



The Curse

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Description: Witches. Warlocks. Hocus Pocus. I didn't believe in any of those things. To be honