanks for clarifying that.” She took another deep breath. “This isn’t a good start, you know.”

He ran his hands back through his hair. “Shit. You’re right. It’s gonna be hard, huh.”

“It really will be,” she agreed.

“You know, I think it’s the first time we have the same opinion. It’s never happened before.”

“Well, it’s happened before, but not often.” She couldn’t help arguing with him, or so her little shoulder shrug told him.

“Okay. How do we do this?” Cohen blew out a breath. “We’re bound to fuck up and fight.”

“But I really don’t want to mess up any of their wedding events. Can you imagine? Us ruining their wedding because of a silly fight?” She rolled her eyes again. “No. I don’t want to hurt my best friend. We’re both in this wedding party, and we’re going to make it work because we are damned adults. And we can do this.” She gave a resolute head nod. “There.”

“We will still need some guidelines,” he pointed out. “Or at least some kind of safe word.”

“Safe word?” she asked, skeptical, though her cheeks turned red.

“Yeah. A safe word. When I feel my anger toward you mounting to the point where I know I am going to say something hurtful, I will say ...” He closed his eyes and pondered on this. “I’m gonna say carwash.”

“Carwash,” she snorted. “When you say carwash, I’m supposed to drop whatever I am saying?”

“Yup. And I’ll make sure to walk away from the situation. Now, what about you? What will your safe word be?”

He watched as Alana thought about it. “If you hear me saypuffed-up rooster, you are to stop.”

Cohen tried not to laugh. “Is that what I am to you? A puffed-up rooster?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“Wow. I choose a random thing, and you’re all ready and willing to make it about you. Guess what, Cohen ... not everything I do or say is about you. The sooner you realize that, the better.”

He blinked at her, still trying to catch his breath after hearing Alana say his name.

Cohen.

It wasn’t a very common first name, but he liked it. It suited him, but never before this moment had he thought of his name as something sexy or as something that a woman could say to make him lose his mind.

Obviously, the woman who would challenge that would be Alana fucking Wixx. She of the candles and magic.

She of the green eyes and red hair.

She who so often haunted his dreams.

She, who seconds before, had asked him for a truce.

Cohen was fucked, and he knew it. There was no way he would be able to keep up with this truce for very long. He didn’t have that much control.

FOUR

ALANA

Alana couldn't believe it. She had actually managed to ask Cohen Pierce for a ceasefire on their feud, and the damn man had agreed. Mason was his brother, and it would only make sense that he wouldn't want to ruin his sibling's wedding.

But Alana didn't like that Cohen had been so quick to listen to her idea. So quick to agree to end their own personal little war.

She kept on replaying their conversation in the diner together, but no matter how many times she ran it over in her head, she couldn't find the lie in Cohen's eyes.

He meant it.

They were officially in a truce.

And the best ... or worse ... of it all was that Lila and Mason were not the only ones who would be benefiting from this.

The whole town would, especially now that Alana was on the council with Cohen. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that Cohen and Alana were likely to rip each other to shreds in a town council meeting, but they would get one hell of a surprise when Alana shouted puffed-up rooster, quickly followed by Cohen shooting carwash.

The whole of Half Moon Key would probably think that they had lost their damn minds.

Alana looked deep into her crystal ball, hoping to see something ... anything ... in the reflective surface. There was nothing. There was never a single thing in the crystal ball for her to see. It was her grandmother's favored tool, but Alana herself didn't have the psychic abilities of her Nana. Even her mother didn't have that kind of power.

A loud knock jarred her out of her thoughts, and she shook her head. When the sound resounded again, Alana looked up.

“Huh. There is someone at the door.” She glanced at the clock. The storefront had closed at five, and no one ever knocked. It was too early for Lila to be tearing down the door too. Alana was supposed to meet her at her house later for a whole lot of wedding stuff, but that wasn’t for another couple of hours.

Alana got to her feet, kicking her high-heeled sandals under the little table where the crystal ball sat. The thick carpet felt nice under her toes, and she sighed on her way out from behind the curtain and into her store.

From her vantage point, she couldn’t yet tell who stood behind the door, but she could tell that it was a man. A tall man with square shoulders and a hard-cut jaw.

Sheknewthat man.

With a grunt, she unlocked the door and threw it open. “Justwhatare you doing here?” she snapped.

Cohen Pierce stood there, grinning at her in his tight jeans and plaid shirt. Usually, he wore a sheriff’s tan button-down, but he had replaced it with a different shirt ... one that played tricks with the color of his eyes. His scruff was neatly trimmed too. The man was trying to make a good impression, but she wasn’t sure for who orwhy.

It bothered her, but only because it made her belly flutter and her breath to become short. She took a deep breath in the hopes of clearing her thoughts from Cohen’s new attire, but it only served to fill her head and lungs with the pine scent that he trailed behind him.

Does he have to smell like my favorite candle?The big jerk.

“What are you doing here?” she snapped, completely forgetting the truce that they had only just agreed on that afternoon.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

His smile didn't slip. It was the opposite; he actually widened the damn thing, making him look every bit the predator that he was. "Carwash."

"Puffed-up rooster."

"Well, that was helpful."

"But you didn't walk away. You said that when you used your safe word, you would remove yourself from the conversation. We're still staring at each other, which means you didn't. Walk. Away."

He crossed his arms, shook his head, and then stopped shaking his head just long enough to push past her into the store.

"Hey!" she cried. "You can't just come in here. We're closed."

"What are you going to do? Call the cops?" He laughed.

Alana swore under her breath. "I knew that you would be the kind of man who abused his power, and I was right."

"I'm not abusing my power."

"No? Then leave. What reason could you possibly have for barging into my house like this when you know that we are gonna be at each other's throats at Lila and Mason's tonight?"

“That is exactly why I came here to see you. I think we should walk over together and really sell this peace we have between us.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “And why should we do that?”

“Because you know they are not gonna believe us. They’re gonna tease us relentlessly. It’s better if we show up together while having a pleasant conversation.”

“And so you thought that you would show up here an hour or two early and what? We would chat for a little while?”

“Something like that, yeah.” He jutted his chin toward the green velvet curtain. “You know, I’ve never gone back there.”

“And you won’t,” she snapped, stepping in front of him, effectively blocking him from the curtain.

Cohen was well over six feet tall, and he was built like a man who didn’t mind physical labor. If he wanted to walk around her, he could.

That’s exactly what he did. He shouldered his way around her, earning himself a deep and annoyed sigh from Alana. He only looked back at her with a grin and wink.

The entire exchange caused her to nearly pass out. What was his game, anyway?

“Don’t go back there,” she urged, putting all of her annoyance in her voice.

He didn’t bite. “Way I see it. If you show me how this magic stuff works, I might not be so against it in town.” He pulled the curtain back and stepped into her witch’s living room ... where she did readings or greeted guests who were a little bit more into magic than the usual Half Moon Key resident.

“Holy shit,” he whistled loudly. “This is actually kinda cool.” He looked around like a little kid in a candy store. Alana knew the second he spotted the crystal ball. He pointed toward it, shaking his head. “Do you actually know how to use that?”

She didn’t know how to answer, so she chose the truth. “That was my Nana’s. I don’t see much of anything in there, but I like to keep it out for her. It reminds me of her, and I don’t get so sad that she’s gone.” Alana only stopped because her throat started to close up from sharing so many details of her life.

She waited for Cohen to tease her, to say something harsh that would make her anger blast on high. She almost wanted him too.

What Alana didn’t want was for his eyes to turn soft and kind. She didn’t want the pity and sympathy in his gaze. “I’m sorry you’ve lost your people.”

She nodded. “Thanks.” Her voice was too thick to sound like her, but he had the grace not to point it out.

“What tool was your mother’s favorite?” he asked instead.

Alana smiled despite the insults she wanted to hurl at him. “The books. She collected magic books in all languages and styles. It was her thing. Not much of a witch when it came to clairvoyance, but she was good with spells.” She swallowed hard.

Cohen gave her a smile. It was sad and full of understanding. “I’m sorry for prying. It makes you sad to think about them ...”

“Sad?” she sighed. “Maybe not sad, exactly, but I am a bit ...” She clamped her mouth shut.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Alana wanted to smack herself silly because she had been seconds away from telling her worst enemy that she was lonely.

Oh, to think of all of the things that Cohen could have done with that knowledge.

She shivered against the thought. If he started teasing her about being an old maid and a lonely witch, she would find a way to get her revenge and turn him into a rooster.

“It’s hard being one of a kind, huh?” Cohen finally whispered.

“Something like that, yeah.”

Alana prepared herself for another barrage of questions he was sure to send her way, but Cohen surprised her by remaining quiet. He took in their surroundings, and finally, he nodded. “Well, I can see the appeal. It’s all very cool.”

She arched a brow. “Did you just call my family heritage cool?”

He laughed softly, almost as if Cohen was trying to safeguard whatever little piece of common ground they had found in her most private space. “I did call your family heritage cool.”

“Huh. And here I thought you were going to give me crap for being a witch.”

“You can’t help being a witch any more than I can help being a shifter, isn’t that right?”

Alana thought about lying to him, but there was no point beyond antagonizing him. “Yeah, that’s right.”

“I’ll admit that until I saw all this, I never would’ve thought that you could chooseto do magic. But you can’t. Choosing not to do magic would be like ...”

“It would be like ignoring the call of the wolf that lives in your head,” she finished for him.

“Yeah, I see that.” He faced her, and for a long moment, they stood in her backroom, behind the green velvet curtain, staring at each other. “I guess we aren’t that different, are we?”

“All I want is to live in Half Moon Key. A quiet, peaceful, maybe evenhappy life. I don’t think that’s too much to ask.”

“No,” he agreed with her again. “You’re right. It’s not too much to ask.”

“Careful, there,” she laughed. “It’s the second time we agreed on something today. If we don’t put an end to this soon, we’ll be friends by the time the wedding rolls around.”

“Lila and Mason would just love that,” he added with a grin.

“They wouldn’t believe this, you know. If we do show up together, being all cordial, they’re gonna think we’ve been body-snatched or something.”

Cohen chuckled. “Probably. I’m glad I came here, Alana. Now, I’m gonna ask you something, and I wanna a straight answer. I’m not being a dick, but ...”

She saw where his eyes were drawn. Right to the ceremonial daggers that lined one of

the shelves on the wall. Alana giggled.

“You’re wondering if that is a wall of murder weapons, but I can assure you. No crime was committed with any of the objects in this room. That’s not what magic is all about. It’s about protection or seeking something. In most cases, people are looking for messages from the beyond or from a loved one. Others want to know if they will ever find love or ever find their place.”

Cohen’s entire demeanor changed as she spoke. He went from friendly ... and maybe downright flirty ... all the way to angry again.

Alana crossed her arms in defense of whatever venom he would spew at her for being a magical practitioner who couldn’t protect the town well enough for his taste.

But Cohen Pierce wasn’t done surprising Alana that evening.

Instead of reverting back to his usual hurtful lines, he took a deep breath and held it before letting it puff out of his nose. “That’s what we all want in the end, isn’t it? A place to belong.”

She didn’t respond, but when their eyes caught in the next second, Alana knew.

They were both seeking the same thing, both certain they would never be satisfied.

“Maybe it’s time to go,” she whispered.

He agreed, but he didn’t rush out. He stepped closer to her and looked deep into her eyes. His gaze was so intense that Alana thought it lit one of the candles by the crystal ball, but that was impossible.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Flames didn't come out of anywhere. They came from a point of ignition, and this certainly wasn't that.

FIVE

COHEN

When Cohen went over to Alana's shop, he thought he would go in, lay down the law like he was so used to doing, and then he would leave with time to spare.

He didn't think for two seconds that he would be standing in the backroom of Wixx, taking in all of the magical objects, longing to know what each and every little thing did for Alana. The magic ball was obviously the easiest thing to spot.

The big glass orb had a place of honor on a small round table in the very center of the room, right under a chandelier. The table itself was covered in a deep green velvet tablecloth that resembled the curtain.

The only thing missing from the ambiance was a fireplace where fragrant flames magically danced to whatever magic Alana chose fit to do.

"I'm not gonna lie," he broke through the heavy silence. "All of this stuff kind of scares me."

Alana arched a brow at him. "Did the big bad sheriff actually admit that he is scared of something? Something that little old me has?" She laughed, but he didn't know if it was a giggle. "I can't believe that for two seconds, Cohen."

There she went again, saying his name like it was precious to her. Or maybe it was because he hadn't heard it from her mouth often that it had more of an impact.

Maybe it was the woman herself that was having such an impact on him.

Cohen kept Alana Wixx at a distance from himself for a reason. He didn't trust the witch, that was true, but he also didn't trust himself. What kind of man was he if he could be attracted to one of his bitterest enemies?

You continued to love Amanda long after you started to hate her, his wolf pointed out needlessly. Of course, it was only needless because Cohen already knew that. Sometimes, his wolf forgot they shared a brain. A head. A heart. Whatever the wolf felt, the man felt; the opposite was also true too.

"You are terrifying," Cohen admitted, his voice barely above a whisper.

Her head snapped up in his direction, and her lips parted in a gasp. "Of all the things to say," she hissed, narrowing her eyes.

Cohen shook his head and took a step forward while one arm motioned to the room in which they found themselves. "Can you blame me? Alana, look around. This isn't the kind of room I usually find myself in. Do you understand that you might make people nervous because of the power you wield?"

"I could ask you the very same question, you know?" Alana shot back without missing a beat.

Was she anticipating his question? Did she mean what she said?

"You cannot be scared of me," he chuckled. "You're a witch."

“But you’re the sheriff. You are also basically the alpha of the town. If there is anyone in this town that wields all of the power, it’s you.”

Cohen threw his head back with a laugh. “I don’t think so. Mrs. Francis has way more power than me, and she insists on protecting you. From the very first time I met her, she warned me that I wasn’t to mess with any Wixx women in Half Moon Key. That kind of command coming from the people who sign my paycheck? Well, let’s just say I took it in stride.”

“Apparently,” she rolled her eyes. “Why are you here, Cohen? We already agreed this afternoon that we would have a truce between us. We have our truce. What more could we have to discuss?”

Cohen clenched his jaw until his head ached. He flipped through all of the reasons that led him to this shop, but he couldn’t find anything that wouldn’t sound completely unhinged.

What was he supposed to say? I think you’ve put some kind of spell on me because I can’t stop thinking about you. No. He couldn’t say that for obvious reasons, and some of it had to do with the accusing tone he would no doubt take when he asked.

Alana Wixx was not the kind of woman who took accusations lightly, especially not when it came to magic. Every time the council asked her to make sure that the spell over town was holding, Alana was very defensive.

He couldn’t blame her either. It’s not like Cohen even understood completely why Half Moon Key needed that kind of magical protection, anyway.

“I would like to know, Alana, what it takes for a person to be spelled.”

She frowned. “You change the topic faster than the wind changes direction.”

He shrugged and took another step closer to her because he found he couldn't help himself. His legs were moving of their own volition as if they simply had to move closer to Alana. How could he not think she was playing a dirty magic trick on him?

"I don't know what you're asking," she finally said, sitting at the small table where the crystal ball sat. "Are you asking me if someone has put a spell on you?"

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

He nodded, curt and short to keep from accusing her. That wasn't going to go over well, especially not when they had agreed to a truce only a few hours ago, and they were due to join Mason and Lila in a couple more to help with wedding plans.

Accusing the maid of honor and his would-be sister-in-law's best friend wasn't the right way to start the evening, but Cohen had to know why the witch was always on his mind.

"Sit," she instructed. "We both know I am the only witch in town. If you think someone has put a spell on you, then we must both acknowledge that you think I have done magic over you."

Cohen sat in the seat beside her, but he refused to meet her eyes. "A witch could've spelled me from far away, right? She wouldn't have to be close to me? Geographically speaking, of course."

"No, and it wouldn't have to be a woman either. Men are fully capable of being witches too. Who have you pissed off?"

The sheriff puffed out a breath. "I've angered a whole lot of people in my life. I'm a cop. Some people hate me on that fact alone."

"Well, can you think of anyone who would want to put a spell on you? What makes you think that you've even been cursed?"

Cohen considered his answer, but he couldn't find the right words. Words that wouldn't accuse Alana of putting thoughts in his head. "I don't know," he finally

responded. “It’s just a feeling I have.” He turned to face her and pressed a hand to his heart and then his head. “It’s here. There are thoughts in here that just pop up, and I don’t want to have them.”

Alana took a deep breath and crossed her legs. Because Cohen was an asshole ... or maybe because she was doing it on purpose to make her spell really hurt him ... he noticed that her crossed legs gave him a clear view of how shapely her legs were. The hem of the blue dress slid up, giving him the perfect shot of Alana’s calf and ankles.

He shook his head to stop from picturing himself kneeling in front of her to slowly lift the dress a little higher while he kissed the curve of her leg. “I’m telling you, I am having thoughts that are not just fun to have. I need help to block these thoughts.”

Alana didn’t move from her chair, but somehow, when she spoke, she felt impossibly close to him, as if her lips were pressed to his ears. “I have not put any kind of spell on you, Cohen. It’s not my style. You think you can’t trust me, but you can. I would never use magic to get something that isn’t mine. It’s against the rules.”

He laughed, shaking his head again. If he didn’t stop shaking, he was sure to give himself a really bad headache. “There are witch rules?”

“Of course, there are. What? Did you think we were given this insane power over others without guidelines?”

“Sort of, yeah.”

“Well, there are rules.”

“And who enforces them? Who makes sure that no witch is out there using her powers to make a man insane?”

Her eyes went wide. “You think someone is making you insane?”

He hissed a curse under his breath and looked away from her, the green of her eyes too bright. She was sure to see right through him if he continued to let her stare at him.

“Cohen,” she whispered after a little bit too much time had passed in silence between them. “Do you think someone is trying to make you insane?”

He nodded. “Yeah. I keep having these very powerful thoughts, and ...” He cleared his throat and rubbed a hand over his mouth because he didn’t actually want to tell her that he kept thinking about her mouth.

What it would taste like.

What it would feel like.

Cohen hated Alana because he could never move away from the lust she built in his blood, and after everything that happened with his ex, he had to believe that he was no longer capable of love. How could he be? How could his heart function again after everything he was put through? Hell, how could his cock even be interested in another woman after Amanda?

When Cohen finally tried to meet her eyes, he noticed that Alana was no longer sitting in her chair. Instead, she stood mere inches from him, bending over to meet his eyes as he remained seated.

“Cohen, I never put a spell or a curse on you. I promise you.”

“There has to be something wrong with me,” he admitted.

“Okay, I can see that your distress is real. I can see if someone has put a spell on you, but to do so, I have to touch you. Are you okay with that, or are you going to bite my head off?”

He gave another tiny and tense nod, and he waited. When Alana lifted her hands, horrified, he jumped up from his chair and stepped back. She snickered. “And here I thought you said that you weren’t afraid of little old me.”

“I didn’t realize you would have to touch me to see if there is indeed a spell on me.”

She gave a sad smile. “Yes, Cohen. I have to touch you to see if there is magic on you. Now, stop being a big baby and stand still.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Cohen held his breath as she took a step forward. Her pale and freckled hands were coming all the way up, up, up until she pressed her palms to his cheeks. She took a deep breath as her eyes flickered closed. Her long lashes curled up from her cheeks, and her lips were barely parted to let in and out the air she breathed. It blew over him gently, making a certain part of his anatomy very aware that there was a woman holding him.

Not just any woman, either. Alana Wixx. His enemy. Or at least the woman he had thought was an enemy since the moment he laid eyes on her.

Alana's breathing became a little bit more erratic, her eyes moving behind her closed lids. Her face reddened, and her frown puckered with concentration and focus. Cohen was mesmerized by her, and soon the scent of magic filled his nostrils. It tickled him before the gentle aroma was replaced with a terrible burning reminiscent of sulfur.

She gasped and stumbled back; Cohen reached out and caught her shoulders just before she fell back. He pulled her into him until their bodies might as well have been glued together. Alana's eyes were wide open and full of fear.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "What have you seen?"

She shook her head. "Nothing," she lied. "Nothing I can explain. I need to do some research, okay? But ..."

"There is something? Some magic around me?"

She nodded. "It's not by my hand."

“I know,” he admitted. “I can tell when you lie, Alana. You’re not lying. You’re not doing this to me.”

This could only mean that he was doing it to himself.

SIX

ALANA

Alana never thought she would be in Sheriff Cohen Pierce’s arms like this. He held her close, his large palms spread out on the small of her back protectively. His breath came out in short bursts, and his eyes were full of emotion.

She wanted to either press closer into him or give him a good hit in the crotch. The jury was still out on what she wanted, but that wasn’t even the weirdest thing that was happening today. It started when she asked Cohen for a truce, then continued when he showed up on her doorstep, and now it was achieving a kind of oddness Alana just wasn’t prepared for.

Therewasmagic woven all around Cohen, but it wasn’t a spell she recognized. There was more to it than that, too, though.

There was the very real sensation crawling up her back that Cohen was about a second away from kissing her, and Alana really didn’t know if she wanted to stop him.

What would it be like to kiss Sheriff Cohen Pierce? Would it be good? Terrible? Would he blame her for it? After all, he was wondering if she had spelled him.

Was this the kind of spell he feared she had cast on him? A love spell? It was laughable, but the laugh didn’t make it out of her. There was nothing actually funny

about the way Cohen was holding her and looking at her.

“Cohen,” she whispered softly.

“Alana,” he responded without missing a beat.

“What’s happening here?”

“Honestly?” he sighed, his eyes never leaving hers. “I have no clue. Do you know what’s going on right now?”

She shook her head. “I have no clue. I’m not the best witch out there.”

“I doubt that.”

Alana laughed dryly. “And here is my enemy, defending the strength of my power.”

“Alana,” he spoke her name so gently that if his lips hadn’t basically been pressed to her ear, she wouldn’t have heard him. “Stop me.”

“I don’t think I can,” she murmured back.

For the rest of her life, Alana would wonder who kissed who first, but in the end, it didn’t matter.

They kissed each other.

It was a mutual decision to lean closer to the other, to part their lips and let their tongues explore.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Cohen's kiss was gentler and more tender than she would have ever thought possible. He cupped her face in his hands and tilted her head back to have all access to her mouth. The second his mouth brushed hers, Alana clung to the front of his shirt, pressing herself into him with a moan.

He continued to delve his tongue into her mouth until his hands left her face to travel down to her shoulders, to her hips, and then to the small of her back. He gripped her tightly in his embrace, and there was no mistaking the hardening length digging into her hip.

The sheriff didn't stop taking deep pulls from her mouth while he walked them backward. Alana was caught between the wall and the man kissing her like he was starving for her, and if she was honest with herself, she didn't want to be anywhere else.

If Cohen wanted to keep on kissing her forever, she wouldn't be opposed to that because the man knew how to kiss. Alana felt it down to her toes. Hell, it might have gone all the way to her soul because the ground shook under her.

"Holy fuck," Cohen gasped, ripping away from her, taking all of the heat with him. "The ground is actually shaking."

Alana steadied herself on Cohen's shoulders, but he was right. The ground, the floor, even the walls were trembling with the force of ... "Is this an earthquake?" she asked, tightening her hold on Cohen in fear and panic.

He gave a tight nod. "Yeah. The power is sure to go out in the next few ..." The

sheriff was then interrupted by the lights going off.

The store's emergency lights, powered by a generator, kicked on. The hazy and watery yellow light played with Cohen's features. He didn't let her go but pushed her long red hair over her shoulder. His fingers brushed against the column of her neck.

"It figures that the first time I kiss you, there is an earthquake."

"First time?" she giggled. "Not only time?" Alana wanted to be unaffected by his touch and his kiss, but there was no evidence of that in her tone. To her own ears, she sounded very much like a smitten woman.

"I have to go. I'll take you to Lila and Mason's, but I don't think that I will be able to help plan a wedding. For sure, there will be a billion calls coming into the station."

"I can make my way over to Lila's all by myself. Go be a hero for Half Moon Key, Cohen. It's what's expected of you."

"It is," he agreed, but instead of leaving her, he tugged her along until they were in the main room of the store. "Grab your purse and whatever you might need for tonight, okay? I don't want you moving around while we figure out what the hell that was."

She pursed her lips at him. "You don't get to boss me around just because we kissed once."

"No?" His voice was tight and rough.

Alana didn't expect it, but Cohen cupped her face again, his mouth crushing against hers in a desperate kiss. This time, there was nothing soft and sweet and exploratory about it. It was pure seduction and stole the breath right from her lungs.

“Now we’ve kissed twice, and that means I get to decide where you’re gonna hunker down in safety.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but he kissed her quiet again.

“And that makes three.”

When Cohen pulled her toward the door this time, she didn’t argue. She went willingly.

* * *

The short walk from Wixx to Lila’s place usually took only about five minutes, but the whole of Half Moon Key was basked in a deep and profound darkness. The moon hid behind the clouds, leaving very little light. There were only solar-powered street lamps as a source of light, but that wasn’t saying much. The streets were slowly filling with confused residents who wanted to understand what the hell had just happened.

Earthquakes didn’t happen in Half Moon Key. Weird storms? Yes. Bad and spotty electricity and Wi-Fi? You got it. But no matter how deep Cohen went into his memories, he couldn’t recall any of the elders talking about an earthquake in Half Moon Key. The town just wasn’t ready for that kind of disaster, but as the town sheriff, it was his business to make sure everyone was safe.

Folks kept on stopping their progress across town, but with every person who asked what the town would do, Cohen assured them that they would be told as much as possible as soon as Cohen got to the station.

“This is a whole lot of scary. I kinda thought ...” Alana stopped short and shook her head. “Never mind.”

“You kind of thought that the earthquake only happened in your store?”

“I didn’t say that,” she replied, but there was no real fight in her words. It told him everything he needed to know: for a few moments, Alana thought that their kisses had made the ground beneath them shake.

At least she was as affected by their lapse of sanity as he was.

“You need to stay with Mason and Lila until we get the all-clear.”

“What all-clear?” she asked him. “Do you have a lot of experience with natural disasters? Do you know how to deal with this? I would venture that no, you don’t. You should gather the council.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“I’m sure they’re already getting together. They’ll probably be waiting for me in my office.”

“Well, then, go. What are you doing here? Walking me to Lila’s house? I am a capable person. I can walk all by myself. I did it for years before meeting you.”

“Woman,” he grumbled. “I spent the last few years hating your guts, and now that we’ve just finished going to town on each other, I can’t try to make sense of it. I have to figure out why in the hell there is an earthquake in this town. Maybe make it easier on me by just letting me walk you to someplace safe?”

She ignored him because, of course, she would. “We’re not anywhere near tectonic plates. This makes no sense. It could be magic. You might need my expertise.”

He shook his head. “Nope. You’re gonna make some wedding plans with Lila, and that is the end of it. Do not make me kiss you again, Alana. I will. I swear to god, if you try to argue with me, I will kiss you quiet.”

Alana wanted to argue, but there was no time for their little haters’ squabble.

Not when she saw a strange green light emanating from the woods.

It was the color of magic and not the good kind. Cohen might think this was a job for him, but he was wrong.

Half Moon Key needed its witch, and Alana would have to rise to the challenge whether she wanted to or not.

SEVEN

ALANA

Lila's front door opened before Alana was even on the front steps. Mason went down them three at a time to clasp his brother's hand.

"What the fuck was that?" Mason asked. "Did we just have an earthquake in Half Moon Key?"

"We did," Cohen confirmed, his eyes finding Alana's. "Weird, I know. I'm just here to make sure this one is safe here with you two. I need to go to the station."

"I am going with you," Mason announced.

"Good idea," Lila said. "We should all go. This might be an all-hands-on-deck kind of situation."

"No," both Pierce brothers burst out at the very same time ... but Alana figured it was for two very different reasons.

Mason's reasoning probably had to do with protecting Lila ... his mate and fiancée. Cohen's forceful refusal had a bit more of an edge to it, one that Alana couldn't trace.

Was it because he was angry with her for kissing him back every time he kissed her? Did he still think she was putting a spell on him? Surely, all of the kissing couldn't be helping her cause.

Or maybe Cohen didn't want Alana out there in the world, playing with magic when she hadn't been able to tell him what kind of spell had been placed on him. That had to be frustrating for a man who was so used to being in control.

“I think that the council will want to meet,” Alana pointed out. “And now that I am on the council, wouldn’t it make sense to take me with you?”

“No,” Cohen snapped. “You are going to stay here with Lila. If the council is meeting, I’ll let you know.”

“You won’t,” she argued.

“And here we go,” Mason threw his hands up in the air. “You two are the worst. We don’t know what is happening in our town. It would be great if you could sheath the anger for two seconds so that we can see if anyone is hurt.”

“No one is hurt,” Alana insisted. “I would know.”

Cohen snorted. “How can that possibly be true?”

She shrugged and gave a sly wave of her fingers to show that she would know through magic. That particular spell hadn’t worked in a long time, but Cohen didn’t have to know that.

“Fine. You two are coming with us.”

“Hey!” Mason cried. “You can’t make that call for my woman.”

“That’s right,” Lila said. “Your woman makes her own calls.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Mason pursed his lips. “Well, shit. How could I forget? I won’t get you to agree to stay here, will I?”

Lila shook her head. “And I’m thinking Jade and Parker will also want in on a piece of the action.”

“Why do you say that?” Cohen asked.

“Because there they are.” Lila pointed over their shoulders.

And there were Parker and his mate Jade, and Jack and his new mate Nora. The four were paired up, holding hands but walking with determination in their direction.

“What do you need us to do?” Parker asked. “We can be on crowd control. Whatever you need.”

Cohen gave a rare smile to the other man. “I really appreciate that you know. I have the deputies to help, but it will be good to have some shifters on my side. Can you guys patrol our lands in your animal forms? Have Mason report back to me, but don’t stop roaming until we know what caused it.”

“But that could be hours,” Nora interjected. “What are we supposed to do? The non-shifters?”

“We’ll go to the community center,” Alana announced. “The council will surely want to do a headcount of the town folks to make sure everyone is safe and accounted for. We’ll probably also need some food.” This is where Alana gave Lila a knowing look.

“You’re right, Alana. I’ll go to Moonie’s and get Bobbie behind the grill. Maybe if I can get Emily and some of the other high schoolers to help out, it’ll keep them busy and the town fed.”

“I don’t like that you’re involved in all of this,” Cohen said.

Alana thought he was talking to her and her alone, but every other person in their small group assumed that the surly sheriff meant something else.

Mason probably thought his older brother wanted to block him from helping the town, while Jack and Parker might have assumed that since they were not sheriff deputies, they shouldn’t be involved.

“We’re basically a pack-pride of misfits,” Jack said with a shrug. “You lead us, Cohen. If you want us to shift and patrol the town, we will.” He turned toward Nora and gave her a sweet kiss. “I love you, Nora. You be safe out there, and we’ll be together again in no time.”

She nodded and kissed him back, needing to be on the tips of her toes to reach his mouth. “I love you, Jack. If there is another earthquake, you take cover. You’re important to me and this town.”

“Ditto,” he whispered back.

The shy woman and her new boyfriend weren’t the only couple to be saying heartfelt goodbyes. Parker and Jade were doing the same, while Lila and Mason were basically trying to merge into one person where their mouths were joined.

Alana and Cohen exchanged a glance, and she had to look away. Did he want to kiss her goodbye? Did she want the same?

Cohen answered at least part of her questions by closing the distance between them. He didn't kiss her, but he stood as close to her as social convention would allow. "We'll continue our conversation later, okay? You be safe, Alana."

"Same to you, Cohen."

He gave her a tight nod before walking away. He used his usual short and tense tone to call his guys to him. Mason, Jack, and Parker were quick to trail behind them.

"Okay," Lila clapped her hands together. "That was super weird, right?"

Alana nodded. "I have something to do. I'll meet you guys at the community center in a little bit, okay?"

Lila narrowed her eyes at her. "And just where do you think you are going?"

Alana shook her head. "I've got my own business for the council to check before I meet with them. They're gonna have questions for me, and I would like to answer them for once."

"You be careful, or else I'll sic Cohen on you," Lila threatened.

But it was useless to say that. Alana already had a feeling that Cohen would find her in the woods to give her a piece of his mind.

She was looking forward to fighting with him again.

* * *

The eerie greenglow that Alana spotted in the high woods of the mountain shortly after the earthquake was all but gone. If she wasn't a witch, she might have

completely missed the hazy glow still trying to push against the bushy leaves of the trees in the hills.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

With trembling legs and shaking fingers, she made her way onto the narrow wooden path that would lead her to the mountains. Avoiding the lake made this quite the trek, but she was determined to get the answers before meeting Cohen and the council.

Was walking alone in the woods a good idea? No, of course not, but she had her flashlight that was going to work again just as soon as the power came back on in town.

Alana also had her magic, but that was it. On a whim ... and to quiet Cohen's voice in her head ... she grabbed a long piece of wood from the ground that would make a good weapon.

"There," she said to the trees. "If he somehow manages to find me, he won't be able to say I am irresponsible. Besides, who does he think he is, anyway?" she asked the trees, which remained silent. "Now I am talking to myself because that is super fucking normal."

She was a witch. Of course, being normal for her looked a little different, but she wasn't sure that her normal should be all wrapped up in Cohen Pierce because he had kissed her a couple of times.

She still hated him, didn't she? Cohen had been making her life absolutely miserable since the council hired him to be the sheriff of Half Moon Key.

He didn't like magic or witches. He didn't trust her, and there was this low aggression always wafting off of Cohen like he was a prisoner in his own body. She couldn't imagine that it was easy for him to be an alpha without a pack to look over,

but surely, being the sheriff that the council totally adored was enough. Not to mention the three other shifters in town, who totally looked at Cohen for leadership.

Cohen had found his place in Half Moon Key with more ease and less time than it had taken her, and Alana didn't know what that meant about her or about him. Was he more lovable than her? They were both very intense and standoffish people, but folks in town gave Cohen more grace for his behavior.

"Probably because of his dick," she mumbled to herself. "It's because he is a man, and I am a witch. Total bullshit. And here I am in the woods, scared that he will scold me for doing my part." She snorted out a laugh as she continued to follow the path deeper into the woods.

Up ahead, the final embers of the green glow began to vanish, pitching the woods into an increasingly terrible darkness.

EIGHT

COHEN

Just as he had expected, the police station on Main Street was crowded with his deputies and a few council members. The other elders were at the community center, setting up the information table. It helped Cohen to know that his friends were already in the woods, trying to find any possible thing responsible for the earthquake ... or any damage.

With any luck, this was only a fluke and wouldn't turn into another one of those strange things that seemed to always happen in Half Moon Key.

He barked his orders to his deputies and went right to the community center to speak with Mrs. Francis. She was basically the mayor of the town, and whatever happened

had to be run by her first. Mrs. Francis would also be the person to ask about earthquakes in Half Moon Key.

When he finally had a moment alone with the eldest elder, he couldn't find the words to ask, and it bothered him that he was so tongue-tied. He was a hardened cop with no heart. He shouldn't be having any kind of strange emotions for his town and its resident witch.

Especially the latter.

That made no sense to him. The timing of it all was too strange for his liking.

"Has something like this happened in town before today?" he finally managed to bite out.

Mrs. Francis considered this question for a few moments. "No. It's never happened. Not that I can remember, but that doesn't mean it can't have happened at all. But you're asking the wrong questions, Sheriff."

"Am I? And what should I be asking?"

The old woman shrugged, pursing her lips. "I would have thought it obvious. Who we need is Alana Wixx," Mrs. Francis said. "Where is she? I would have thought that she would be excited to be here, given that she finally has a seat on the council."

"I dropped her off with Lila," Cohen answered. "They're going to be organizing some stuff for the town."

Mrs. Francis pursed her lips. "Oh, Cohen. You dropped her off?"

He winced, knowing he had said far too much to the one woman who could see right

through him. After all, Mrs. Francis was the one person in all of Half Moon Key who knew his past. Mason, his brother, was the exception to this, of course, but it didn't stop Cohen from disliking that the elder had so much on him.

It made hiding his true feelings that much harder.

He could totally hide how he felt from himself, but how was he supposed to do that with Mrs. Francis? She could probably see right into his soul with that age-earned wisdom of hers.

"Hate is such a funny thing. You need to bring Alana here, Cohen. Right now."

"Fine," he grumbled. "But I don't know what she can do to help."

"She can help because I don't think for two seconds this earthquake was natural. I don't think it was nature. In fact, it felt like magic to me."

“Magic,” he repeated hollowly.

“Magic,” Mrs. Francis confirmed.

It was as Mrs. Francis repeated the word that Cohen’s mind flashed. He couldn’t explain where it had come from, but one moment, he was certain that he knew this was a strange earthquake brought on by climate change, and just then? Well, now he wasn’t so sure anymore.

When the earthquake hit, Cohen had been kissing Alana.

He threw his head back with a laugh, surprising himself and Mrs. Francis. He tried to compose himself and stop laughing, but he found that, for the life of him, he couldn’t.

Mrs. Francis watched on, grinning. “I’m pleased that our town has finally started to amuse you, Cohen, but I don’t know why the topic of magic should make you laugh so much.”

He shook his head. “Maybe it’s because we’re standing around, talking about magic. I’m losing my mind with all of this magic stuff.” And Alana, his wolf added completely unhelpfully. Don’t forget that Alana is definitely impacting our mind. I should know. I’m in here.

“That’s why I am telling you that you need to bring Alana Wixx here right now,” Mrs. Francis said, bringing Cohen back to the crisis at hand. “Alana will know what to do. Or at least, she will have an idea as to what we could do to stop it from happening again.”

There was something in Mrs. Francis's words that didn't sit right with him. It sounded like the elder had all kinds of secrets. The kind of secrets only Alana would know.

"I'll find her and bring her to you."

"Good, Sheriff Pierce. Now, someone bring me shredded carrots. I need to think."

Cohen made sure someone was going to fulfill Mrs. Francis's request before seeking out Alana Wixx.

The witch who made his world shake.

* * *

Cohen was frustrated. He was looking for Alana, but there was no sign of her bright red hair anywhere on Main Street or in the community center. When he finally tracked down Lila, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Lila, where is Alana?"

The woman barely looked up from the huge pot of soup she was stirring. "Alana? Why do you need to find Alana?"

Cohen arched a brow at his future sister-in-law. "Does it matter why I need to find her? This is a crisis. I need her."

Lila's eyes sparkled. "Oh, you need her, huh? I like that. It's nice to know that you see my best friend for what she is now. Someone who is good in a crisis."

"Mrs. Francis wants me to bring Alana to her," he responded dully.

“Right. Mrs. Francis is the one who needs her.” Lila continued to grin. “But you should know that I haven’t actually seen Alana in a little while.”

“Shit, okay.” He cursed under his breath and started to walk away, but Lila called him back.

“You should know something about Alana,” she looked around, keeping her tone low. “She’s been through some stuff, my girl. I would hate to have to kill you because you’re mean to my best friend.”

“I don’t go around hurting people, Lila. I’m the sheriff, so you could say that it’s actually the opposite. I save people.”

“Well, be that as it may, you should know that Alana isn’t as tough as she likes people to believe. You keep knocking against her armor, but you’ll break her one day if you’re not careful.”

Cohen wanted to get the hell away from Lila and her cautionary warnings. He didn’t want to know that Alana went through some rough times because that would only make it that much harder to keep hating her, especially now that he knew what it was like to kiss her. He could clearly remember the little moans of pleasure she made whenever he took a swipe of her mouth.

He shook himself to remove the searing memories from his mind.

“I would never purposefully hurt Alana,” Cohen assured Lila.

“I know,” she was quick to respond. “I know you would never hurt her on purpose, but it’s not theon purposepart that worries me.”

“I’ll see you around, okay? I need to do my job right now.” Cohen left, still seeking

out that shade of red that he could only ever equate with Alana's hair.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

When he still couldn't find her a few minutes later, he decided to follow his shifter nose. Alana would probably be very frustrated that he was using his wolf senses to find her, but she would just have to understand that now she was on the council, her time wasn't always her own. When Mrs. Francis calls you, you show up.

Alana's scent led him back to her store and then right into the woods.

"Please, in the name of all that is holy, she did not go into the woods by herself."

Of course, she had.

His witch was fearless, though just when he had started thinking about Alana ashiswitch, he didn't know.

NINE

ALANA

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Alana wasn't usually the type to swear a blue streak. There were so many words in the world, and she was usually so sure that she could find something better to say than a cuss word.

That was before she found herself lost in the forest in the middle of the night.

And not just any kind of night, either, but the first night of an earthquake when there

was no moon and very few stars in the sky, thanks to the heavy clouds that colored the black night with ominous tones of gray.

The green glow was long since gone, vanished into thin air as if it was nothing more than a thick cloud of greensomething.

Magic, most likely.

Alana didn't know what kind of witch or magic could create an earthquake, but she knew she had to find that green glow. It would have answers, of that she was sure.

Of course, it wouldn't have all of the answers. It wouldn't be able to explain why she had kissed Cohen Pierce a handful of times that night, just about the time the earthquake happened.

Now that she thought about it, alone in the dark and scary woods, the kisses and the earthquake had been almost simultaneous. It didn't make much sense, but even she had to admit that sensedidn't exactly always makesensein Half Moon Key.

Alana continued to walk into the woods until she found the little clearing with the fairy ring ... or so the locals called it. She knew this strange rock formation for what it really was.

The place where her grandmother had done the protective spell on Half Moon Key.

The green glow might be gone, but there was something else that worried her.

Some of the big boulders were cracked right down the middle as if some huge god had decided to go to town on them with a powerful sledgehammer. She ran her fingers down the crack of one of the stones, and she shivered against the strange ebb of energy that collided with her fingers. She tried to trace the energy, but it led her on

a merry chase around the clearing. There was no tracking it, and there was no holding it down.

She wasn't following it. It was following her. It was all very strange. It was energy on the run, seeping into Half Moon Key, and she didn't know what the hell to do to fix it.

"I swear," she said through gritted teeth to the ground under her feet. "If you start to quake again, I am gonna be so mad."

She started to speak magic words, hoping to settle whatever had unsettled the seat of her family's magic. It took powerful magical juice to protect a full town as her grandmother had done, but it took even more magical juice to try to recreate it.

So focused as she was on the spell she was trying to cast, she barely heard someone shouting her name. She was just about to convince herself that it was all in her head when it echoed again, this time stopping her dead in her tracks.

"Alana!" the loud call came again.

"Cohen?" she asked, recognizing the voice.

"Alana? Where in the fuck are you? Stop moving, will you? I can't get a read on where ..." He stopped short as he found his way through the line of trees and into the small clearing where Alana stood. "Oh. You're safe." The words rushed out of him as he rushed forward. He didn't stop advancing toward her until he held her in his arms, one hand at her back, the other tangling in her hair. "You cannot scare me like that, do you hear me?"

She tapped against his chest and didn't stop until he loosened his grip but only enough for her to look into his eyes. "And I was meant to be in danger, was I?"

“How am I supposed to know if you’re safe or not? I told you to stay with Lila and help the council that way. I didn’t ask you to start a hike in the woods in the middle of the night. What were you even thinking?”

“Don’t scold me, Cohen Pierce. I am a grown woman and well within my rights to go off anywhere I damn well please.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“Well, sure, because that’s all I have time to do right now. Run through the forest to find you.”

“No one asked you to come after me and find me.”

He shook his head, still holding her. “On the contrary, Red. I wassent to find you and bring you back. Mrs. Francis wants a word about tonight.”

Her heart ... which up until that point had been beating hard against her chest ... stopped and dropped. It ached, but she didn’t know why. “Oh. Mrs. Francis was looking for me.”

“She wants to ask you if this is magical,” he explained.

Though he still held her, Alana didn’t know why he insisted on it.

“That’s why you needed to find me, huh? Because Mrs. Francis thinks that this was a magic thing. Well, you should know that is precisely why I am in the middle of the woods in the dark. I’m not an idiot, Cohen. It definitely felt magical, so I took it upon myself to come out here to find out if it was true. I saw this strange green glow and ...”

He stepped away from her, his arms falling at his sides. “I’m sorry. Did you just say that you saw a strange green glow in the forest, and your first instinct was to race off out there to see what it was?”

“Well, yes.”

“Are you absolutely insane, woman?” he bellowed

“No,” she snapped back, raising her voice to match his. “I am not insane, but I have a duty to this town. I have to protect it from those who would harm us. That’s exactly why I am here and what I am doing. Or I would be if you hadn’t rudely interrupted me.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You came in the woods to see if there was something dangerous armed with nothing but a stick and a flashlight that isn’t working?”

“I’m a witch,” Alana responded. “Always assume I am armed.” She moved her fingers. “I’m magic, remember?”

He only tightened his hold on her. “You’re armed, are you? You could defend yourself from me? From any threat that crossed your path?”

She gave a resolute head nod. “Of course.”

Something dangerous played across his eyes. “No. You’re wrong. If I was a bad shifter, I could have snuck up on you and been halfway done eating you before someone even heard you scream.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say,” she whispered.

“Is it? I am sorry that the truth offends you, Alana, but you cannot leave town ...”

“I can do as I well damn please, Cohen. You are not my keeper, and I will remind you that up until tonight, you would have had no problem letting some bad shifter munch on my bones.” Alana pushed against his muscular chest and took a step back.

His eyes darkened, and he stepped forward. “Don’t even joke about shit like that,

Alana. What is the matter with you? You think I am enjoying this whiplash?"

"Whiplash? You think that caring for me all of a sudden is whiplash?"

He blew a breath and rubbed a hand across his mouth. "This isn't the place to have this conversation. We need to get you back into town."

"No. I need to find what was making that light. I know it was connected to the earthquake, but I need to figure out why. I am not going back to town without answers. What good am I if I can't help?"

He held his breath and gave a curt nod. "Fine. We will find it together."

"I'm sorry?"

"I'm gonna help you. We will comb the woods until we find this mysterious green light of yours."

"Cohen," she argued.

"Nope. This isn't a discussion, Alana. You have no choice. Either you accept my help, and we find this light of yours, or I throw you over my shoulder and take you to town."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Oh, but I would. I really would."

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

He took a few determined steps toward her, his hands reaching for her, but Alana was quick. Not shifter quick, of course, but there was still decent shuffle in her. She moved away just before he was able to grab hold of her.

“Alana,” he said through gritted teeth. “Get back here.”

“Nope.”

She continued walking forward through the trees, and though she didn’t turn to see if he was following her, the sound of his footsteps crushing the undergrowth was enough for her.

At least she wouldn’t be alone.

“I want to show you something,” she said. “And I need you to pay attention to this stuff because you’ll have to describe it to Mrs. Francis.”

He nodded and followed her until they reached the formation of stones. Alana took Cohen’s hand in hers, and immediately, his body reacted. He shoved those pesky emotions down to the very core of him and continued to press his fingers against one of the broken stones.

“Do you feel that?” she asked, fully expecting his answer to be a resounding no.

“I do, yeah,” he marveled. “What the hell is that?”

“That, wolf man, is the remnants of magic.”

“Magic?” he asked, confused. “What do you mean the remnants of magic?”

“These rocks weren’t always here. This is where my grandmother cast a protective spell on the town, but that the stones are cracked is weird. It weakened the magic. It might have completely destroyed it for all I know.”

“Shit,” he hissed out. “I don’t believe in this stuff ...”

“Only because you have no experience with it,” she reprimanded with a frown. “When you see it in action?” She snorted dryly. “You will definitely believe in it once we’re done with all of this.”

“All of what?” he asked.

“You do know I have to find a way to fix this, right? I can’t leave a protective spell just dying out here. The council won’t allow it.”

Cohen wasn’t listening. His eyes were glued to her flashlight. The light was sputtering on and off enough to make a dent in the night’s heavy darkness. “Give me that.” He didn’t wait but took it right out of her hand and laid it on the rock. The flashlight turned on and stayed on as if it was connected to its own power source. “What the hell?”

Alana’s panic surged. “Cohen, stop. Don’t,” she warned.

But it was too late. The sheriff took out his phone, rendered useless by yet another one of Half Moon Key’s strange outages, and placed it on the rock right beside the flashlight.

The black screen lit up like a fucking Christmas tree with text messages, emails, and other kinds of notifications. Cohen turned angry eyes toward her. “Okay, what the

fuck is happening?”

She winced, but there was nothing for it. She had to tell him the truth before he figured it out for himself.

“That strange electrical glitch we have in town? The one that also messes with the internet? It’s because of the spell. This spell.”

He glared at her. “I figured. Why? Explain this to me.”

“Well, magic always leaves a trace, right?”

“Uh-huh, talk faster, Alana.” His nostrils flared with anger, but she pointed a finger at him.

“No! You don’t get to be livid at me for something that was done and for something that was decided before I was even born. I don’t know why the council and my family chose to cast this spell, but I have been trying to keep it alive since my mother passed on.”

“But you don’t have the same kind of juice? So it’s slipping?”

Alana winced. “Maybe. I’m not sure. I think it might be because electricity and Wi-Fi didn’t exist when the spell was cast. Well, okay, obviously, there would have been electricity in town, but it’s probably changed. The energy has changed, especially with the internet. I think the spell doesn’t always recognize what is truly good or truly bad.”

He nodded. “Okay. We are going to the council. Now. I want an explanation. I want to know why they had some witches put up this spell, and I want to know why it did that.” He pointed to the break in the stones. “We need to know if that’s what made

the earthquake happen.”

“I agree,” she said, resolute.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

He turned to face her. “Now,that is dangerous. This is the third time now that we agree on something on the same day.”

“We might as well tell the council the world is ending.”

If he disagreed, Cohen didn’t say it. He just followed her down the path, out of the forest, and right to Mrs. Francis’s house.

It was going to be a long night for all of them.

TEN

COHEN

Cohen didn’t want to be angry with Mrs. Francis and the other elders for turning to a witch to protect the town. Of course, they hadn’t been old and wise when they made that choice. He was eager to hear their reasoning for turning to magic.

They probably thought it was the best course of action because, one day, most of the town’s shifters would be very old and fragile. The magic could very well be their long-term plan.

The sheriff couldn’t fault them for wanting to secure Half Moon Key. It was a safe haven for families ... shifters and humans alike. An idyllic small town where you could trust your neighbors just as much as the people across town.

It was one of the things Cohen loved the most about Half Moon Key. He also had a

whole lot of respect for old age. It was a shifter thing he learned as a young boy: respect your elders because they know more of the world.

He didn't doubt that was true for one second. There was a whole lot of wisdom in the council, but he still couldn't understand why all of these smart people thought that a magical spell would be a good idea to cast on a whole town.

A. Whole. Town.

He tried to temper his anger as he and Alana made their way to Mrs. Francis's home, where the council was currently gathered. Given that the power glitch had the cars still down, they had to walk all the way across town.

Most of the people were slowly getting back into their houses now that everyone was safe and accounted for. There was only a little bit of damage, but most of it would be easy enough to fix in the daylight. Cohen would try to coordinate the efforts, but he was sure a few of the elders had already set some things up.

The town really came together in times like this. It was a real community, with all of the residents wanting the best for their neighbors.

“At least now we can give some kind of information to the council.”

He only vaguely heard what Alana said. For some strange reason, Cohen was having a hard time focusing on much of anything. There was just too much going on in his brain.

Between the earthquake, his brother's impending wedding, the truce with Alana, kissing her, and learning there was a spell on the town affecting their lives, Cohen was reeling.

He could focus on Alana, though. As confusing as that was, she completely stole his attention.

Did she have to look so good in that blue dress? Did her hair have to shine like that? And those fucking lips of hers. Did they have to be so damn delicious? All he wanted to do was cross the distance between them to kiss her again and again.

Cohen took a whole lot of pride in how well he could control his emotions. It was true that most people thought him to be surly ... evengrumpy. But Cohen rather thought he came by his hard exterior shell quite naturally.

Things happened to a man when his heart broke.

There was no healing from the pain of his past.

Losing his wife had hardened him beyond anything he could have thought possible.

Even the way he thought about Amanda wasn't exactly normal. Cohen felt very much that he had lost her. As if she hadn't chosen to leave. As if she had died.

She hadn't.

Amanda was alive and well, and even more than that, she was happy. Married to the man she cuckolded him with, the couple had a few kids now. They had a nice house in a nice neighborhood.

The reason why Amanda cheated?

Cohen's wolf.

The second she found out about shifters, Amanda was on the outs. It caused a huge

rift in their relationship.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

There was another lie Cohen told himself about Amanda. He always thought of her as his wife, but they hadn't actually ever made it down the aisle. He thought of her as his wife because that was the depth of the love he had had for the woman.

The woman he was going to spend the rest of his life with.

Losing her in such a terrible way ... her choosing another man over him because he was a shifter ... severed something in his mind, in his heart. Cohen hadn't been the same man since that day.

But he would never admit that since coming to Half Moon Key, he felt a whole lot more like himself. Not quite recovered, but more alive. Just the fact he was into fishing again was a major victory.

There was nothing like fishing with his buddies nowadays.

There was another part of his day he really enjoyed, but he wouldn't admit it to himself. Not even in his most honest moments because nothing could come of it.

Cohen could not let himself fall in love again.

That was why he hated Alana Wixx so much.

That woman, with her long red hair, her intense gaze, the way she moved, how she talked, the way she never took any crap from anyone, not even him, the Sheriff.

She was dangerous to him. An enemy. All because he wanted her. Badly.

“Sheriff, are you with me?” Alana asked with a soft giggle that made his back straighten.

Jarred out of his thoughts, Cohen looked to the left, seeing that Alana was now walking much closer beside him. The smile she gave him was tense, as she was still unsure of their truce. No doubt, she could feel the tension in him whenever she was around.

He only nodded curtly in response, and immediately, she shut down, crossing her arms. Cohen shook his head. He took hold of Alana’s hand in his.

Why? He didn’t know, but somehow, touching her was a whole lot easier than speaking. With his actions, he could let his instincts and deepest desires take over. He didn’t want to think and analyze and try to discern the meaning behind every gesture.

For some strange reason, Alana didn’t move away from him, nor did she object. She just let him lead her as if he had done it a thousand times before.

“Okay, we need to talk this out.” Oh, yeah, it was a whole lot easier talking when he was touching her.

“What do you mean?” she blinked up at him.

“Well, for starters, our truce means nothing if we’re only ever just going to take offense whenever we have a little misunderstanding.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” She was resolved not to have this conversation.

“You know what I mean, Alana. If you’re gonna be on the council, we’re going to be around each other a whole lot more. You can’t gloat when you beat me, and you can’t

actively work against me. You ...” he stopped, not sure how to continue.

Alana smirked. “Yeah! There! See? It’s just as much me as it is you. You also feel like you have to win over me.”

“What’s that about?” he asked more to her than to himself.

It was only when Alana’s eyes went round with shock that he realized what he had spoken out loud.

He was asking her why she felt like she had to have one up on him. He knew what his answer was, and if Alana came to the same conclusion as he had, he would be in really big shit.

“Pause for a minute,” Alana said, covering her face with her hands.

He chuckled, unsurprised that she would push back. “What?”

“I want you to stop for a second. You can’t walk in there this angry about the spell and the earthquake.”

He frowned. Okay, so she wasn’t thinking about me. Cool. Totally fine. I don’t care. “Why? I can be pissed about all this magic stuff. We shouldn’t be relying on magic to protect our town.”

“Aren’t shifters a form of magic?” She arched a brow.

“I can honestly say that I never thought about it that way.” He cleared his throat and forced himself to look away from her eyes. They were too beautiful, too keen. If they kept hooking on his, she would read what was in his soul, and there would be no telling how things would go from then on. If she wanted him, how in the fuck was he

supposed to keep away? Cohen needed Alana to hate him. It was an important line of defense.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“Think about it, then,” Alana said. “You’re a man who can shift into an animal whenever he wills it. How is that not magic? Not the kind of magic I can do, nor the kind anyone in my family could do, but that doesn’t mean it’s not something otherworldly.”

He laughed again. “If my wolf is anything, it is otherworldly.” He repeated her choice of word, amused by it. “What did you mean, Alana? What kind of magic could your family do? It’s different than what you do?”

She nodded, but there was a reluctance in her movements. Cohen could tell she didn’t want to share this part of her story. It was either too private, or she hated him so much that she didn’t want to develop any sort of connection.

“Look, you don’t have to tell me. I get that I don’t understand witches all that well, so maybe what I just asked you was out of line. If that’s the case, I apologize. I really don’t mean to hurt you when we disagree.”

“Lila and Jade call it fighting.”

“But what do you call it?” The words were just out of his mouth before he realized what he had said. The question was loaded. A whole lot hung on her answer.

That would have to wait. Mrs. Francis stood on her front porch, waving them forward impatiently.

ELEVEN

COHEN

The small but cheerfully decorated living room was cramped with elders and council members. Of course, Mason and Parker were there with their ladies too. Mrs. Francis was joined by the other elders, shifters who had lived their whole lives in Half Moon Key.

“Well, what do we know about the earthquake?” Frank asked Mrs. Francis.

The elder shook her head. “That’s what I would like to know. Cohen, what have you got for me?”

Cohen was quick to take on his role of sheriff. He nodded and faced the others. “Before I even start talking about the earthquake, I want to know what the hell happened here for you to decide to cast a spell on a whole town collectively.”

Mrs. Francis snorted audibly. “Oh, no, you don’t, my boy. You’re not going to judge us. We did what we thought was right.”

“But why?” he pressed. “I don’t understand.”

“How could you? It’s not like we understand any more than you do. When we asked the witch, Alana’s grandmother, Helena, to cast the spell, we didn’t know that it would come with so many consequences.”

“Consequences?” Cohen frowned, his tone cold as he wanted to know the truth right away.

Mrs. Francis either chose not to answer, or she hadn’t heard him. “We couldn’t foresee that technology would become such a big part of everyday life. We also didn’t know it would affect shifters.”

He narrowed his eyes. "Affect shifters, how?"

Mrs. Francis shrugged. "It blocks the mate sense."

Cohen's entire body tensed. All at once, bits of information clicked into place. Mason, Parker, and Jack were his friends. All of them were shifters. They hadn't sensed their mates until much later in their relationships than was usually common for shifters.

"How?" he growled at her. "How is that possible?"

"As far as Nana knew, it was a flaw in the protection spell. For some odd reason, the magic thinks the shifters in town need protection from the mate sense," Alana explained.

"I only knew Lila was my mate after we said I..." Lila's elbow cut off the rest of Mason's sentence.

Cohen didn't register what was said, though. He was too busy trying to breathe through the waves of anger. "Why in the hell would you need to protect the town this badly?"

"Because the world isn't always kind," Mrs. Francis answered. "When the town was first established, we thought that we would have our own little Eden forever, but it didn't take long for bad seeds to find us. They wanted to take root here, just like the rest of us."

"Exactly," Frank, the fisherman, said. "They brought all kinds of trouble, and we didn't want any of that in our town. This place is our home. What were we supposed to do? Let them overtake us with crime? Ruin the natural beauty of the lake, forests, and mountains? We wouldn't have a safe community. They had to be kept out."

“They had to be,” Mrs. Francis repeated as if that answered all of his questions.

It didn’t. How could it? Every two seconds, he thought of something else he wanted to ask, something else that he needed to know.

“And your grandmother fucked up the spell on top of it?” Cohen wasn’t being fair, and he knew it. It wasn’t Alana’s fault. She wasn’t involved in the casting of the spell.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“I’ve been tending to the magic to make sure it holds ever since my grandmother and mother passed. But the spell knows I am not the original caster, so it’s starting to behave strangely. That’s my best guess, but a guess is all it is, though it is an educated one.”

Cohen shook his head. “I’m sorry, but did you just say that the magic behaves? How can it behave? It’s not real.”

Alana’s eyes darkened. “Of course, it’s real.”

He clicked his tongue. “No, no. That’s not what I mean. Obviously, the magic is real if it’s blocking the mate sense, which is supposed to be this big thing that nothing can mess with. I don’t even want to know how powerful you are if you can mess with it.”

“I’m not as powerful as my Nana, and that’s part of the problem. I don’t have the same magic as her. My strengths are different than hers. The magic recognizes that it is a different witch based on that alone,” Alana continued.

Cohen nodded like he could keep up, but this was all too much. Thankfully, Alana stopped talking.

In fact, for a long moment, everyone was quiet. Either they were giving Cohen the time to process all of this, or no one wanted to be the first to break the silence.

“Bro,” Mason started, stepping forward. “You gotta say something, man. You’re sitting there looking like the big bad wolf who is about to huff and puff us all away.”

“Mason,” Lila chided. “Don’t tease your brother right now. It’s just really not the time for that.”

“Oh, no, by all means. Tease him all you want,” Mrs. Francis said. “He deserves it for thinking that we had a choice.”

“I don’t think I would have made the same choice,” Cohen said. “But probably because I don’t know about magic.”

“Neither did we, but Helena was a resident, and she wanted a safe place for her daughter and granddaughter after everything they went through.”

Cohen’s eyes immediately cut toward Alana, hoping he would instantaneously know what she had experienced. That didn’t work, obviously, but he hated not knowing. Not only because he didn’t like the idea that others knew more about her than he did, but Cohen had a feeling. He had a terrible feeling that when he discovered this piece of Alana’s past, he would want to seek revenge on her behalf.

He shook his head and cleared his throat. He wanted to ask her right then what she had gone there, but, of course, he couldn’t. There was no reason for him to know. Not really. It had no bearing on the earthquake, did it?

It has a bearing on us, his wolf’s comment shocking him. Cohen didn’t have the chance to ask for clarification because Alana said, “Now that the magic is slipping for real, we need to decide if we find someone to reset it or if we let it die out. But the thing is, I have no idea what that looks like. As the spell dies, it might cause more anomalies than the power and grid going down.”

“No more earthquakes,” Cohen said. “There can be no more earthquakes.”

“Well, that means resetting the spell,” Alana replied after clicking her tongue. He

didn't miss the way she wrung her fingers together, though. She was nervous and scared she wouldn't be up to the task.

"But I can't recast the spell. I don't have enough power to do that. I would need a whole lot more magic to protect the town now that it's gotten bigger and more populated."

"We need to do something," Mrs. Francis said. "A lot of shifters settle here because it numbs the mating sense."

"You knew?" Cohen's whisper was rough and sad. The betrayal in his heart was pretty damn obvious in his tone.

Mrs. Francis waved him forward with a crook of her bony, wrinkly hand. He went forward because she was an elder and because he would always have a special place in his heart for Mrs. Francis. "I am sorry, my dear boy. I should've told you sooner, but you were still so sad about your loss when we met. I knew that you'd benefit from a position in Half Moon Key. I figured the spell would keep you safe."

"Holy shit, Mrs. Francis," Jack shouted. "You wanted me to move here because you knew that the spell would keep me safe from Sage." Jack had been through his own series of trouble a little while ago, and his history with Half Moon Key was a whole lot clearer now.

The elder blushed and waved him off. "Of course, I wanted the spell to protect you. You're a special boy, Jack. You, too, Cohen. That's why I wanted you here. I didn't think you would be open to being with your mate even if you did meet her. I didn't think you would miss it too much. I should've told you about this. I am sorry."

"It's all right," Cohen replied, and he found he meant it too. He didn't want to be angry with the most beloved citizen in town. Besides, her motives were pure, and her

intentions were good. How could he be angry?

Well, you know what this means? His wolf asked. It means there is a chance that Alana is our mate, but the spell has shielded us from it.

“It would explain a lot.” It was only when every eye in the room blinked at him in confusion that Cohen realized he had spoken out loud. “The spell breaking, I mean,” he blurted, happy to be quick-thinking. “Everything that’s been happening in town makes sense,” he clarified, happy that each second put distance between him and his wolf’s thoughts. “The magic isn’t as strong, so trouble has found the town. That’s how all of our misadventures have been happening.”

“So you see why you need the spell now?” Mrs. Francis asked. “How are we supposed to keep our people safe if we can’t stop bad people from coming into the town?”

“That’s a very good question,” Alana nodded along with Mrs. Francis.

Cohen said, “We use good old police work.” Parker chuckled, “We’re a bunch of shifters.”

“Well, now we are, yes,” Frank said. “We’re all old now. We needed younger blood to settle in the town. Take over. You bunch are gonna breathe new life into Half Moon Key.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“Breathe new life ...” Alana gasped. “Oh, my god, I think you just gave me an idea of how we can fix this.” She bounced to her feet. “I have an idea, but before I tell you what it is, I need to make sure I can make it work first.” She rushed toward the front door, and Cohen was on his feet, following behind her as soon as the door shut.

“Hold on,” Mrs. Francis called out to him from the front porch. Cohen looked down the street where Alana was making a quick getaway, beelining it for her store. Mrs. Francis called out his name again before saying, “Give Alana some time. She is going to be a little bit self-conscious about her idea.”

He frowned. “Why?”

“That’s not my story to tell, Cohen. If you want to get to know Alana, maybe stop biting her head off every time she opens her mouth. I promise you that she is a good person. She has the best interest of this town at heart, just like the other women in her family, just like me. Just like you, Cohen. Be nice to her.”

He grumbled, and the older woman chuckled.

“You like to play the big tough guy, Cohen, but you forget I know your history. I know that you are closed off because love hurt you. That heart of yours is still in there, just ready and waiting to be used. You’ve got a great capacity for love, Cohen. Maybe it’s time you use it.”

He left before Mrs. Francis said anything more that would upset the very narrow balance he had on his emotions.

If Alana needed time, he would give it to her, but Cohen didn't want her to be alone. He was pulled to Wixx by forces that were way beyond his understanding.

And this time, he didn't even blame Alana for it.

He blamed himself and the magic that was keeping him safe, locked in his past.

TWELVE

ALANA

Alana sat in her favorite chair, staring down at the crystal ball she had never been able to use. Oh, but at that very moment, she would have given just about anything to see the future in the shiny orb.

It would be so much easier if she could simply figure out how to fix the Half Moon Key protection spell without actually spending any more time with Cohen Pierce.

Only danger lay that way.

Not the kind of danger that Alana could get behind. It wasn't simply a broken heart that Alana wanted to avoid. There were other dangers too.

She didn't want to kiss Cohen, and she definitely didn't want to ... all of a sudden ... stop hating him. Disliking him was much safer, especially now that she knew exactly what it was like to kiss him. And wow! The man knew how to kiss.

Alana shook her head to clear her thoughts, but without fail, every time she did close her eyes, she saw Cohen. Either he was about to kiss her or ...

The curtain parted, and Alana would have jumped to her feet from fright at the

interruption had she not been expecting this very visit.

She knew he would follow as soon as she left the council meeting. It wasn't only because he had called out her name. There was something else between them now that they had a truce in place.

A truce and a few kisses.

Alana felt differently about Cohen now, though when exactly that had happened, she didn't know. Maybe part of her had always wanted to be something different with Cohen.

Something else.

The man himself was something else, indeed. Cohen stood there in her personal space, glaring at her with his arms crossed. "That was quite the exit. I thought we were a team. The truce?"

She snorted dryly before laughing. "Oh, yeah. Our truce. I couldn't stay there, Cohen. I can't have the weight of Half Moon Key on my shoulders. I do not have that kind of power."

He shook his head. "But you don't have the weight of the town on your shoulders, Alana. Or if you do, you're not the only one carrying it. I'm there, and so are Mason, Parker, Jack, my deputies, and Mrs. Francis. You're not alone, Alana."

She continued to stare at the crystal ball, wishing there was a fire in it. At least then, she could explain why her cheeks were burning.

"I know that you're overwhelmed, but you need to take a breath here." Cohen sat beside her, and his legs were so long that his knee almost touched her own.

She wanted to press her leg into his for comfort, and that was precisely how she knew that she was well and truly losing her mind. How could she even consider taking comfort from the sheriff? From Cohen Pierce? The man who always, always, always stole her breath.

“Alana,” he whispered. “Look at me.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

She fought for as long as she could before he reached over and lifted her head with a press of his fingertips to her chin.

“Hey. I know this is not what you expected when you woke up this morning, but this is the situation we find ourselves in. You’ve been tasked with getting the magic back up and running.”

“But I don’t have that kind of power!” she interjected, the panic rearing again.

“I know you don’t think you can do this, but you don’t have to be alone.”

“Yeah? Do you know another witch?”

He winced before shaking his head. “You’d be the first one I meet, actually.”

She snorted. “That you know of. We’re really good at hiding who we are.” She winced, realizing what she had just said. Now Cohen would know that she was indeed hiding things.

“Alana,” he spoke her name so softly, she barely heard it. He gently took her arm and spun her around so he could look into her eyes. “I don’t know you very well. I have always let my distrust of witches get in the way of being kind. I am sorry for that.”

“You’re just saying that now because you heard Mrs. Francis talk about my past. I know you, Cohen. You’re a sheriff, for fuck’s sake. You don’t mind me so much now that you see me as a damsel in distress. But I don’t need you to save me, okay? I’m the same witch I was before.”

“I know,” he replied. “But you’re wrong, you know. I do not see you as a damsel in distress, and I never have. There is nothing about you that screams distress. It’s actually the opposite. You give off this energy like you don’t need anything or anyone.”

She pursed her lips. “Being the only remaining witch in Half Moon Key isn’t easy.”

“It’s lonely,” he amended, somehow sensing what she wouldn’t say.

She gave a curt nod. “Yeah.”

“Well, then, what can I do to help with this plan of yours?”

“I don’t actually have a plan. I knew they were going to task me with fixing it, so I just figured if I pretended to have an idea, then they would have to believe me later when I said it wouldn’t work. They’ll have to believe me when I tell them I can’t help them anymore.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course!”

“But have you tried?”

Alana narrowed her eyes at him. “No.”

He shrugged. “Well, then, how can you know you can’t do anything?”

“Because I am not as powerful as my grandmother and mother. And they needed to work together to keep it going. I can’t do it without them. There’s no way.”

“Perhaps not, but that doesn’t mean we can’t figure this out. Together.” Either he put emphasis on that last word, or Alana was losing her mind. He wasn’t done. “If we try everything we can think of together, then the council will have to go in a different direction than magic.”

“Oh,” her anger decreased, lowering her shoulders with it. “I didn’t think of it that way. That’s actually a good plan. Thanks, Cohen. For the support and trust.” It was weird to say those words to the sheriff, but Alana meant them.

She also could feel his support and trust. It wasn’t a bad feeling.

In fact, it was so refreshing that she checked to see if she had left a window open.

“Good thing you already established a truce, then, huh? You’re full of good ideas, so don’t sell yourself short.”

Alana took a deep breath. “Cohen, there’s something we need to discuss before we start working again. Okay?”

He swallowed hard. “Okay.”

“We cannot keep this up. This hot and cold. I can’t take it. All of my energy has to be for the town. I might not believe I can do it, but I still have to give it my all.”

“What are you saying, Alana?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“No more kissing.” She tried to be as assertive as she could be, but it was terribly difficult because shedidwant more kisses from this man.

She might not get along with him all the time, and she might find him to be the most annoying man in the entire world, but all of that melted away when they kissed.

In those tender moments, she was not a witch. She was a woman. A desirable woman who could bring a strong and stubborn man to his knees with passion. It was the most powerful Alana had ever felt.

Probably because it felt right, but she didn’t know what to do withthat. How could kissing a man who hated you, a man you were pretty sure you hated right back, bethatgood?

It was apparently one of life’s mysteries, just like why the magic was dying, and the earthquake rocked the town.

But it wasn’t even true anymore. They didn’t hate each other. Now they were on the same team, working together.

Now, Cohen trusted her. When everyone else in town looked to her for answers, Cohen rolled up his sleeves and asked her what she needed.

Alana hadn’t felt that in ...years.

That was precisely why they couldn’t kiss anymore.

“No more kissing,” Cohen repeated. “Sure. We can do that. Or,” he shrugged, taking a step closer to her. “We could go in a totally different direction.”

Before Alana could even ask him what that might be, he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her softly. She melted into the kiss, more than ready to kiss this man for the very last time.

That’s all this was.

A goodbye kiss.

It was the last kiss they would share before they started to fix this town once and for all.

Alana let herself believe that was the truth for as long as she could, but soon, it wasn’t enough. Not nearly enough of Cohen. His lips moved with hers, his tongue exploring her mouth while his hands went up and down her back before settling on her hips.

Her hands traveled up his shirt, curling around his back so she could dig her nails into the taut skin. He growled in her mouth, tightening his grip on her hips. His erection pressed into her hip, and Alana sighed happily. To feel the hard length against her, to know with certainty that Cohen was just as affected by their embrace as she was.

“Alana,” he kissed down her cheeks and along the column of her neck. “I don’t want this to be the last time we kiss.”

Her breath caught, and her legs shook, but Cohen held her close. The circle of his arms kept her upright, her body leaning into his for support. She took a deep breath, inhaling Cohen’s scent. Something unfurled in the pit of her stomach, and Alana’s entire body heated over.

Cohen could so easily turn her upside down.

Maybe that's why she hated him.

Because he dared to be the only man who ever had an effect on her, damn him.

"Alana," he repeated her name over again. "Should we stop?"

She didn't know what she wanted. Instead of trying to find the words, she lifted to her toes and pressed her lips to his. Her fingers made quick work of the buttons on his shirt. She pushed it over his shoulders, revealing his muscular chest. His skin was golden, with a smattering of hair that led down into the waistband of his pants.

He was all man, all power.

"Alana," he reached out and lifted her chin with the tips of his fingers. "If you're gonna start stripping me out of my clothes, at least tell me you want me."

"Isn't this enough of a sign?"

He chuckled, his mouth quirking into a grin. "No, love. It's not enough of a sign." He grabbed hold of her hair and gained access to her neck. He pressed kisses along the skin he had exposed. "Tell me that you want me, Alana."

"In this moment, Cohen, I want you. But if you start being a dick, I will leave you high and dry."

His grin returned. "High and dry, huh?" He rubbed the back of his fingers against her cheeks. "I don't think I'm ever a dick to you."

She snorted. "No way you believe that."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

He shrugged before kissing her again. His tongue delved deep before he pulled away. “Maybe I am a bit of a dick sometimes. I can’t help it. You get to me.”

She licked her lips, tasting him there. “I get to you?”

He took another sip of her mouth. “You get to me, and I didn’t like it, but it turns out you’re a hell of a lot harder to resist than I thought.”

“We have nothing in common. We will never agree on anything.”

“We agree we both want this. Right here, right now.” He kissed her cheeks, her forehead, and her cheeks again before finding his way back to her mouth.

“Right here, right now,” she repeated, not knowing if she could ever be able to offer more.

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Cohen was on her. He kissed her deeply, his hands tugging up the hem of her blue dress until all of the material was gathered at her waist. She put her arms up, and Cohen pulled it over her head, leaving them in a blue cloud for a second. The dress dropped to the floor, but they continued to look into each other's eyes, letting the intensity of the moment sink between them.

Finally, Cohen stepped forward, his hands cupping her breasts through the cup of her bra. She reached back and unclasped the garment, and Cohen let it fall to the floor. His eyes grew heavy with desire as he took in her naked breasts. He reached out and drew his thumbs across her nipples. He leaned down and took one of the hardened nubs into his mouth. His other hand traveled to the waistband of her panties. His long,

agile fingers dipped into the material, rubbing along her sex. He growled when he found she was turned on by his kisses.

“Take your pants off, Cohen,” Alana whispered.

“You like to give orders in the bedroom, too?” he teased.

She pursed her lips at him, but he returned the smile she tried to hide. “Maybe I do. But maybe I don’t want to be the first one to end up naked in my living room.”

He chuckled. “Fair point.” He quickly unbuckled his pants and let them fall to the ground. He laughed again when she gasped at the sight of his bare erect cock. “I don’t wear underwear,” he explained. “There’s no point. If I need to shift, they just end up ruined.”

“So you’re always going commando?”

He grinned. “Yeah.”

She blushed deeply, and he noticed. “It’s going to be tough walking around the council meeting knowingthatlittle tidbit.”

He threw his head back with a laugh. “Well, maybe I can wreck it for you and tell you ...”

Alana pressed her hands to his mouth. “No. Don’t you dare wreck this for me.” Cohen kissed the palm of her hand, and when she gasped in surprise, he laughed again. “This is the most I’ve seen you actually smile and laugh in ...” She shook her head. “I think in forever.”

His smile slipped a bit, but he nodded. “Yeah. I guess that’s right. I don’t ...” He

frowned. “I don’t think I actually know the last time I laughed.”

“I can tell you. It was just a couple of seconds ago. It’s nice too. The sound of your laugh, I mean.”

“Did you just give me a compliment?” he teased.

She shook her head. “What? No. Of course not.”

“Sure sounded like one to me.”

“Well, maybe you need to get your ears checked.”

“Get my ears checked? Nah. I’d rather just give you a compliment in return.”

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Don’t give me a line and say something you don’t mean.”

“I would never.” He pressed his hand to his naked chest, right over his heart, making a vow. “But you are a very beautiful woman, Alana. It’s insane how stunning you are. And that mind.” He shook his head in wonder.

“Okay, okay. One compliment in return. Enough. I’m already naked and in your arms. Don’t overdo it.”

Cohen chuckled. “Alana? Let your guard down.”

“Did you not hear the part where I’m naked?” She pointed to her breasts.

“Yeah, but you’re not nearly naked enough.” Without missing a beat, Cohen dropped to his knees and pulled her underwear down her hips. He kissed the inside of her

knee, the curve of her thigh, all the way up to the apex of her legs. He kissed her mound, and she trembled. Cohen kept hold of her legs but parted them slightly, just enough to tongue her clit. She gasped, her hands tangling into his hair.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“This is naked enough?” she asked breathlessly.

He chuckled and looked up into her eyes. “How can you even think of a funny line like that when I’m trying to seduce you.”

“Try harder,” she goaded, knowing that he would see right through her.

“Try harder,” he repeated. “Yeah. Okay. I can do that.”

Before she could even register what he said, Cohen had picked her up off the floor. He laid her onto one of the big cushioned chairs and parted her thighs while returning to his knees. He kissed her knee, her thigh, the same path he had already taken.

But just when he should have darted his tongue on her clit, he surprised her by kissing his way back down. Teased to the point of madness, she pressed her hips forward with a plea.

He grinned at her as he leaned down again, and this time, he didn’t stop until he was licking her pussy. He took long swipes of her, up and down and up and down, before finally settling the tip of his tongue on the tight bundle of nerves. She quivered under his touch, her hands going to his hair, tangling there, keeping him right where they both wanted him to be.

He lapped and laved until Alana was panting, arching her hips up to meet his eager mouth. He slipped a finger to her entrance, pushing only a bit inside before retreating.

Alana’s orgasm tore through her with an intense speed, but the electric current didn’t

stop, for Cohen kept lapping at her hungrily. He only eased when her aftershocks subsided, leaving her boneless and satiated on the edge of the chair.

Cohen stood and took her hands to help her to her feet. He sat in the recliner, and Alana understood his intention. She wasted no time and straddled him, her legs slipping between his thighs and the armrests. Cohen wrapped his arms around her and pressed their lips together. Alana rocked against him, feeling his erection against her skin.

She reached between them and positioned his cock at her entrance before slowly easing down onto the length. She gasped and continued to quiver as she lowered down, down, down. She was so full, so wonderfully full. He rocked his hips, and Alana met him thrust for thrust as she rode him. He tongued one breast, then the other, bucking into her.

Alana's entire body was on fire, her sex aflame with Cohen's movements. His kisses, his licks. Everything the man did took her closer and closer to the edge. She continued to ride him with abandon until her release crested, and she came apart on top of him, crying out his name. He continued to move into her until he joined her in her release, coming deep inside of her.

"Alana," he whispered, his voice heated by his climax. "Oh, Alana. I don't think once was enough."

She kissed him to shut him up.

But the truth was, she felt the very same.

THIRTEEN

COHEN

Cohen sat in his truck, and he debated not going into Moonie's at all. Maybe he should walk away and chalk his night with Alana to a moment of insanity brought on by the sudden and odd earthquake. Maybe he was losing his mind. He had to be.

Why else would he have slept with Alana? Why the fuck else was he craving more?

From this vantage point, Cohen could see that Alana was already sitting at their booth.

Not his. Not hers.

Theirs.

That's what she had said last night after they had sex. "We're not gonna talk about this until I've had some time to think. Actually, no. Scratch that. We both need to think. Yup."

Cohen hadn't agreed with her last night, and he didn't agree with her this morning either. He didn't need time to think about what last night had meant. It didn't really matter what it meant so long as he could keep seeing her.

If she wanted to be fuck buddies? Sure.

If she wanted to date? Fine.

If she wanted to move in? Okay.

If she wanted to rent a spaceship and go for a ride around the universe? Why the fuck not?

He was in deep shit, already in deep for this woman who, up to fewer than twelve

hours ago, he found very annoying.

There was another question that snuck into his brain every now and again. Last night when Alana had said, “We’ll meet for breakfast tomorrow morning in our booth. We’ll talk then after we’ve had time to think and process.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Yeah. He found Alana annoying, all right, but that didn't mean he could keep away from her. That's why he wouldn't know what to say if she wanted to pretend last night had never happened.

If she wanted to erase their night together? No.

He wouldn't be able to do that, even if she drove him nuts sometimes.

But hang on, his wolf argued. She was only annoying because you didn't want to be into her. We are obviously so into her that we slept with her in her store's living room. Not a classy move. You're already going to have to make up for that, so don't mess this morning up because you're overthinking things again. Alana is NOT Amanda.

His wolf was right, of course. There was nothing of his ex in Alana Wixx, but that's not why he felt so pulled by her. Cohen was sure it was because he had to be suspicious of her, but now he suspected there was a whole lot more to it.

There was nothing for it. He couldn't blame the earthquake, and he sure as shit couldn't blame their night together on a momentarily lapse of judgment. Not now. Not if he was honest with himself.

Cohen wanted to fuck Alana last night. This morning, he wanted to make love to her, and he didn't know what to do with that.

The only thing he could think to do was to go into the diner and see if Alana felt the same way he did now that they knew how things could be between them.

With a resolute sigh and his back straight, Cohen walked into the diner and beelined it for the back booth that he and Alana had been fighting over since his very first day in Half Moon Key. No one in town was surprised to see him walk up to a woman he was always bickering with. In fact, the whole town would probably go through some kind of revolt if Cohen and Alana didn't fight.

This morning was different, though. This morning, when Cohen sat down, Alana didn't flinch. She smiled at him warmly, her eyes nearly melting with the heat she threw his way. Maybe he was the one that was melting, though, because hers wasn't the kind of smile that a woman gave to a man she was going to let down easily.

It was the kind of smile a woman gave a man she was happy to see. One she might have spent the whole night thinking about.

"Morning, Cohen," she said. "I took the liberty of ordering you a coffee already. Hope that's okay."

He returned her smile. "It's very thoughtful, thanks. Am I late?" He longed to reach over the table to take her hand in his. Cohen just wanted to touch her, any part of her that he could. Now that he had touched her so intimately, he found he wanted to constantly be close enough to touch her.

Alana shook her head. "Oh, no, you're not late. I'm early. I couldn't sleep," she added with a shrug that made her hair flutter around her in a cloud of red softness. It gave Cohen vivid memories of last night, and he wanted to reach over and run his hands through the crimson strands. He knew they smelled like honey and sunshine and burning candles. It wasn't a smell he had ever come across, but it was intoxicatingly his favorite aroma in the whole world now.

"Ah." Cohen stirred some milk and sugar into his coffee. "And did you use the sleepless night to think about our situation?"

“Our situation?” she laughed, meeting his gaze before blushing deeply. “Is that what we’re calling last night? Our situation?”

“We can call it whatever you want, Alana.” He reached over and took her hands in his, about as bold as he could be. “I mean that, love. We can be anything you want us to be. I’ll let you take the lead.”

That he trusted her enough to even say that ... and mean it ... was a true testament that he had forgotten all about the pain of his past heartbreak.

“Cohen,” she looked into his eyes. “You can’t mean that. Tell me what you want this to be. This is a two-way street. I want us to be on the same page. I don’t think either one of us is ready to live through heartbreak.”

“You’re right. The town doesn’t deserve that either. Us fighting for real, I mean.”

Alana rolled her eyes, trying to hide her grin. “Well?” she pressed after taking a gulp of her coffee.

“If you insist on knowing where I’m at? Fine, here it is.” He took a deep breath and rushed out the words. “I don’t think it was just one time, one night. I would like to have more time with you, Alana.” Probably forever wouldn’t even be enough.

“Oh. Okay. Well, good. That’s exactly what I wanted too. To spend more time with you, I mean.”

He grinned. “Yeah, I understood.” He intertwined their fingers while his heart exploded with the sheer happiness he felt.

“Good,” Alana stammered. “So.”

“So,” he repeated, still smiling. “I can finally tell you that I really want to kiss you right now.”

Alana blushed, but she bit into her lip, apparently pleased that he wanted it as much as she did. “And will you kiss me?”

In tandem, they took stock of the number of people in the crowded diner. The breakfast crowd was one of the biggest Moonie’s saw throughout the day because Mason made the best chocolate chip pancakes. They were quickly becoming a favorite like the chef himself.

It was gratifying for Cohen to see that his flighty little brother was finally settling down with a woman who could keep him entertained for a long time. And that Lila had a restaurant they could run together? That proved to him the engaged couple really did belong together.

“I will only kiss you if you are okay with it. It’s entirely up to you. The second I leave this side of the booth to sit on that side, the whole town will know. The whole town will also know if I kiss you in this crowded diner.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“Right. Maybe we can leave the kissing for later.” She scrunched up her face. “Or, maybe we should leave the breakfast for later. Kiss now.”

“What are you saying?” he chuckled. “You wanna leave and go somewhere more private?”

Alana nodded, her cheeks turning a delicious shade of red. “Yeah. Maybe it was a bad idea to come here this morning.”

“How about we eat breakfast, fake an argument, and then go back to your place to make peace.” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“Don’t forget that we do need to find a solution for the magic,” she added.

His heart sank. “Fuck. For a second, I completely forgot that we had to do that.”

Alana laughed softly. “You’re the sheriff. How could you possibly forget that?”

“No clue,” he answered.

But the heated gaze he sent her way was answer enough. Cohen was incapable of doing much thinking when Alana was this close to him.

She was her own brand of magic, of that the wolf shifter was sure.

FOURTEEN

ALANA

The backroom of Wixx would never be the same for Alana.

The space was set up like a living room a long time ago by her Nana. The intent was to have a place that was comfortable and inviting for customers should they want a reading.

Now that she looked around her safe haven, she couldn't help but see all of the things Cohen had done to her the night before. The things she had done to him also featured in her thoughts.

It didn't matter that a night had passed and that they had agreed they would see each other. Alana still didn't fully comprehend what was happening between her and Cohen.

It really didn't help that the man in question sat in the chair where they had sex the previous night.

He lounged back, his arm on the armrests, his long legs spread in front of him. His eyes were narrowed in focus as he stared at the carpeted floor. Neither one of them had spoken in a little while as they tried to find the first step to fix the magic.

"Let's review," Cohen grumbled. "We can't go to another witch."

"Nope."

"Remind me why?"

"For a bunch of reasons. We can't ask another witch to cast that kind of heavy magic. She would have to pick up her whole life and live here. And even if we did find

someone to do the spell, it would leave us vulnerable to our enemies because we would have no way of knowing if the witch was casting the right kind of spell until it was too late.”

“And there is no one you trust? Not another witch in your family?”

“Both Nana and my mother were only children. I have no cousins. I don’t actually have a family in the broader sense of the word.”

“So that really is the extent of what we can do with magic.”

She nodded. “Because there is no way I can hold it together.”

“I still don’t believe that you’re not powerful enough to do it on your own, but I will take your word for it. Is there nothing we can do to boost your power?”

Alana considered this for a few moments before going to stand in front of the library. She ran her fingers down the spine of the books, and finally, she pulled one from the shelf. “There might be a couple of things we can do to heighten my power, but I make no promises that it would be enough.” She handed him the book. “Read this, will you? Anything catches your eye, let me know.”

He pursed his lips at her. “And just how am I supposed to spot a magical solution that could work?”

“Because you’re an intelligent man. I trust you not to miss a thing.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Cohen stared deep into her eyes. “You just said a whole lot there, Alana. Did you mean it? You trust me?”

Did she? Alana lost track of time for a little while, lost as she was in his eyes. She blinked herself back into focus and looked at the man that had rocked her world. The very same man who had driven her nearly insane with anger last week. Hell, even a few short days ago. Chances were, he would always drive her a little bit insane.

“I do trust you,” she said, finding that she meant every word. “Don’t ask me to explain how or why, but I do. I think that it might be because you’re the sheriff. I can’t believe that you would do something to harm this town.”

“I would never,” he assured her. “And I would never do anything to put you in harm’s way either.”

“Oh, how times have changed,” she teased. “You were ready to kick me out of town for good a little bit ago.”

Cohen laughed softly. “What the fuck did I know?” He laughed again, placing the book on the coffee table before coming to stand in front of her. He cupped her face in his hands and leaned down to press a kiss to her lips. “I didn’t know anything until last night, Alana. It’s like this light has been turned on in my head. In my heart.”

She could’ve pointed out that he still didn’t know very much, but that would only cause a fight, and Alana and Cohen had fought enough to last them a lifetime. Besides, she didn’t think it was true anymore. Cohen was hardly the close-minded asshole she had needed to believe he was.

“You sound very sure of yourself,” she pointed out instead, trying to be teasing. Yet after the intimacy they shared, she needed to add something else. Something to make her a bit more confident in whatever they were starting. “You’re not going to change your mind back again, are you?”

“I’m not a changeable man. Now, I want to show you something.” He grabbed the book from the coffee table and tapped the page to which the book was opened. “Look at this.”

Alana gasped, her eyes going round with shock. She grabbed the tome from his hands and stared down at the picture. “Oh, my god. There’s no way ...”

But there was every bit of a way. Cohen told her so. “What are the chances that the rocks split open the very moment we kissed for the first time?”

Alana’s breath came out in sharp little pants. Cohen’s explanation was shocking, but nothing could have prepared Alana for what happened next.

It confirmed so much.

A little red candle tucked into one of the corners of the room on one of the many tables sputtered to life. Alana couldn’t even blink as she watched the fresh, still-unused candle wick ignited from the smoke it had somehow begun to create out of thin air.

The witch gasped when a little orange flame began to dance. She reached out and grabbed Cohen’s arm, her other hand going to cover her mouth in shock. “Do you even realize what this means?”

Cohen nodded, staring at the candle. “Yeah, actually, I do. And I’m up for it if you are.” He smiled at her and kissed her again. “What do we have to lose?” he whispered

between sips of her mouth.

Everything.

That was the answer. How a man who had gotten this heartbroken by his ex could be so flippant about the potential of heartbreak, Alana didn't know. It terrified her because there was no going back if they chose this path.

* * *

The council of Half Moon Key was made up of the eldest and most respected shifters in town. These were the people who had life experience, but they also remembered things that others didn't have the benefit of knowing.

Keeping them out of this plan was probably not the best idea, but both Cohen and Alana were reluctant to take a plan to the elders that wasn't foolproof or an untested plan. There were other residents that had a better and more recent understanding of the impact of the magic on their lives, and that's who Cohen and Alana had decided to reach out to for some help.

Mason, Parker, and Jack sat on the back deck of Cohen's place, each man with a beer in his hand. Mason's fiancée Lila sat beside him on the wicker loveseat while Parker and Jade shared one of the lounge chairs. Jack was sprawled at Nora's feet, the woman's hand passing through her mate's thick hair over and over again.

The whole scene would have appeared quite domestic and peaceful if it weren't for Alana's nervous energy. They had gathered Cohen's fishing buddies and de facto pack to ask their opinions, but neither she nor Cohen had been able to broach the topic yet. Probably because both of them were a little reluctant to admit what they had discovered.

Choosing to stall a little bit longer, Alana made her way into the kitchen, passing through the French patio doors. She was pouring herself a glass of water when the door opened again.

“Psst! Over here! We need to talk.” Lila waved Alana forward frantically.

Alana quickly peered around, making sure the Pierce brothers were well out of earshot behind Lila and the closed door. “Can the wolves hear us from all the way over there?”

Lila shook her head, but she pulled out her phone. “No, but Mason also knows not to listen in whenever I have this song playing.” The soft notes of a rock song began to play over her phone’s speaker. “What’s up?”

“The candle turned on,” the witch whispered.

Lila’s eyes widened. “No way!”

“Yes, way.” Alana was faint, just remembering the sight of the little red candle turning on all by itself. Of course, Lila was her best friend, and she knew exactly what that meant.

“Tell me everything.”

Alana glanced over Lila’s shoulders to make sure Cohen was still outside, well out of earshot. “You’re sure Mason won’t listen in?”

Lila nodded. “He wouldn’t dare. He overheard a conversation between Emily and me, and since then, he has insisted on not listening to my private chats. But we did agree that if this song plays, he should listen only if he wants to be completely traumatized. Now enough with the suspense. Tell me how the hell that candle was lit. Was it Cohen? It was Cohen, wasn’t it?”

Alana nodded. What she wouldn’t give to have her mother and grandmother there to help her figure this out.

“Cohen!” Lila screamed.

“Shh,” Alana chided, but it was too late.

Cohen was already folding himself out of his seat outside to make his way into the kitchen. “Did you call for me, Lila?” he asked.

His future sister-in-law shook her head. “Nope. I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

He joined his brother and friends again, looking back at them in befuddlement. It was obvious that he didn’t believe Lila. Cohen gave Alana a confused glance, but she only smiled at him, hoping he wouldn’t ask her about that candle.

She wasn't ready for what it meant.

Not just yet.

FIFTEEN

COHEN

Cohen closed the French patio door behind him, glancing back in case he was able to hear whatever had Lila and Alana chattering away excitedly.

There was obviously something happening. Something else. Something that went way beyond the magic Alana had to do, and Cohen was willing to bet that it had something to do with the candle that randomly lit itself the previous day. Cohen had an idea as to what it could mean, but he hadn't asked Alana for confirmation, a bit scared of what he would discover.

"Are you okay, man? You look like you've seen a ghost." Mason frowned at his brother.

"Jade, I think we should go see what the other two ladies are doing," Nora announced, standing to her feet. The two women exchanged a knowing look before retreating back into Cohen's cabin.

"I think that's the most people you've ever had in your place. At least of the female persuasion," Jack joked once they were alone.

"You would be right in that assumption," Mason laughed. "My brother never lets people into his house, so it's obviously a fucking miracle that we were all asked to gather here."

“Alana thought it was better,” Cohen explained. “There’s more room than her place, and besides, if Mrs. Francis spotted all of us going into Wixx, she would know that something is up, and the last thing we want right now is to tip off Mrs. Francis that we have a plan.”

“We have a plan?” Parker asked, straightening in his seat. “Since when?”

“This is news to me, too,” Mason piped in. “How could you come up with a plan without your best thinker on the case.”

“I did, with Alana.”

Mason clapped a hand to his heart. “Ouch. That shit hurts, bro. And here I thought we were closer than ever.”

Cohen pursed his lips at his brother, but his smile still managed to show through. They were closer than ever, but this didn’t make this any easier.

“Okay, seriously, you look like a man who’s just been told that he is gonna be executed. Mind telling us what the hell is going on?”

Cohen took a seat and ran a hand over his mouth. “You’ve all met your mates recently,” he needlessly pointed out. “And from what you’ve all said, none of you actually had any of the usual inklings that you had found your mate.”

“That’s right,” Jack nodded. “It was super strange.”

“I second that,” Parker cut in. “I didn’t know that Jade was my mate until we said I love you.”

Cohen frowned. “What?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“No way,” Jack burst out. “It’s the same for us. I was so confused. I didn’t know why I was feeling such strong things for Nora, especially not since we had known each other for so long. How could I suddenly notice her all of a sudden? Makes not a lick of sense.”

“I have a theory,” Cohen began. “From what I was able to understand from Mrs. Francis and my extensive conversations with Alana, is this ... Since the elders and Helena Wixx ... Alana’s grandmother ... put up the protection spell, none of the shifters’ mate sense has been working.”

“We know this, big bro,” Mason said.

“Right, well, what you don’t know?” Cohen sighed. “It’s a doozy. The magic started to slip a little while ago. Alana has been trying to convince the elders that they need help, that they need to do something to make it better, but they have been ignoring her.”

“What?” Parker interrupted. “Why?”

Cohen shook his head. “I think they believe in Alana a little bit more than she believes in herself, but the problem there is that Alana understands magic a lot more than they do. Obviously. Magic is just as much part of her heritage as shifting is part of all of ours.”

“I can see that,” Jack sighed. “It must have been hard for Alana to try to convince them that she needed help.”

Cohen didn't like thinking about it. He also didn't like that while Alana had been fighting for the town, he had been fighting her because he didn't think her magic had any place in Half Moon Key.

Oh, how wrong he was.

He owed Alana a bunch of apologies, and he had a pretty good idea of how he wanted to make it all up to her, but he couldn't do it when the house was full of people. It would have to wait until later when they were alone and a little bit more certain of what they needed to do to make the town safe again.

It was clear after the events of the last year that the small town would always be in danger of invading forces who would want to tarnish the safety of the lakeside, mountainous, and forested town of Half Moon Key. But the people who lived here had chosen this specific setting because it afforded them an added layer of community and security.

He couldn't let Half Moon Key lose that.

Not when it had protected so many people for so long.

Cohen could now freely admit that he didn't mind so much that magic had played a part in protecting his home before he was there to protect it for its inhabitants.

And now we get to protect our home with Alana, a witch who makes our heart beat a little faster. It's almost like no matter what, we are made for each other. Think about it. Why else would it be so easy to fall for her even though you hated her just a little while ago?

A thought popped into Cohen's mind. He was a bit uncomfortable with the heaviness of the notion.

“Guys, tell me something. You were only able to get your mate sense when you said I love you?” he asked.

“I don’t know that it has to be said,” Jack argued. “I only had to think that I was in love with Nora, and my lion was immediately roaring the truth of it.”

Oh, his wolf howled loudly, the sound reverberating back through his mind. Yet before his wolf could say something that was sure to complicate his day, Cohen continued. “You only had to think it?”

Jack threw his head back with a laugh. “Imagine my surprise. Here is this woman I have known for years, a woman who was apparently head over heels for me for years. It took me thinking that I was in love with her. All a bit backward, but it doesn’t matter in the end. We found each other, and that is what counts.”

“Right.” Cohen couldn’t argue with that. Jack had every right to be happy that he found his mate despite the protective spell that hung around the town. “But you do realize that the reason you were able to hear that mate sense call after the I-love-yous were said was because the spell was weakening? Without it, there would have been no way for you three to know you had found your mates.”

“I was gonna be with Lila regardless,” Mason pointed out, surprising his older brother. “I was in love with her, and I didn’t care if she was my true mate or not.”

“Oh, bro. Same. Very much the same for Jade and me. I was going to be with her no matter what. I couldn’t imagine my life without her long before my panther told me she was it for us.”

“And you?” Cohen asked Jack. “Is it similar for you?”

“It is. I can’t believe that it took me this long to notice that Nora was the one for me. I

wanna kick my own ass for it sometimes, but how the hell was I supposed to know?"

"I wanna hate the elders for putting up this magic spell," Cohen grumbled.

"Actually, if I'm honest, I don't mind it so much," Jack said. "Don't get me wrong, they should have told the shifters who moved into town about it just in case we weren't okay with it, but Mrs. Francis would have known that I was up to be in any kind of relationship for a long time after I moved here. I licked my wounds for a very long time. I would have been a very shitty boyfriend."

"Yeah, I'm with you," Parker nodded. "I needed the time to heal and feel for myself before my mate sense kicked in. I'm happy at the way things unfolded."

Cohen was shocked. "How are you not angrier?"

"Because it doesn't matter," Mason answered. "It doesn't matter if we know who our mate is today or tomorrow or in ten years. If you're in love with a woman, you gotta see things through. Even if she isn't your mate. I know that hasn't exactly turned out great for you in the past, but I want you to know, big brother, that not all women are like Amanda."

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“Who is Amanda?” Jack asked.

“No one of importance,” Cohen answered, his surly demeanor rearing its absent head with a vengeance. “Not anymore.”

“Are you telling us what the plan is now?” Mason tapped his foot. “It’s not like there is an enemy out there for us to fight.”

Parker smacked Mason’s shoulder. “Way to jinx us! Now, no matter what, we know things will get bloody.”

Mason rolled his eyes. “We’ll be fine. We have a witch on our side.”

“Exactly,” Cohen cut in. “We have a witch on our side, and we are going to try to use her magic to save us and the town, but we need to keep a few things in mind. The first, of course, is that Alana doesn’t believe she is as powerful as her grandmother and mother, the two witches who cast the protection spell in the first place.”

“Oh, okay. What’s the other stuff?” Parker was listening intently, no doubt ready to do whatever needed to be done to save his new but beloved hometown.

“The second thing we need to keep in mind is that we cannot go to another witch. There is no way to know if we can trust anyone that isn’t actually and actively connected to Half Moon Key.”

“Makes sense,” Jack acknowledged. “Makes a whole lot of sense.”

“We will have to help Alana however we can, and I’m not too sure what she will need from me.”

“Then why call us here?” Mason’s question was fair, but Cohen’s answer was going to rock them to their core.

“I’m pretty sure Alana Wixx is my mate.”

SIXTEEN

MRS. FRANCIS

YEARS AGO

The storefront hadn’t changed much since Helena and Lina Wixx had moved to Half Moon Key. Theirs was to be a family business, a candle store that also sold all kinds of magical paraphernalia. There was even a back room where the mother and daughter duo invited some of their guests for readings.

Mrs. Francis didn’t believe in magic, but she was a rabbit shifter. Was that not some kind of magic? Didn’t it make her a bit of a hypocrite for not believing that Helena and Lina could do magic? Probably. At least a little bit.

The closed sign was turned over in the window, and Mrs. Francis rapped her knuckles on the glass door. It was quickly opened by a beautiful young redheaded woman with green eyes. Lina was stunning, just like her mother. The only difference in the pair’s appearance was that Helena’s hair had started to turn gray, giving the older witch a very dignified look that Mrs. Francis admired.

“Mrs. Francis,” Lina greeted her. “Please, come in.”

She did as she was asked and followed Lina beyond the thick green velvet curtain. The room that lay on the other side was the small living room where the Wixx witches practiced their magic. There were two huge plush chairs with a little round coffee table where a crystal ball sat.

“Take a seat,” Helena said, pointing to the vacant chair.

“Thanks. How are you?”

Helena gave a small smile. “It’s okay to be nervous, dear. It would be very odd if you weren’t at least a bit scared.”

“Right,” she nodded. “What do you need me to do?”

“Just sit there for a moment. Tell me what troubles you.”

“Well, as you know, my husband was the alpha of Half Moon Key ...” Her voice trailed off, heavy with grief.

“Yes, I heard about your loss. I truly am sorry, Mrs. Francis.”

The shifter woman wiped tears from her cheeks. She wanted to berate herself for crying, but there was nothing for it. Ever since her husband had died in a bloody battle to protect Half Moon Key, Mrs. Francis was always on the verge of tears. It was very easy for her to cry and a little bit more difficult to stop. If she got going, she would never be able to dry her eyes.

“You know it’s too soon to try to contact him, don’t you?” Helena asked softly with all of the compassion and sympathy in the world.

“I figured, yes. But that’s not why I’m here. They won’t stop coming. They really

won't. I have lost my husband because of this, and that is enough. There should be no more loss in this town. We need to defend and protect what is ours.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“What do you have in mind?” This question was posed by Lina, who stood by the door, arms crossed, as if she was ready to leave at a moment’s notice.

“I’m not sure,” Mrs. Francis admitted. “I don’t know enough about magic.”

“Do you even believe in it?” Lina narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

Had the witch been able to read her mind? Mrs. Francis didn’t know, but she also didn’t think that lying to a witch was advisable. “If I’m honest, no. I don’t know if I believe in magic.”

“Then why come here at all? Desperation?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Francis replied. “Desperation. Maybe it’s because I have just buried my husband, maybe it’s because we didn’t have kids to continue his line, but the town ...” She took a deep breath. “The town will not survive if they keep coming like this.”

“We’re agreed on that,” Helena said. “I promise you, Mrs. Francis, my daughter and I will do everything in our power to make sure that your town, our home, doesn’t see another attack. Ever.”

“You can do that?” Mrs. Francis was breathless, holding her hands to her mouth in hope.

“We can, yes. It’ll take a whole lot of magic, but we can do it. Before we talk about the magical semantics, we do need to tell you something. Something that must stay in this room forever.”

Mrs. Francis's heart turned cold, her mouth going dry. "Oh? Are you really going to try to extort me? You know the town isn't exactly rich. We just spent all of our money on building the infrastructure for the residents."

"I know," Helena assured her. "I would never extort you. It's not my style. Actually, we're going to share a secret with you."

"A secret?" Mrs. Francis repeated. This conversation was definitely not going in the direction she had expected. She straightened in her seat, more than a little scared. Her little rabbit heart beat so fast, she was afraid she'd pass out.

"A secret, yes. You see, witches don't usually live away from their kind. We tend to live in covens, much like you shifters like to live in packs. My daughter and I are witches without a coven. We need a safe place to hide, and that's why we came here. The lake, the forest, the mountains, all of it builds the perfect defenses for us."

"Are you on the run?"

Helena inclined her whitening redhead. "In a manner of speaking. We cannot be out there in the world without protection."

"Why?"

Helena flinched, but it was Lina who spoke out. "Do you really need to know? Can't you just trust us that we are not a threat to your town?"

"I would prefer to know, yes," Mrs. Francis answered. "Especially if you bring trouble to our door."

"We would never do so intentionally, but our help is contingent on you accepting our truth," Helena admitted sadly.

“Which is?” Mrs. Francis questioned, even though she could tell how much this pained the witches.

“My daughter is special,” Lina sighed. “The kind of special that only comes once in a lifetime.”

“Oh.” It was only then that Mrs. Francis noticed the small wooden cradle in the corner of the room. It was hidden behind gauzy curtains that draped from the ceiling. “How is she special?”

Helena and Lina exchanged a look as if the mother and daughter were making a last-minute judgmental call about her. They must have decided that Mrs. Francis was trustworthy because Lina uncrossed her arms with a mournful sigh.

“It’s because of me. Of her father. He believes that Alana is this great sorceress who has come to the world to rid it of mortals.”

Mrs. Francis gasped, her hands covering her mouth. “Is she?”

“Maybe,” Lina admitted. “There is no way to know for sure who my daughter will become. It’s my wish to raise her away from all talk of those prophecies. I want her to be a normal little witch. I want her to have a good and normal life that isn’t plagued by her father’s ambition.”

“And where is this father? Is he magical? Dangerous? Do we need to protect ourselves from him?”

“Of course, we have to protect Alana from him, and if he were to find us, you may rest assured that he would destroy us.” Lina’s breath caught on the words. “All I want is a safe place where I can raise my daughter to be whoever she chooses to be. I won’t have her life be dictated by an old prophecy that some madman believes to be

true.”

“We don’t want to rid the world of mortals,” Helena continued. “We’re not violent or evil. We just happen to have magical powers, just like you happen to shift into animals.”

“And how will this spell protect the town and your child from her father?” Mrs. Francis had come here in the hopes of assuaging all her fears. If this kept up, she would leave Wixx with way more fears than she had ever thought possible in her lifetime.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“Well, we would cast a magical protective spell on the entire town and on all of the land and water. We have no idea what the repercussions will be on the town. There might be some anomalies as we keep the magic alive. That kind of magic leaves traces, you see.”

“But no one will be able to find us? To cause us harm? Nothim? Not the child’s father?”

“As long as the magic holds, no one who doesn’t belong in Half Moon Key will be able to settle here.”

Mrs. Francis nodded. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Lina repeated.

“Yes, let’s do it. Let’s cast this spell and make sure that no one else ever gets hurt in defense of our town.” Mrs. Francis gave a resolute head nod.

“It’ll be done, then,” Helena said. “We will do it as soon as the child turns one.”

“Why then?” Mrs. Francis longed to know.

“Because we need Alana’s magic to make it work. Neither one of us is powerful enough on our own. We need at least three witches to make it hold, but if Alana is as powerful as her father believes, then one day, she should be able to hold it by herself.”

Mrs. Francis walked over to the crib and looked down at the sleeping form. The baby girl was adorable, with soft, puffy cheeks and a shock of red hair that seemed to be a familial trait. Mrs. Francis felt horrible that she was putting so much pressure on an infant, but what choice did she have? No one would feel the crushing weight of grief in her town again. Not if it could be avoided.

“If we don’t do this, what are the chances that her father finds Half Moon Key?”

“He will find us. It’s just a matter of time,” Lina sniffed. “And I won’t let him take my baby away from me.”

“I would never ask you to relinquish your child,” Mrs. Francis assured the young witch. “But won’t she be angry with you one day?”

Helena and Lina exchanged another look. “She will be, and she will have reason to. We’re going to bind Alana’s powers to the spell to make it as strong as it needs to be.”

Mrs. Francis’s eyes widened. “Why don’t I like the sound of that?”

“Because you shouldn’t,” Helena responded sadly. “It means that our little Alana will never have access to all of her magic. Not unless the magic breaks somehow, but for that to happen, she would have to meet her match.”

Mrs. Francis frowned. “Her match? Is that similar to our mate?”

Lina nodded. “It’s basically the same thing.”

“We need to weave another part into the spell. We have to make it so that Alana never meets her match and that if she ever does?” The mother took a deep breath. “Their relationship has to be doomed for the safety of Half Moon Key. It’s the best

we can do to protect the town. To protect her.”

Mrs. Francis sighed, feeling the mother's pain deeply, but the decision was made.

A few months later, Mrs. Francis watched from the darkness as the three witches, a grandmother, a mother, and a babe, made their way into the Half Moon Key woods to seal the town from any of its enemies.

In the morning, when she woke, Mrs. Francis didn't feel any different, but she knew.

Life in Half Moon Key would never be the same.

SEVENTEEN

ALANA

Alana paced the length of Cohen's impressive kitchen. The kitchen island was in the center of the space, and though the appliances were all top-of-the-line, it was pretty obvious that they weren't used often. Cohen probably wasn't much of a cook, given that he was a single man. Cooking for one was never fun. That was something Alana knew for herself.

She ran her hand down the smooth and cold surface of the island. It glistened under the spotlights as if it were inviting her to pull up a chair and sit or raid the cupboards to start cooking.

How strange was it that it was her first time in the man's kitchen despite the fact they had already slept together? Stranger still was the fact that Alana felt oddly at home in the sparsely decorated kitchen. For some strange reason, she couldn't help but mentally fill in the empty spaces with the stuff she had in her own place.

Like her brain was telling her that she belonged in this house. Cohen's home.

Like she belonged with Cohen.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Sheriff Cohen Pierce had been a thorn in her side since he had moved to Half Moon Key at the insistence of Mrs. Francis. To this day, Alana didn't understand why Mrs. Francis wanted to hire a shifter sheriff that wasn't from Half Moon Key, and Alana really didn't think that the elder would ever explain her odd choice.

Not that it mattered much. Not anymore. Now, Cohen was as much a part of Half Moon Key as she was, and though she had been fighting with him from the start, she wouldn't dream of having him living anywhere else.

She wanted him to be close to her. Always.

She ran a hand against the marble countertop. The cold stone grounded her in the moment and away from her melancholic thoughts about Cohen.

“What's this about a candle?” Jade asked Lila in a very loud whisper.

The candle. That fucking candle. Who would have thought it would have such a big impact on her life? Her mother and Nana must have known.

“Alana?” Jade asked. “Are you still with us?”

Lila waved Jade off. “It's not for me to tell the candle story. If Alana wants to share with you, it's entirely up to her.”

Jade gave her a pleading look, but Nora spoke. “Man alive, Jade. Leave her alone. You can tell she is super uncomfortable with all of this attention. How about you stop prying?”

“Because it’s what I do, apparently,” Jade shot back. “I want to know. Besides, I’m a pro at getting a shy best friend to open up.”

She pointed toward Nora, who just shrugged and said, “It’s true. You might as well tell her what she wants to know. She won’t stop until you tell her.”

“Fine,” Alana sighed. She leaned against the counter for strength. She didn’t want the others to see she was shaking from head to toe just thinking about it all.

“When I was a little girl,” she began, “my mother and grandmother bewitched a candle. It was a strange kind of love spell, but basically, if the red candle was ever to light itself, it was supposed to be a warning that I found my match.”

“Found your match,” Jade repeated with a serious frown. “As in ...”

“Sounds like find your mate, doesn’t it?” Lila asked, interrupting her best friend.

“It really does sound like that,” Nora agreed. “Do witches have mates? Have you found your mate?”

Judging by the sparkle in the eyes of all three other women, they were all hoping that Alana had found her mate, and if Lila’s hopping from one foot to the other was any indication, they all thought that her mate might just be ...

Nope. Alana wouldn’t let herself think that just yet. It wouldn’t serve her to imagine herself with Cohen any more than she was already doing, standing in his kitchen with her friends as if this were a dinner party and she was helping Cohen host.

It could happen. All you need to do is keep on sleeping with Cohen and stop fighting with him. Or, you know, fight naked.

Alana didn't know if her mind would lead her down the right track, and she was still a little too wary of leaping in fully. She shook her head. "No, I haven't met my match." Hadn't she? "Not that I know of, anyway," she added. Her words earned her a severe stare down from Lila. "What? It's true," she swore. "Besides, I don't know why my mother did that spell. She didn't even believe in love magic, and every time a client came here looking for a love spell or anything even remotely close to that, she would ban them from the store for at least six months while they cleared their heads and hearts."

"Whoa, that's intense," Lila said.

The witch shrugged. "Love magic is super serious. It is not to be messed with."

"Got it," Lila nodded. "Do not mess with love magic. But then why would your mother do that for you? Wasn't she breaking her own rule?"

"I have no clue," Alana admitted. "But it sure sounds like that, yeah."

"It seems to me that a mother would do anything to protect her child. Could this be a way to protect you somehow?" Nora suggested. "Or do I read too many mysteries?"

"Jury is still out on that," Jade teased, hooking her arm with Nora's.

"Did you ever find the spell that your mom cast? Have you tried looking for it in one of her books?" Nora asked. "Maybe that could help to explain why she would choose to cast that kind of magic for you."

"It might have just been some parlor trick to make me feel better, though. That's what I believed right up until that candle lit itself." Alana shook her head. "I didn't think anything of it until today."

Lila cut her a look that spoke volumes, and once again, Alana leaned against the counter with a reluctant sigh. Her legs were shaking way too much to stand on her own.

“The whole truth, Alana,” Lila sang. “We can’t help you unless we have all of the details.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Alana rolled her eyes. “Looks like Lila is gonna force me to tell you something ...” She paused, took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and braced herself for their reaction, all the while very much aware that the four men sitting outside were shifters. There was a very real possibility that they would hear what the women were discussing.

Was Cohen telling his brother and buddies that they had sex? Or would he keep that to himself until it became an important piece of the puzzle, just like she had to do? Her eyes darted to the windows of the French doors, and she longed to cross through them and demand that Cohen, the sexy, grumpy sheriff who was the best sex of her life, tell her what their night together meant to him. It wasn’t enough that he had already told her they could be whatever she wanted them to be.

She needed to know what he wanted them to be. She just had to know. It was almost painful to be in this strange limbo of her own making.

“Just say it, girl. No judgments,” Lila coaxed.

“I slept with Cohen last night,” Alana blurted. “A few times.”

“Holy fuck. And then the candle turned on?” Nora gasped. “Holy shit. Is that when the candle turned on?” Nora gripped Alana’s arm, bouncing up and down on her feet. “Please tell me that you were totally with Cohen when it turned on. That is so romantic, I can’t even cope with it.”

“Whoa!” Lila giggled. “Can we take this moment to acknowledge that Nora has used a cuss word?” The other women, including Nora, joined in on the laughter.

“But it is totally strange that you slept with Cohen,” Jade cut in with a frown. “And the candle thing. That is definitely weird too.”

“How was it?” Lila asked. “The sex?” She pitched her voice low.

“Ew, that’s gross. Cohen is your brother-in-law.” Nora’s shock was adorable, but Alana also understood it. She was just as jarred by the question.

“Not my brother-in-law yet,” Lila corrected. “But that’s not why I ask. I wanna make sure that my girl is well taken care of if you know what I mean?” She wiggled her brows suggestively.

Alana pursed her lips. “It was fine. Good. Whatever.” The best. It was the best I ever had. She couldn’t say that without inviting a whole lot more questions that she really didn’t want to answer.

“Ha,” Lila shouted. “It was amazing, wasn’t it? It had to have been. Look at you. You’re all kinds of red.”

“You’re blushing so hard that you look like me,” Nora teased, showing, once and for all, that the shy woman was slowly thawing to her new group of friends.

The witch was indeed blushing more than she had ever had in her life. She made sure to avoid the gaze of each of the women in the kitchen, choosing to focus on the tale she had to share. “So the candle turned on, and now I think it’s because that maybe ...” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes again. “It might be possible that Cohen is my match.” She barely whispered the last few words, too shocked by how real they felt in her heart and soul.

“Well,” Lila sighed deeply. “It’s not like Cohen would know if you are his mate because of the spell,” Lila chewed on her lower lip. “Damn. Your mother and

grandmother really didn't want you to meet your match, huh?"

"I wonderwhy," Nora whispered, more to herself than to the others. It was only when she noticed that they were staring at her that she turned three different shades of red. "Well, what? It's a fair question. If this was a book, your family would have cast the candle spell to keep Alana safe from something. Or someone."

The four women exchanged a look. The kitchen's atmosphere turned tense and heavy.

Alana frowned. "You might be right, actually."

Nora continued to blush. "Probably not, though. Ignore me. I'm just rambling."

"Please," Jade snorted, "with the number of books you read? Nope. Not to mention, your mate is a best-selling mystery author. If anyone could smell a mystery where one is to be found, it would be you."

"You're probably right," Alana admitted. "Both of you, Jade and Nora. There is probably more to it than what we think at the moment. I need to find that spell. It must be in one of the books in the shop."

"Then what are you waiting here for? Let's go to the bookstore." Nora stood, ready to go.

The other women chuckled at their shy friend's sudden flash of energy ... and all because it was connected to a book. It was so on-brand for Nora.

"You would be this excited to look at books," Jade teased. "But for all we know, your bookish ways just saved the day."

Nora's cheeks were the color of a fresh apple. "Let's wait and see what we discover

before we celebrate.”

* * *

Alana stood in Wixx’s living room, once again stunned by how her perspective had changed.

All because she slept with Cohen right in here, her family’s most magical place, save for the fairy rings where they did several of their rituals.

The candle lighting itself obviously had a big impact on her view of the living room too. What was she supposed to think? She had no idea. All she could do for now was run her fingers on the spine of all the books on the bookshelves while she tried to find the right one. The one that would hold the candle spell.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

With trembling fingers, Alana pulled down one book and then another. She flipped through tomes and tables of content, one book after another. Somehow, she managed to convince her friends that they had to stay at Cohen's while she searched for the spell. It wasn't that she didn't trust them, but Alana wanted to be alone when she found the spell her family had decided to put on her.

It was sure to upset her, and it would probably be for the best that she could cry and rage alone.

Alana was deeply engrossed in one of the magic books when she was shaken out of her thoughts by a soft knock and a softer throat clearing. With a gasp, she turned toward the noise.

Cohen stood there in a pair of jeans. His hands were tucked into his pockets as if he were a shy little boy, very much standing where he wasn't allowed to be. His hair fell over his forehead, and once again, Alana was taken with how well the tan color of his sheriff's shirt fit him.

"Hey," he greeted her. "Sorry for just barging in, but the others told me you left. You're here looking for something?"

Alana nodded. "I've got it covered."

"I'm sure you do, Alana. You're a very capable woman. Not just because you're a witch with some pretty cool powers but because you're smart. I didn't come here to tell you how to search. I came to help if you will let me."

Alana chewed her lower lip. “Cohen, there are things you need to know.”

“Same, Alana. Very much same.”

“Oh,” she looked down. “Okay. Well, I don’t know what the others told you ...”

“They didn’t tell me anything,” he assured her. “Jade was about to spill all the beans, but Lila stopped her. Apparently, whatever you’re here for is something you should tell me about.” He closed the distance between them, only stopping when they were a couple feet apart. “It’s probably a good thing ’cause I have to tell you something too.”

“You go first,” Alana blurted. Better he let her down easily before she went on and on about the candle and her suspicions that Cohen was her match.

He cleared his throat and walked away from her, rubbing a hand over his mouth. The line of his shoulders was tense, and as he started to pace, Alana got the image of Cohen as a trapped predator. It made sense. The man was a wolf, after all. And there was every chance he was caught with her, and there was no way he would appreciate that.

Cohen was the kind of man who liked to fish alone or with a closely knit group of friends who knew when to shut up.

“I think that you might be my ...” he cleared his throat again.

“Cohen,” she whispered. Her heart was thundering out of her chest with fear and anticipation. Was he about to say what she thought he was about to say? She held her breath.

Finally, he stopped pacing and met her gaze. “I think you’re my mate, Alana.”

She couldn't breathe; she couldn't think. All she could do was stand there, her mouth agape. Her brain refused to speak. Cohen stepped toward her again, his face a mask of unreadable emotion.

"I don't know for sure because of the protective spell, but listening to the guys, I couldn't help but get the feeling that you're it."

Alana opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out, so she snapped it shut.

"You really need to say something right now, Alana. I don't know what's going on in your head and how you're going to react to this, but you need to know that ..."

"You're right," she blurted. "Us? It's fate."

The words were barely out of her mouth before Cohen was holding her, pressing their mouths together in a passionate kiss.

On the shelf, the candle lit itself again while deep in the surrounding woods, the ground shook.

EIGHTEEN

COHEN

Cohen couldn't, for the life of him, understand why every time he kissed this woman, his world shook.

That's what it felt like, anyway.

Alana Wixx was one powerful woman, and it had nothing to do with the fact that she was a witch.

It had everything to do with the woman herself.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Her body fit against his perfectly, and his hands always seemed to find her curves, and he didn't think either one of them minded.

"Alana," he whispered against her mouth. "Why do you think I'm right? Tell me." He needed to hear her voice. He had to know that he wasn't the only one standing on the edge.

"I think you're right because of that."

He turned to see what she was pointing at.

There, on one of the shelves, was a small and thin red candle. Its flame moved to the invisible wind. He frowned, sure it hadn't been lit when he walked in. He would've noticed.

"What does a candle have to do with us?" he asked, still holding on to her.

"It has everything to do with us."

Cohen listened intently as Alana told him about the spell her family had cast. She avoided his gaze as she spoke, but he was pleased that she didn't move away from him. In fact, she even stepped closer to his body, the grip of her hands tightening as she spoke.

He didn't want to have a negative reaction to what she was sharing, but it was hard to temper his anger. How could someone choose to put a spell on their child? It seemed very backward to him.

“It lit up last night when we ...” Alana blushed. “You know.”

“And you didn’t light it when you came in?”

She shook her head, and before she went on, he knew what she was going to say. “It must have turned itself on when you walked in.”

“Does that mean it’s safe to assume that we’re mates? Matches?” Cohen didn’t want to ask the question because, once again, he was scared of her answer. It was his fear of heartbreak and loss that made him ask the question.

His wolf made other thoughts run through his head. Of course, it’s safe to assume that. I still have no clue if it’s true. What did your buddies do again?

Cohen took a deep breath. It was way too soon for what Mason, Parker, and Jack had done.

It didn’t matter if it was true.

“Do you think we should talk to Mrs. Francis about all of this?” Alana chewed her lip. “Maybe she will have information that we don’t have.”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “But I think that first things first, we need to find that spell. How can I help, Alana?”

“I don’t know what you can do. I need to go through all of those books and find a love spell that has a red candle as part of the instructions.”

“I can look.”

Alana laughed softly. “You have no way of knowing this, but nearly every single love

spell asks for a red candle.”

He snorted. “Of course. Where do you want me to start?” He pointed toward the bookshelves ... the ones that were still tucked into the library, not the ones she had so obviously been looking through. “I’ll put aside any book with a love spell.”

“That sounds like a plan.” She nodded, her heart fluttering for him.

They worked in silence, starting at opposite ends of the library. Hours ticked by with no progress, but the pile of books Cohen put aside grew much bigger. When Alana and Cohen met in the very middle, she decided it would be more useful if she started flipping through the books he had set aside.

One by one, each book was returned to the shelves.

“That was all of them,” Cohen sighed. “Did you find it?”

Alana shook her head. “No. I didn’t.” She crossed her arms and glared at the amassed books. “I have no clue where the spell could come from if it’s not from here.”

“Are there any other spots it could be?”

She considered this for a moment. “If they cast this spell on me without my knowledge, they might have hidden the book somewhere. It definitely sounds like something they would have done if they felt they had to protect me.”

Cohen smiled sadly. “You were all very close, huh?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“Yeah. They were the only family I ever had. They taught me everything I know. Or at least, I thought that was the truth.”

He shook his head. “Hey, no. Don’t do that. Don’t look back at the good memories that you have with a sour taste in your mouth. That isn’t fair to them or to yourself. You don’t know what happened. What made them do it.”

Cohen closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around her waist, tucking her into his side. “I’m really sorry this is happening, Alana.”

She held fast to him like he was the only steady thing in her world, and it made his heart clench in his chest. His protective instincts were turned all the way up for Alana, and that angered him too. He had no clue how to help her anymore.

“Alana, we will figure this out, okay? Maybe this was enough for tonight. Maybe we should take a break. Have you eaten anything today?”

“There’s no way I’m hungry. There’s just this terrible knot in my stomach, and I don’t know how to get rid of it.”

Cohen took a deep breath, and he held her again, dropping a kiss on the top of her head. “We’ll figure it out. We’re seven fairly intelligent adults and Mason. We’ll get to the bottom of this.”

She poked his side. “Don’t tease your brother when he isn’t here to defend himself,” she chided playfully. “Besides, I think that your brother is a very intelligent person.”

“Maybe he isn’t so bad, but hey, look at that. My plan worked. I wanted to distract you, and that’s exactly what I was able to do. Distract you. Now, come on. I’m gonna make you something to eat before you pass out.”

Keeping their hands intertwined, he crossed the living room and through a small door that led to the back half of the building and through another door that brought them out into the alley. As the sheriff, Cohen knew Half Moon Key by heart, and he already knew that Alana lived in the small house across from her family’s shop.

Painted a soft yellow and sharp white, the little home hardly looked like a witch’s home with its welcoming vibe and lush surrounding gardens. There were plants and herbs and all kinds of other things Cohen knew Alana used for magic.

She unlocked the door for them and gave him a quick tour before they settled in the kitchen. Cohen didn’t stop insisting until Alana sat at the small dining room table with a glass of ice water.

He rummaged through the fridge and freezer until he had a few ingredients on the counter. He wasn’t as good as his brother in the kitchen, but he could fry an egg and boil water. He could grill a mean steak, too, but Alana didn’t need a huge chunk of meat. She wasn’t a shifter. She was a witch.

He stared down at his gathered ingredients and grappled with a plan. The only thing he could think to do was make an omelet. He quickly chopped up all of the veggies for the egg mix and a side salad. Every time Alana offered to help, he shut her up with a series of heated kisses.

Either they would burn the house down with his omelet, or they would have a quickie in her kitchen if he couldn’t keep his hands to himself.

In the end, they settled down and ate together.

“Are you ever going to tell me why you hated me the moment you laid eyes on me?” she asked between bites. The smile curling her delicious lips told him she was teasing him.

He grinned. “You know why, and you also know that there was no hatred. Not really. I was attracted to you, and I didn’t know what to do with that.”

“Well, see, usually, when someone is attracted to someone else, the common thing to do is to ask them out. Flirt, even.”

Cohen threw his head back with a laugh. “Thanks, Alana. I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“You would probably be in a whole world of hurt without me.” She giggled. Her jest turned serious.

His eyes darkened, and he cupped her face in his hands before kissing her sweetly. “If you are my mate, you have no idea how true it is.”

“You never told me why you decided to live here. A small town secluded from everything and everyone.”

He sighed and remained quiet for a long time while he tried to find the right words to share his story with her.

“I met Amanda in college. We were both in the political science program. Obviously, I wanted to go into law enforcement, and she wanted ...” He took a deep breath. “Actually, I don’t know what she wanted from her life. We dated. We were together for a long time. All through college. I asked her to marry me, and I thought that we would be together forever.”

“Even if she wasn’t your mate?”

He shrugged against her. “Yeah. It’s not every shifter who finds his true mate. Some of us fall in love and get married just like humans do. Besides, it didn’t matter that she wasn’t my mate. I loved her, and that was enough for me.”

Cohen fell silent for another few beats. “She cheated on me. I never saw it coming, either. We were engaged, and our wedding was only a couple of weeks away. Maybe less.”

“I am so sorry she hurt you.”

He faced her. “She did, but I think it was for a reason. I was never meant to be with her. I was always meant to come to Half Moon Key to meet you. Mate or not, match or not, I don’t care. I want to make this work, Alana.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Her breath caught, her eyes turning molten. “Two days ago, you hated me.”

He shook his head. “Two days ago, I wasn’t man enough to admit that I wanted you. That’s over now. I want you, Alana Wixx. With your powers and your magic candle and everything else. Even if you always steal my booth.”

Cohen was walking out on a ledge. He had put himself completely out there, and all he could do was hope that Alana wouldn’t break his heart.

She won’t, his wolf assured him with a conviction that gladdened Cohen’s heart.

NINETEEN

ALANA

Alana was aware of two things. The first was that Cohen was in her bed, still fast asleep. His arms were wrapped around her possessively, but it wasn’t stifling. Instead, it was the safest Alana had ever felt in her life.

The second was that despite the safety she felt with Cohen, Alana was very much asleep.

It was a good thing that she was in his embrace because the dream she was having was far from pleasant. Alanaknewshe was dreaming for the very simple reason that her mother and grandmother were sitting in the living room, chatting away like they hadn’t been dead.

“Mother, this is a bad idea,” Alana’s mom, Lina, sighed. “I don’t like it.”

“There are a whole lot of things that mothers don’t like to do, but they still have to do it because it is their job to take care of their children,” Nana replied.

“I don’t think that hiding most of her magic from her is a good idea,” Mom whispered. “She might need it.”

“We are not hiding it, Lina. We are only making it difficult to find. Can you imagine what would happen to this small town if Matthew decided to come here? If he wants the baby, he will stop at nothing to find her.” Nana patted her daughter’s arm. “You know it’s the only way to protect her. The magic cannot be inside her. Not if she is going to survive.”

Mom only nodded, completely defeated. “I’ll get everything we need ready, then.”

“We are doing the right thing, my sweet girl,” Nana insisted. “If we use her magic to build a defensive forcefield around the town, Matthew will never find her. Not here. Not ever.”

“I just don’t like the idea of leaving her defenseless in the world. What if something happens to me? What if I can’t protect her, and she has no magic to do it herself?”

“Don’t worry about that, Lina. This is only temporary. We’ll make sure that there is a failsafe in the spell. If she meets her match, the man she is meant to be with, the magic will break.”

Mom’s frown deepened. “Why would we do that?”

“Because this is a shifter town.” She waved her hand over her crystal ball. Shadows followed under her palm. “Her match ... hermate will be a shifter. He will be able to

protect her against any threat. And what's more, once she has found him, her magic will return to her."

"That's one hell of a failsafe," Mom snapped. "I don't like it." She put a hand up to get Nana to stop. "I know. I know. Sometimes, mothers have to do things they don't want to but are for the benefit of their children. I heard you the first time."

The dream melted, shifted, and moved until Mom and Nana were standing in the Half Moon Key woods high up in the mountains. Even though she was still dreaming, Alana recognized it immediately.

They stood in front of the strange rock formation where the Wixx witches did most of their higher magic. The forest was perfect because it gave them access to all of the elements of life.

Together, Nana and Mom stepped toward the circle of stone, their hands clasped together. They chanted in tandem, the words foreign yet somehow familiar. As they continued to speak the incantation, the whole of the forest turned a bright shade of green. It pulsed through the trees, seeped into the ground, and moved high to the clouds.

"The spell is in place." The rocks of the strange and mystical formation began to shimmer with the same emerald glow.

"My little girl has almost no magic," Mom whimpered, tears flowing freely down her face.

Nana took her hand in hers. "It's only temporary, Lina. And it's for her safety. It will be okay." Nana stepped up to the rocks and produced a red candle from one of her many pockets. She spoke another incantation as she lay the candle on the rocks. The green magic wrapped itself around the candle, and an invisible hand carved a name in

the hardened wax.

Cohen Pierce.

The letters were as clear as daylight. Alana focused on it, but soon, the dream vanished, leaving her free to wake up.

“I think I know what to do!” Alana gasped, sitting up in the bed and kicking at the sheets and blankets.

“What?” Cohen stirred beside her; his voice was still full of sleep. “What do you mean?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“We have to go to the woods. Get dressed.”

Cohen frowned, and though Alana tried to kick out of the blankets to make her escape, he took her in his arms and pinned her down to the bed. “Woman, it is dawn. The sun isn’t even up yet. Wanna tell me why you’re trying to get out of bed? Didn’t I tire you out last night?”

She giggled and wiggled under him. His erection pressed against her hip, and she laughed again. “How can you be aroused again? Didn’t I tire you out last night?” she repeated the question, moving against him.

“You’re a witch.”

“I am,” she teased, rocking her hips again. “A good witch, though. Now, if you get out of bed and get dressed, I promise a repeat performance of last night.”

“We could do that right now.”

She shook her head and disentangled herself from Cohen. “We could, but I know where we have to go.”

“And where is that?”

She rifled through her closet until she found a pair of jeans. She quickly slid them on before grabbing a black zip-up hoodie which she also put on. Cohen watched her get dressed with a grin. “Usually, when a woman as hot as you is in my bedroom, I try to get her out of her clothes. Not into more.”

She pursed her lips at him. “Come on, Cohen. We can finally get to the bottom of this. I think I know how to get the magic spell back up.” Alana went to the bed and grabbed his arm, which she then proceeded to tug on him. “Come on.”

“Okay, okay,” he conceded, getting to his feet. “I’m up, you maddening woman. I’m up.”

Alana left him alone to dress and rushed to the kitchen, where she got two cups of coffee ready, putting them in travel mugs. She also slathered a bunch of peanut butter onto fresh toast and chopped up some apples. The whole lot went into a small bag that she slugged over her shoulder as soon as Cohen joined her in the kitchen. Alana handed him one of the mugs before kissing him.

“Are you ready? Good.” She didn’t stop to wait for his answer.

“Usually, people tell me their plans before we go blazing into whatever we are blazing into.”

She rolled her eyes. “Other people are not all-powerful witches, Cohen.”

“Nope, you’re right. Just shifters.” Laughter danced in his eyes.

“This conversation is very reminiscent of what usually sets us off. Maybe we should go before we start to fight.”

“The best part of fighting is the making up.” He winked at her. Cohen slurped a big gulp of coffee, waiting for Alana’s reply.

“Fine. Let’s fight and make up later. Right now, we need to get to the woods. I had a dream, and I think it might have been a message from the beyond.”

He frowned, his coffee container stopping halfway to his mouth. “A message from the beyond?” he repeated.

Alana nodded. “Just as I was about to wake up, I had a dream where my grandmother and mother were discussing the spell, my father, and the possible consequences. We need to go to the woods where the stones cracked during the earthquake. That’s where they did the spell. The love one and the protective one.”

“What? Why there?”

Alana took a deep breath and closed her eyes as she readied herself to speak the words that were sure to hurt her. It was intense, but she would think about the spell and the implications later. “We need to go there because if I understood the dream properly, my family didn’t just take my magic. They didn’t bind me, exactly. They used my magical powers to seal the protective spell.”

Cohen’s eyes widened, and his brows went all the way up into his hairline. “What the fuck? Are you saying that the spell has been your magical powers this whole time?”

She nodded, a ball forming in the back of her throat.

“Oh, love.” Cohen placed his cup on the counter to grab her into a warm and comforting hug. “I am so sorry they did that.”

“It’s okay,” she sniffled.

He pulled away only long enough to look into her eyes. “What? How can this be okay?”

“I just think that they had to be pretty fucking desperate to do that. Magical powers are sacred to witches, and there is no way my family would have severed me from my

magic unless they had good reason. It might have been the only way they could think of to save the town. It very well might have been the only way to protect me from my father.”

Cohen moved away from the hug again, but his frown was darker and full of anger this time. “Protect you from your father? What the hell?”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Alana shook her head. “I don’t know. The dream didn’t say much about him, and I don’t remember my mom and Nana talking about him at all. I don’t think he would be a very good person if he was after me. He was, though. He wanted me, but not to be a parent. He was after me for my magic.”

“But why did he want your magic?”

“To steal my powers, I think,” she responded with a wince.

Cohen’s eyes darkened. “Like hell. That won’t happen. You’re not gonna remove your magic from yourself.”

Alana nodded. “I know it’s not ideal, but the first thing we need to do is get that protective spell back up. Without it, my father, whoever he is, will be able to find me. I don’t think that would be a good thing for Half Moon Key.”

If she thought that his eyes were dark before, they were black holes now. Alana was pretty sure she saw the hint of a wolf in the depths.

She wasn’t scared.

In fact, it was quite the opposite. Alana thought she might just be loved.

TWENTY

COHEN

Cohen was way out of his depth. He might have been a shifter and a sheriff who could fight his enemies better than most, but he was a wolf.

He wasn't a witch.

He didn't have magical powers, either. He had no clue how in the hell he was supposed to protect Alana from a threat that he didn't understand. Not completely and not enough.

As he and Alana made their way to the wooded path that would lead them through the woods and around the lake, Cohen asked, "Do you think we should call the rest of the gang? Tell them what we've learned. Maybe ask them for some help."

Alana shook her head, wincing. "No. I don't want them involved. They aren't magical. They wouldn't be able to help me with the magic I need to do. They would just end up distracting me as I try to explain what I am doing."

"That's not the part that I'm worried about," he grumbled. "We might need help."

"What are you worried about?" she pressed. "Not magic?" She turned a few shades of white. "What else are you concerned about?"

He shrugged between two bites of the to-go breakfast she had prepared for them. "If your father shows up, what are we supposed to do? Fight this possibly magical creature? Just the two of us? Not to make myself seem weak or anything, but I am a wolf, Alana. I can't fight magic. I don't know how. It's just not a skillset I have."

She stopped walking, turned to face him, grabbed his breakfast, much to his consternation, and cupped his face in her palms. "Listen to me, Cohen. I don't know or care who my father is and what kind of powers he has, but he will not harm you." She waved off his mumbled response and continued. "He won't come here, anyway.

Why would he?

“So the magic barrier fell around Half Moon Key. So there is no more protective spell. That doesn’t mean my father is still out there in the world looking for me in the hopes of stealing my powers or whatever the hell he wants with them ... with me. It will be okay,” she promised before kissing him softly.

The moment her lips pressed against his, there was a sharp electric current in his bloodstream. His entire body was alive under her touch, and he wasn’t sure, but he asked anyway. “Did you just do magic?”

Alana grinned, but she blushed deeply. “I might have used some of my powers to put a protective spell on you.”

“But ...”

“If you’re about to lecture me about your shifter self and how strong and powerful you are and that you don’t need me to help protect you, I am going to go bat-shit crazy on you, Cohen. I know you’re a shifter, and you’re not as vulnerable as other men. You heal fast, but you can still die. Not that I believe for two seconds that my father will suddenly show up after all of this time. As I said, he must’ve given up on me and stealing my powers by now.”

Cohen wasn’t convinced about that. “So why put a spell on me?”

“Because you’re important to me, and I don’t want anything to happen to you. It’s only a precaution to keep my mind at ease. It was more for me than it was for you.”

“If you think so ...”

Magic was power, and a power-hungry person didn’t stop craving power all of a

sudden because his super-powerful daughter fell off the face of the earth. Whoever this man was would be considered a threat until Cohen deemed him otherwise. All of his instincts ... from shifter to sheriff ... screamed at him that he should tell the rest of the Half Moon Key pack that something was happening. At the very least, they were members of the council, and they deserved to know that Alana had found a potential solution for the protective magic.

While they kept on walking, Cohen discreetly took out his phone and texted Mason, telling him he should message Jack and Parker. The other shifters weren't exactly his pack, given that they were a mix of canine and feline shifters, but that didn't change how Cohen felt about them.

He knew what it was like to be in a pack and how he felt with his fishing buddies. It was way better. The other fellows would have his back, and he had theirs. No matter what, no questions asked. As they continued to walk on, Cohen wasn't able to check to see if he had any responses because, soon enough, they were standing at the foot of the strange rock formation that rose from the forest ground.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

The closer they got to it, the brighter a strange green glow was visible in the cracks in the stones. It cast an eerie effect on the entire area, and Cohen didn't like it. He was part animal, and that part of him was adamant that rocks shouldn't be glowing like a kid's plastic ceiling stars.

"Is that normal?" He pointed at the glowing green rocks. "Why doesn't that look normal? Rocks aren't supposed to glow."

"They can and do if they are infused with magic as these have been. That green glow? It's my magic. My powers. The ones my family used to protect the town."

She wavered on her feet a bit as she spoke, no doubt now very much aware that this was real. Her magic was right there, almost within touching distance, but it would never be hers. Not if she went through with this insane plan. There was no talking her out of it, though. Alana was one determined woman.

If it were any other foe ... another shifter, for example ... Cohen would have insisted on taking the lead, but this was magic. He didn't know enough about it to put his foot down and insist that Alana take her magic back. He didn't know what the consequences would be for Half Moon Key and its residents. As it was, neither Cohen nor Alana was willing to find out what the end of the magic would do to their beloved town.

Cohen huffed out a breath. "Huh. Then I guess it makes sense that the glow is from you. It's a shade of green, and it's all you. It reminds me of your eyes."

Alana flustered and looked away. "This isn't the time and place to say sweet things to

me, Cohen. I need to focus.”

“Well, it’s true. Now that I see it, there is no way I can unsee it. What’s the plan, anyway?”

She ran her fingers along one of the deeper cracks in the rocks, and immediately, the ground began to rumble.

“Holy fuck.” Cohen rushed forward and helped Alana stay steady on her feet. “I’ve got you.” The earth beneath them continued to tremble.

“Thanks, babe,” she said, breathless. “Do you think this is an ominous warning? Or is it because we are on the right track?”

“That’s a very good question, love, but I don’t know. You’re the magic expert. I’m just here because I ...” He stopped as the ground grumbled again.

The movements of the ground under their feet weren’t actually big enough to make her fall, but enough to scare the crap out of Cohen. He was a wolf, a sheriff, a man who saw the world in black and white.

That was before he met Alana.

Now he saw the world in shades of green. From her eyes to her magic, the woman was all kinds of wrapped up in him now. If Mrs. Francis popped out from behind a tree to tell him that he was losing his mind and that there was no actual earthquake, he was just falling in love with Alana, he wasn’t sure he would be very surprised.

Alana reached out for the rock formation again, but her movements and gestures were a bit more calculated this time.

“Do you have to touch it again?” he asked as she reached out for the stone formation again.

She nodded. “I don’t know what I’m doing, but for some strange reason, it feels to me that if I touch it, I can ...” She scrunched up her face.

“Suck the power back?” he offered.

Alana winced. “If I do that, if I take the magic back, there will be no more spell protecting the town from my father and any other threat. I think I have a responsibility to Half Moon Key to keep the magic as it is. Keep it there, locked in the stones for generations to come.”

Cohen shook his head. “As much as it warms my heart that you would sacrifice your magic for the town, I don’t think that’s fair.”

“It’s not about being fair, Cohen. It’s about protecting this place. It’s too important. It’s my home. I don’t know who my father is, but that’s not even the point. If I take back my magic right here, right now, and something happens to Half Moon Key? If something happens to one of the residents? Oh, god, someone like Mrs. Francis? To one of my friends?” She took a deep breath. “If something were to happen to you?” Alana straightened her back. “No. I need to keep the magic where it is. I need to protect Half Moon Key.”

“Then you should know that I will protect you right back, Alana Wixx.” Cohen placed his hands on her shoulders and pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “You just tell me what you need right now.”

Alana took a deep breath and stared down at the glowing rocks. “I don’t know. After the dream, I thought that I would come here and just magically remember the spell that my family did, but I am drawing a blank.”

“Close your eyes and steady your breathing,” he coaxed, keeping his hands on her shoulders. “Relax and just focus on the dream. Go back there in your mind and try to remember the ...” he faltered. “Try to remember the thing.”

“The incantation,” she laughed softly.

“Yeah, that. Try to remember that.” He kissed her again, hoping that it would give her the strength she wanted and needed to complete this impossible task.

Cohen couldn’t begin to imagine what she was going through. “You always thought that you were less powerful than your grandmother and mother, and here you are now, knowing the truth. You are more powerful than both of them combined. They were able to keep the town safe all of those yearsbecauseof you. You have more than just earned your seat on the council. You should fucking lead that thing.”

She giggled. “Not a chance. I would never take that role from Mrs. Francis. That would be a major upset.”

“Fair enough, love. I just want you to know that I admire you. Your strength. I can’t even fathom what it would be like to sacrifice my wolf.” He shook his head. “Actually, that’s not true. I would give my wolf away to keep you safe.”

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

I am not even mad about that. His wolf cut in. I totally agree.

Cohen laughed, earning him a questioning look from Alana. "My wolf is on board. He might not have told me that you're my mate, but he might as well have with that line."

"Match. Mate. It's all the same, isn't it?" she asked. "Because we know you're the one my family foresaw ..."

He nodded. "Yeah. I guess we're gonna have to talk about all of this, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Maybe we were just so dead set against liking each other because of ..." She gestured to the rock. "Maybe it was the spell keeping us apart so that this didn't happen?"

"It's as good a guess as any," he conceded. "Okay, now, back to the dream and visualization. You've got this, love. I'm right here with you."

He always would be beyond the shadow of a doubt.

TWENTY-ONE

ALANA

Alana scanned the clearing that surrounded them, along with the massive rock formations formed on the ground. She had stood in this same very spot with her mother and grandmother many times before. They had done all kinds of magic here

because her family explained that the height of the rocks and the proximity to the other elements ... water and air ... made it the best place to practice magic.

To be here with Cohen ... to know that he was willing to watch her back and be there for her ... was intense. It did things to Alana. Mostly in her heart.

Her heart was fully involved with the grumpy Sheriff Cohen Pierce, and if she was honest with herself, she had probably always been completely taken with him. Yet, her wary nature made it hard for her to focus on why she could never stop looking at him now that they were something to each other.

Now Alana knew why she was incapable of staying away from Cohen. It was because her heart and soul were trying to tell her something: that he was it for her. Too bad her family had made her into a very suspicious and untrusting person.

“I need to focus,” she whispered. “But there has got to be something wrong with me because you’re all I can think about.”

Cohen stepped closer to her and chuckled. “That’s very flattering, love. Tell me what you need to focus.”

“I don’t know. Maybe just hold my hand?” she offered on a whim, but it felt true. It felt like it could make all of the difference in the world.

He took a few more steps toward her and intertwined their fingers together. Contact with Cohen always made her a little breathless, but not in a way that felt like floating away with happiness. He was more of a grounding presence, and Alana chose to sink into that, even if it was just for a moment. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

His fingers tingled against hers with so much force that he looked at her in confusion. Alana was just as stunned as him, but they had a silent understanding not to speak.

She continued to focus on the stones and the spell she had to remember.

Alana's entire body seemed to take root in the woods. Her feet felt so heavy that she was sure she wouldn't be able to lift them to walk or run. Her fingers buzzed, but it wasn't merely because of Cohen anymore. Something was happening.

Her mind was opened, willing, and ready to receive the incantation. As soon as she spoke the words, her body lightened from the inside out like a huge weight was lifted.

"I think I know what to do," Alana whispered.

Cohen nodded. "Okay, okay, good. What do you need from me?"

"Can you keep standing there? Maybe behind me?" As soon as she spoke, Cohen did as she asked, but it wasn't enough. "Put your hands on my shoulders," she suggested. "Let's see if that works."

Through the thin material of her T-shirt, Alana felt the warm, dry hands of her lover, and it did a whole lot to make her feel stronger. She closed her eyes again and took deep and steadying breaths. She continued to do this as she let the memory of her dream take over. She could recall nearly everything about the spell.

The words of the incantation were the only thing that was just about out of reach.

She strained, frowning though she kept her eyes closed. Her forehead was creased with her efforts, but soon, she felt her center of gravity shift, and if Cohen hadn't been holding her, she would have fallen flat on her ass.

"What the hell was that?" Cohen asked, steadying her.

She turned to face him in consternation. "What do you mean? You felt that too?"

He nodded, his eyes dark with concern. He scanned the clearing, his shifter nose sniffing the air as if he could spot a foreign scent. His keen eyes were sure to pick up anything that didn't look like it was in its right place ... even trees and grass, bless his predatory nature.

“It felt like there was a huge pressure drop. Like I was being crushed onto the ground,” Alana offered.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

Cohen continued to scan their surroundings. “I felt it, but I heard it too.”

“What did it sound like?” Though she was scared, she was also sure she had never been stronger.

“It sounded like very powerful wind crashing into something,” Cohen finally responded, still sniffing at the air.

Alana contemplated this. “I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or not. I was just trying to remember the incantation from my dream.”

“Try again. Let’s see if this happens again.”

With Cohen’s hands on her shoulders, she tried again, but once again, she was taken by surprise by the crushing weight of the air around them in the spacious clearing. She blinked her eyes open just in time to see that the rocks were no longer glowing green. In fact, there seemed to be no magic in the rocks at all anymore.

“Something is happening,” she gasped. “Something bad.” Her body was getting lighter again, but instead of feeling strong, she felt faint. Alana turned to face him, and Cohen was peeling out of his sheriff’s buttoned-down shirt. “Are you going to shift?”

“I think I might have to. My senses are good in my human form, but it definitely doesn’t beat how I can perform in my wolf’s shape.”

Alana took a deep breath. “If you think that’s best, you do that, but this isn’t really

how I thought I would meet your wolf for the first time.”

He grinned. “You thought about that, did you?”

“Oh, yeah, of course, I have. I’ve seen it a few times around town, but we’ve never interacted.”

He threw his head back with a laugh. “I don’t think that a wolf shifter and a witch usually interact, but we can if you like once this is all said and done. Are you okay if I do the shift now? If you need me back into my human form, just tell me. I’m gonna do a lap or two of the surrounding woods to make sure nothing is amiss. Are you gonna be fine here on your own? I’ll be within earshot, I promise.”

“You go it. Thanks, Cohen.”

“Anything for you. For this town.”

She gave a resolute nod because she wholly agreed with him. Alana watched in fascination as he continued to strip out of his clothes, but she didn’t have any time to enjoy the view of his formidable masculine form because his skin and body were soon contorted into the shift. His smooth and taut skin pushed and pulled and sprouted fur.

In seconds, Cohen, the Sheriff, was quickly replaced by a wolf. The loveliest wolf that Alana had ever seen. In fact, she didn’t even know how a wolf could be lovely. That was a weird thought, but it was probably because she was so into the man that everything about him felt like it belonged to her.

The wolf gave a curt head nod that was so human and so Cohen that Alana returned it with a smile.

Once she was alone in the clearing, Alana faced the rock formation again and closed her eyes. She focused on the rocks and tried to bring the glow back.

It was hard as hell.

It was the most difficult thing Alana had ever done in her life. She had no incantation to help her. All she had was her sheer determination and a life she loved. One that was about to get a whole lot better, too, now that she had someone to share it with. She wanted to date Cohen, to make love to him. She wanted to bicker over their booth at Moonie's.

And one day, she wanted to marry him and have his babies. Half-shifter, half-witch babies who could lead Half Moon Key like Mrs. Francis did, as she and Cohen would. She focused all of her energy on that with her eyes scrunched closed.

"Well, well, looks like you're even more powerful than Helena anticipated in her prophecies." The sudden sound of an unfamiliar male voice made her jump up and out of the magic that she was trying to wield.

A man stood on the top of the rock formation, completely unfazed that if he fell, he would plummet to his death. The stranger's skin glowed a faint green as if he was intaking the magic from the stones to leave the town ... and Alana ... depleted.

That's exactly what he is doing, the magic warned.

Alana felt connected to the man, but not in a good way. A quick look at his green eyes told her that this stranger was her father, but that's not why she felt connected to him. It wasn't the same color of their eyes that had her faltering for her next move. Rather, it was purely based on suspicion.

Alana thought that the man was draining her magic. From the town, from her very

soul. That could only mean one thing, of course. It meant that even if the magic was in the rocks, imbued in the earth and in all of Half Moon Key, she could access it. The magic was hers, after all. It longed to be reunited with her.

“Who are you?” she snapped, suddenly wanting to destroy the father she never knew because he was trying to steal her power.

The stranger grinned. “You know who I am, daughter.”

“Don’t call me that. I had parents. My mother and grandmother. Not you. Never you. Why are you here? What do you want?”

His smile ... which was already terrifying ... turned cold and hollow. Now here was a man who wouldn’t care if he killed her. He was here for one thing and one thing alone, and that was her magic.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:03 am

“You know the answer to that too. You know what I want.”

“The magic,” she said. “But you should know that you’re not getting it. I won’t let you.”

As if on cue, Cohen broke through the line of trees. His wolf’s hair was raised around his neck, his growl low and dangerous. If her father didn’t care about killing, then Cohen didn’t care what he had to do to defend and protect Alana and the town.

“You think you can stop me?” her father chuckled dryly.

“Of course, I can beat you. You’re not as powerful as me, remember? You want my powers because I am so damn powerful. Well, guess what. These powers are not yours to take. Do you hear me? The magic and I belong to Half Moon Key.”

Acting on pure instinct, Alana knelt on the forest floor and dug her fingers into the ground, dirt pushing its way under her nails. She didn’t have a spell for this. All she had was her desire to protect her town, her man, and herself. She wanted to protect the future she longed to have with Cohen.

Apparently, that hope was powerful enough.

The ground began to shake again, but this time, the massive boulders quivered. The glow seeped out of her father’s face and back through the thick stony fissures. Seeing this, Alana struck again, this time asking the wind to help her.

It snapped by, nearly flattening her along with the force of the gale, but she was ready

for it. Her father, however, was not. He stumbled forward and lost his footing, nosediving off the rock formation. Alana screamed in surprise, scared she had accidentally killed her father. He might not be a man she had ever met, but she didn't want to be a killer.

Thankfully, she didn't have much more time to think. Cohen leaped into her line of sight and jumped onto her father, pinning the man to the ground. The wolf's flight broke the stranger's fall, but there was still the terrible sound of something heavy landing with force. The air turned colder, and there was a sickening sound as the wolf's jowls closed around the pinned man's arm. The stranger shouted and tried to remove himself from the animal's proximity, but Cohen was much stronger.

"Call off your dog," the man screamed.

"He isn't my dog. He's my boyfriend. And do you really think he is going to let you go after what you've done?"

"I haven't done shit," the man argued. "What have I had the time to do? Make a dent in your town's powers?"

"Why did you even come here? You must have known that I would defend my powers with everything I have. You had to know it wouldn't be that easy."

The man snickered. "I never would've come for the magic if the spell wasn't so weak. I thought I might as well try my hand at defeating you."

Alana narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Call. Him. Off." Blood gushed from the bite, and the man shouted in pain.

With a sigh, Alana nodded to Cohen. The wolf immediately eased back, but Cohen

snapped his teeth at the thief in silent warning. It was only when her father thought he was free that Alana struck. She whispered under her breath, and the air around them obeyed, pushing him into the rocks, imprisoning him. His resulting smirk was bone-chilling.

“Cohen, you need to make sure he was alone. I don’t like that look he is giving me. I think he has something up his sleeve. He wouldn’t have taken this shot if he didn’t have a backup.”

Cohen’s wolf inclined his head, and he was soon gone through the forest. His speed was impressive, and Alana hoped that meant he wouldn’t be gone too long.

“Well, at least you’re not as dumb as I thought you would be.” Her father laughed through wincing of pain.

Alana snickered. “You don’t know me. You never met me, so how dare you call me dumb?”

“Because your mother was easy to fool. Having a child with a witch from the Wixx line was entirely too easy.”

“Sure, having the child was easy, but keeping her was a bit harder, wasn’t it? Because I am a grown woman, and I never laid eyes on you before. That tells me a couple things.”

“Enlighten me.”

“You’re not as good as you think you are,” she answered. “That’s the first thing. The second?” Alana laughed because she couldn’t help but feel giddy that she could fight for her town, for her future.

“You think you can control people because you can easily scare people. That’s all smoke and mirrors. It’s not real magic. Makes me wonder if you have any kind of power at all.”

Her estranged father’s face turned beet red, trying to stand straight and hold out his hands toward her despite the fact that one of his arms was clearly injured. Blood gushed out from the wounds inflicted by Cohen’s sharp teeth. He yelled incantation after incantation at her, but none worked. Whatever magic he tried sputtered out before it could cause harm.

Alana was just about to cast magic of her own when the very loud roar of an animal ripped through the air, sending birds scampering up into the clouds. There was a terrible commotion, and she blinked a few times as she tried to focus on what she was seeing.

It didn’t make sense.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:04 am

There was a bear in the clearing. A very large, very angry bear.

There were two terrible things about this. One, there were no brown bears in Half Moon Key. Only grizzlies. And the second? The bear was in a violent battle with a wolf. Her wolf. Her head snapped toward her father, aiming her fingers at him in a silent threat of magic. “Call that bear off. Now.”

Her father ... Matthew, she suddenly recalled, thanks to the help of her magic ... shook his head. “I don’t think so. This levels the playing field a little bit. Now that your wolf is in trouble stop siphoning away the magic.” He held out his hand to her, wiggling his fingers expectantly. “Give me the magic. You’re gonna let me take it all, and then you will let me leave with it.”

“Not. Happening,” she said through gritted teeth.

Alana took a deep breath to settle herself, but she didn’t want to close her eyes, refusing to give Matthew the upper hand. It was never a good idea to close your eyes when facing another witch. That was basically turning your back to an armed murderer, daring them to destroy you.

The ground under her feet started to quiver, and the green glow became so bright that Alana could barely see the bear and wolf fighting. Through the cloudy green haze of the magic lifting from the rocks and hovering all around the clearing, she saw Cohen jab at the bear with his front paws over and over again.

It was obvious that both shifters were skilled fighters, and though it would have been easy to assume that the bear had the upper hand because he was bigger, that would

have been a serious miscalculation because Cohen had speed. The bear was not swift enough, slowed by his massive size.

“I don’t know,” Alana said through gritted teeth. As she spoke to her father, she chanted a protective spell in her head. It was difficult to do, but she held fast. Alana kept her breath steady and calm through the searing pain that began at the base of her skull.

Doing this kind of magic and not being completely focused wasn’t advisable, but this was a fight for Half Moon Key. Alana would do what she needed.

Taking her father completely by surprise, she uttered another protective spell in her mind. He blew backward, crashing against the rocks. He cried out in pain when his body landed on the ground. He didn’t move for a little while, and when he did, it was obvious that the tumble wasn’t the only thing hurting him.

The protective spell she was weaving into the town was working. It was affecting Matthew, and judging by the bear’s pained roars, it was affecting Cohen’s opponent too. Alana couldn’t see her man anymore, but she could sense what he was up to. He was using jowls and paws and every other part of his body as part of his arsenal.

Alana took another deep breath and held it. Mom, Nana, come to me now. Tell me the spell. Speak the incantation, and help me save Half Moon Key and Cohen from Matthew.

The ground shook again, but this time, it continuously rumbled. Trees fell in the woods, sending the wildlife farther into the hills. The rocks ... the fissures still glowing green ... glowed brighter than ever. The green flashed with blue and red mixing in. Alana had never seen such a shade before, but she knew why it was happening.

The magic was working. She was siphoning her magic back into the spell, but there was more going into it now.

The blue hues were no doubt the ghosts of her mother and grandmother, and the red was very much the manifestation of love. Not just the love Alana had for her family and for the town she called home but also the love she had for Cohen.

The love Cohen had for her too.

She let the love settle in her heart, and through the haze, she locked eyes with Cohen, who had pinned a now unconscious bear to the forest ground. Her wolf inclined his head once, and she returned the gesture.

“Matthew, you are no father of mine. You are banished from Half Moon Key. Forever.” She shouted the last word, aiming her hands up to the sky.

The early morning sky was no longer cloudless and blue.

It was stormy and so full of clouds, so heavy with gray and black, that it could have easily been late evening. Alana continued to repeat the banishment, weaving it with the spell that would lock her Wixx magic into the very fabric of the town.

“You’ll pay for this,” Matthew shouted. He continued to throw verbal abuse her way, but she didn’t hear any of it.

The magic spat Matthew and his bear out of Half Moon Key just as the cracks in the stone vanished as if they had never been there.

Alana collapsed into the long grass, laughing to herself. “I did it, Mom. I did it.” She closed her eyes and let the magic of the town ... her magic ... wrap itself around her.

“Alana?” Cohen knelt beside her, naked as the day he was born. “Are you okay?”

She blinked at him, her laughter dying down. She launched herself into his arms, and he held her tightly. “You’re naked and covered in blood, and I’m not even sure if it’s yours or the bear’s.”

“It doesn’t matter, love. It doesn’t even matter. I’ll be healed in no time.”

She buried her nose against his skin and held on tightly. “Cohen, thanks for fighting by my side.”

“I’d love to take credit for this, but I can’t. All I did was make sure the bear couldn’t hurt you on your father’s command.”

“Don’t pretend you only had a supporting role in this fight. It was a whole lot more than that.”

He kissed the top of her head before tipping her head to his to steal a few quick kisses. “It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be,” he admitted. “But I wasn’t the one doing magic.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:04 am

She grinned. “It was the hardest thing I have ever done, but I had help. You and my family.”

“Oh, good, I’m glad. But it’s over?” Cohen asked.

“It’s over. The spell is back up. Matthew came here with magic. That had to be what you heard just before he showed up, but as soon as the magic was done, it threw him out. He can’t be here. He doesn’t even know where we are. Do you know why?”

Cohen shook his head.

“Because he used magic to come here, he doesn’t know our actual location. But more than that, I made sure to wipe his memory when I was casting the protection spell. The one I put up is much more powerful than the one that was here before.”

He frowned. “As glad as I am to hear that, does that mean we will have more strange things to worry about? The electricity and Wi-Fi?”

She shook her head. “No. It won’t be worse, but it will be the same. I like the outages. It always brings people together, and why would we need Wi-Fi way out here, anyway?”

He grinned. “That’s actually really sweet, love. Now what do we do?”

Alana stood, holding his hand in hers. “Whatever we want. The threat is gone, and the spell is stronger than ever.”

“And the mate sense? Were you able to restore it?”

“I didn’t,” she admitted. “I think it’s a good thing that people come here to heal and fall in love organically.”

“You know, I think you’re onto something. I trust myself a hell of a lot more now that I know that my mind and my wolf’s mind basically want the same thing.” He took her by the waist and kissed her softly. “Let’s get home for some rest. It’s barely nine a.m., but I’m already beat.”

“That’s because you’re bleeding. To bed with you.”

He chuckled, kissing her again. “Sure, love. I’m just not sure that we should have sex right now.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know that’s not what I meant.” She laughed softly. “You need to heal, and I need a nap very badly before we go and tell the elders that our troubles are over.”

Cohen smiled. “Mrs. Francis is going to be so happy we got it all squared away.”

“She may very well be,” Alana agreed. “But let’s be honest. She will be a whole lot more excited that we are together now.”

His smile widened. “Because we’re together.”

It wasn’t a question because it didn’t need to be. They were a couple, and that’s all that mattered.

TWENTY-TWO

ALANA

The moon was high in the sky, and though it was only a half-moon, it was bright white, casting a peaceful light on the town that Alana and Cohen had just saved.

She took a deep breath and let it soothe the edge of her soul and heart. She felt more settled than she had in a very long time.

Alana was complete. She felt complete. Or at least, as much as she could, given the fact she had a mate that was, as of yet, unmated. She had plans to change that tonight, though.

“Cohen,” she said, wrapping her arms around his waist as he took their steaks off the grill. She pressed a kiss to the shoulder that, hours before, had been terribly injured. There was no sign of that injury now. The joys of falling in love with a shifter.

“What’s going on, Alana? You’ve got your planning voice on.”

She giggled. “I do not.”

“You sure do. Do you think I’ve known you this long without picking up on your little quirks? You’ve got a planning voice. You do. I heard it enough back when you were trying to drive me insane to recognize it.”

She pinched his side, and he chuckled, turning to face her. He cupped her face in his palms before kissing her softly. “What are the plans you are trying to make?”

She smiled at him. “You’re not gonna like it. In fact, I think that you might argue with me as vehemently for this as you would for the booth in Moonie’s.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:04 am

He threw his head back with a laugh. “There is no way that can be true. Nothing has ever made us bicker like that damn thing.”

She joined in on his laughter. “Do you know why we fought over it? Because I have my suspicions that it’s the same for you as it is for me.”

“Oh? Is it because you were a bit scared that you would end up kissing me? In a crowded diner full of the town’s worst gossips?”

“Something like that, yeah.” She kissed him sweetly. “But you can so easily push my buttons, so sometimes, I only wanted to make you as crazy as you were making me.”

“I promise to only push your buttons when absolutely necessary now. Deal?”

“Deal. So that means that you’ve got to say yes.” She batted her eyes up at him, hoping that he would concede without any more details.

“Say yes to what?” he asked, one of his brows hooking up.

“Tonight, we are becoming mates.”

“No.” He shook his head. “Absolutely not.”

“Yes,” she shot back, trying to add her usual fervor. It was completely absent, however. “Absolutely. We are doing this.”

Cohen didn’t stop shaking his head. “We can definitely have some amazing sex, but

we aren't making this kind of choice tonight. You need time to settle after casting that spell."

"Why? I just wove my magic into every fiber of this town. I know I'm going to live here forever, but what's more, I know I will be living here with you. Until the day I die. So why wait to make it official? You know I am stubborn and that I get what I want, Cohen. What makes you think you can talk me out of it?"

"Because I wouldn't be any kind of worthy man if I didn't make sure you were thinking it all through."

"What is there to think about?" she argued.

"Okay, so maybe it's not so much the thinking as the ..."

He sighed. "I'm just scared it's too much for you. We have had a very intense day, love. Maybe tonight we continue to rest." Cohen kissed her softly. "Tomorrow is another day."

For a moment, she considered what it would be like to ignore the pull she felt for him. To keep it for another evening when they hadn't spent the day battling forces to save Half Moon Key.

"Or," she said with a grin, "we take this opportunity to celebrate."

"Celebrate," he repeated, skeptical.

"We made it. We did it. We saved our hometown and all of its inhabitants. I did a whole lot of magic I didn't think was possible. We need to do something to celebrate that."

"So let's have some champagne. Let's not get you making life-changing decisions after such an emotional and physical day."

“I appreciate that you want to be the savior and the good boyfriend right now, but I am telling you that this is what I want. I just saved Half Moon Key with you, and I wanna rejoice in that.”

Cohen didn't say anything for a little while. He only started at her, his eyes carefully taking in her features. “Oh, Alana. I wanna fight you on this, but I'm done fighting with you unless it's for the booth.”

“You're giving up very easily,” she teased.

“Only because you're right. There is no winning against you. Against the pull I feel for you.”

She reached for her phone and flipped through it, earning her a frown from Cohen. “What the hell are you doing, love? Weren't we just discussing all kinds of sexy times?”

She grinned at him. “We did, yes. But you just said that I'm right, that there is no winning against me. I want that recorded. For later. This is important.” She barely contained her fit of giggles.

“I'll tell you every day, love,” he promised, kissing her neck.

“Every day?”

“Sure, I will. And I'll tell you that I love you ev ...” Cohen didn't finish his sentence, his body frozen against her.

She cupped his cheeks. “Cohen? What's going on? Ar ...”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:04 am

This time, Alana was interrupted by Cohen kissing her. He took complete control of the kiss, his hands exploring the curves of her body. “Alana,” he whispered between kisses. “Oh, Alana. Do you know what my wolf just told me?”

Her breath caught, and her entire body stilled. It took her a few seconds to reply with a confused “No. What did he say?”

Cohen’s smile was so bright and wide that Alana couldn’t bear to look away. “You’re my mate, Alana Wixx. That candle might have turned on, and that was more than enough, but now my wolf is sure.”

“And all because you said you love me? That’s some loophole.” She grinned slyly.

“You knew?”

She nodded. “When I was doing the spell to protect the town, I heard whispers, yes. We’re definitely meant to be. I just put every piece of my magic in this town. It’s where I want to be. It’s home. It’s where you are. Make me your mate, Cohen.”

His lush lips bent into a grin. “Then, you’re right. Let’s do this.” He set the steaks on the counter, then pressed more kisses against the curve of her neck, walking them all the way to her bedroom, where he kicked the door closed behind them before laying her on the bed.

He looked longingly into her eyes, and her pulse quickened with anticipation. They both knew what came next, and they were both eager for this night ... for their life together as mates.

Cohen helped her onto the surface of the bed until she was propped up against the stack of pillows. When she was settled and comfortable, he slowly eased her black leggings down her legs, taking her underwear along with them. In no time at all, Cohen had stripped her of all of her clothes and somehow managed to strip himself down to a pair of bright blue briefs.

“Hey! You’re wearing underwear,” she teased as he started to kiss his way up her legs. He twirled his tongue around her navel before licking his way down until he could lap at her sex.

“I might be wearing underwear.” His breath was hot against her sex. He pinned her knees onto the bed. “I only put them on because I knew I wouldn’t be shifting any time today.”

“Oh?” she gasped as one of his agile fingers dipped inside her entrance. “And why’s that?”

“Because I wanted to spend the night doing exactly this with you.”

She giggled when he nipped her thigh, the sensation coursed through her blood and body with heated speed. He finally returned his attention to precisely where she needed him to be. He lapped at her sex, twirling his tongue against the sensitive nib at the apex.

Alana dug her fingers into the bed, letting the pleasure build inside her. Cohen’s tongue drove her wild and right up to the brink of madness as he added a second finger to her clenching core. At the same time, he sucked hard on her clit, pressing his tongue on it while moving it from side to side.

That was all it took.

She came apart, riding the waves of her release. Her body glowed from the inside out as the aftershocks moved through her. Cohen didn't stop, only looking up at her with hooded eyes.

"I know what you're doing," she was breathless. "You're trying to satiate me with your fingers and tongue. You're hoping I change my mind about the whole mate thing tonight."

Cohen grinned and lay on top of her, lining up their bodies perfectly. His heavy, thick erection pressed into her, and she reached between them to wrap her hand around his length. It pulsed under her touch, and Cohen hissed out a blissful breath.

Alana presented her neck to him, gathering her hair over one shoulder. "Do it," she whispered her plea, meeting his fiery eyes.

She half expected him to change his mind and move away from her, but he didn't. He pressed his lips to her neck and shoulder, right where the soft and tender skin met. Slowly, his kiss turned from a peck to an open-mouthed embrace. His teeth grazed the flesh, and Alana closed her eyes to savor the moment that stretched out ahead of them.

Her sex still fluttered from her first orgasm, but there was an ache inside her. One that was so powerful that she didn't know how she would be able to wait without losing her sanity. "Cohen," she pleaded.

"Oh, Alana, my love, my witch, my mate." He positioned himself at her entrance, only breaching an inch. He stayed there, above her, his eyes looking deeply into her. "I love you, Alana."

"I love you too," she whispered, trying to move him deeper inside of her. "Please, Cohen," she coaxed. "I need you."

He sank in deep and immediately set a pace that was too slow. It was pure seduction. His rigid member parted her folds easily, and they both moaned in pleasure when he filled her completely. She moved her hips to meet his thrusts, holding onto his shoulders to steady herself.

His skin was hot and smooth under her palm. Everything about this man was hot. Alana was on the brink again. "Cohen," she warned, her voice wavering with her building orgasm.

"Soon, love. So soon." His words were heavy with pants and desire. He continued to move inside her; every thrust and pump was perfect ... exactly what she needed.

Cohen reached between them, and his fingers slipped through her wet folds. The moment his digits grazed her clit, she gasped, arching into him. The new angle seated him even deeper inside her, letting him hit deep spots that had her nearly weeping with pleasure. He didn't stop, his pace perfect.

She bucked into him as her release began, and above her, Cohen also increased his speed. He held her with his free hand, and just as Alana's orgasm crested, so did his. They came together, with Alana shouting his name and Cohen marking her with his bite.

The heat of the moment ... the intensity of it ... went right to her core, heightening her pleasure to an impossible level. He continued to move within her until he was softening. He quickly cleaned them off before joining her in bed again.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:04 am

Cohen bundled her into his arms and lay back on the pillows. “Alana Wixx, my mate.”

She sighed happily. “Cohen Pierce, my match.”

“I’m happy it’s you, Alana. That life led me to you. Fate might have chosen us for each other, but I would’ve chosen you.”

She snorted. “I’m not sure that’s entirely true. We fought so hard.”

He grinned. “Only because I knew that the second we were together, I would never be able to let you go. Turns out I was right.”

He flipped them over until Alana was sprawled on top of him. She giggled, using her hands on his strong chest to steady herself. “What’s happening?”

“I’m gonna show you just how much I love you, Alana. All night long. All life long.”
He kissed her gently, and she melted into him, letting go of her fears and loneliness.

Alana was home, and that home was Cohen Pierce, the surly sheriff. “I’m so happy you stole my heart just like you stole my booth. Both are yours now.”

Cohen chuckled. “Right back at you, love.”

EPILOGUE

MRS. FRANCIS

Only a few short days had passed since the latest big bad had come to town. Not that anyone would be able to tell from the looks of it. Everything was untouched, from the residents to the peaceful lake to the quaint shops lining Main Street.

Untouched and protected in a very big way.

Half Moon Key might be a small town hiding in a forested mountain with a nice lake, but the little town was home. It was a safe haven for a whole lot of people ... humans, witches, and shifters alike. It would always be a safe place for their kind, for anyone who needed to find where they belonged.

Mrs. Francis and the other elders had this dream, but it was her dearly departed husband who had led the charge. And to think that now, his legacy was going to be protected forever. The old woman was thankful on all levels. She walked by the police station on her way to the diner just as Alana and Cohen walked out of his place of work, holding hands.

“Hello, there,” Cohen called out with a smile that was a bit warmer than was usual for the typically gruff wolf shifter.

“You two are a sight for sore eyes. This is what an old woman wants to see. Young love.” She pressed a hand to her heart. “So wonderful, truly.”

“Well, we owe it to you.” Alana laughed. “Sure, I didn’t want you to hire this guy, but I’m definitely glad you did.”

Mrs. Francis tapped her nose. “I’m good at this stuff. It comes with age.”

Alana was waved forward by another Half Moon Key resident walking by. Apparently, there was a young child with a high fever, and the mother wanted to know if Alana had any tips and tricks that could help. The witch beamed. Being

asked a question like this definitely solidified how the townsfolk saw her.

His mate. The alpha mate. A witch. A good witch. Half Moon Key's own witch.

Taking the opportunity in hand, Cohen stepped closer to the elder. "Mrs. Francis, I've got a question for you."

The old woman grinned. "Oh? What can I do for you, Sheriff?"

"I was just wondering how it is that you know. How is it that you can guess who will be a good fit for Half Moon Key?"

She shrugged. "I have no clue, to be honest. I just feel it. With Jack, it was a bit different, of course. I can't explain it. I just knew that he would die if he stayed out there in the world. He's a good man, and I didn't want that on my conscience. That's why I brought him here."

"And me?" he pressed. "Why me?"

She grinned that knowing grin. "You're another one I had a feeling about ... I didn't think you would die out there like Jack, but I could tell you were hurting, that you needed a safe place to land."

"And there is no place safer than Half Moon Key," he added with a chuckle.

Mrs. Francis beamed at him. "That's exactly right. It is the safest place in the world for our kind of people."

"Shifters?"

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:04 am

“Maybe,” Mrs. Francis shrugged again. “But maybe not just shifters. Humans too. Think of Lila, Jade, Nora, and witches like your sweet Alana.”

It was his turn to beam at her. “She is sweet, isn’t she?”

Mrs. Francis threw her head back with a laugh. “And to think that only a little while ago, you claimed you hated her. You couldn’t be in the same room as her before you turned into a churlish, grumpy jerk.”

“I know, I will always feel bad for that, but you’ve got to understand, Mrs. Francis. I didn’t trust her because I ... ”

“You didn’t trust her because your ex hurt you so much that you completely lost trust in your heart. In yourself.”

His throat tightened. “That’s exactly right. The second I felt a physical attraction and pull toward Alana, I figured she was just like Amanda. It didn’t help that their names are very similar.”

“But they are not the same woman, and they are very different. I never met your ex, but I have known Alana for a very long time. She is a good person, and she has a good soul. She loves this town, and she will be a good alpha mate.”

“Alpha mate?” Cohen frowned. “Why would she be the alpha mate?”

“Because there was an emergency council meeting this morning. One that you were not invited to,” she quickly added when he opened his mouth to interject. “We passed

a vote, and you have been voted the Alpha of Half Moon Key.”

“But what are we? A pack? A pride?”

Mrs. Francis laughed. “Does it matter what we are? We’re a small town, a community, a family. You’re our alpha because you deserve to be. Alana too. We all know what she sacrificed to save Half Moon Key.”

“It wasn’t a sacrifice,” Alana interrupted as she joined them. The smile on the witch’s face made it damn obvious that she meant it too. She didn’t have any regrets or qualms about leaving her magic interwoven into Half Moon Key. “It was an act of love. One I would choose to do over and over again.”

“This town and its residents owe you.” Mrs. Francis inclined her head.

“No,” Alana argued. “They don’t. Trouble came to town because of me. I attracted it here.”

“That wasn’t your fault, love. You can’t take the blame for that, nor can you believe for one second that you deserve to be without your magic.”

Alana grinned. “Who said I am without my magic?”

Mrs. Francis and Cohen exchanged a confused glance.

“What do you mean?” Cohen asked. “Aren’t you without magic?”

Alana’s smile was so wide and bright that it made it a bit hard to look at her without squinting. “I thought about something ...” She knelt on the ground, placing her palm against the ground. It rumbled a bit as she wiggled her fingers in the grass. Off in the distance, the lake’s water began to form little waves.

Cohen gasped. “Are you the one doing that?”

She nodded. “Yeah. As it turns out, keeping the magic tied up in Half Moon Key doesn’t mean that I’m without it. It just means I am very connected to the town.”

Mrs. Francis took a deep, steady, and comforting breath. All of her fears for her hometown vanished in that instant. “I knew you would be an amazing alpha mate,” she said. “I could feel it.” She winked at them before leaving on her way to Moonie’s.

Unsurprisingly, the diner was busy. It was just about the end of the lunch rush, and people were settling up their bills, leaving empty plates in exchange for full and happy bellies.

Lila and Mason ran Moonie’s together, and though it was Lila’s family business, Mason was a chef by trade, and he had taken to the work very easily. The town had adopted him simply because he was a good person. The kind of man who didn’t mind working at the crack of dawn so long as it was done with his mate and future wife.

“Mrs. Francis! Mason will have your shredded carrots in a second,” Lila called out.

The elder settled at the counter, and moments later, Mason walked through the revolving kitchen door with a small white bowl of shredded carrots.

“If it wasn’t for your favorite food, I would never guess you’re a rabbit shifter. You’re so fierce, Mrs. Francis.”

She patted Mason’s cheek like a dotting grandmother might. “Rabbits are survivors, and they have a whole lot of children.” She swept the busy diner with her eyes. “And now, this mama bunny knows that her family will be okay forever. That’s all I could ask for.”

She forked some of the shredded carrots into her mouth, and their sweetness exploded on her tongue. All was right in her world ... in Half Moon Key ... and it always would be now that the town had an alpha and a witch to watch over it.

The shifter's safe haven would endure long after they were all old and gray.

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 2:04 am

Mrs. Francis continued to eat her shredded carrots when Parker and Jade, and Nora and Jack, came into the diner for a slice of Mason's pie. The three couples moved tables around so they could all sit together. They were soon joined by Cohen and Alana, who bickered on who would sit where, but it was only to be silly and reminiscent of their relationship's roots.

"And to think I chafed against this kind of family reunion my whole life," Nora giggled, earning herself a kiss on the cheek from Jack.

"This is fun," the mystery writer said. "A good break for us."

"A break from what?" Jade asked, her eyes sparkling with interest. Now that Jade and Parker were engaged with Cohen and Alana soon to follow them, Nora and Jack were probably the next to make their mating legal in the eyes of the government.

"We are writing a book together," Jack beamed. "A mystery book, obviously."

"But there's a love story in it," Nora sighed happily. "We're going to do the book tour as our honeymoon."

Jade punched the sky. "Yes! I knew it."

Nora flashed her brand-new engagement ring, the diamond twinkling under the diner lights. Congratulations were exchanged, and a bottle of champagne was produced from somewhere, no doubt care of Mason.

"Well, seeing as we are all sharing news ..." Parker began before exchanging a look

with Jade. “We might as well tell you that we’re expecting a brand new little human.”

Jade patted her stomach with one hand while pushing the champagne flute with the other. “I’m due in seven months, but no bubbly for this mama.”

Mrs. Francis tuned out of the conversation, paid for her carrots, and went out to walk to the bank, where her favorite bench was.

It was on this bench that she had kissed her husband for the first time, and it was where they held hands and watched the townsfolk go by. The elder smiled at the sun, basking in its warmth like a lover’s caress.

Half Moon Key was safe, and the next generation would thrive because of the magic woven into the very fabric of the town, despite the glitchy electricity and Wi-Fi, despite the seclusion. Those weren’t important, anyway.

Half Moon Key was a paradise forever protected by love and community.

The End.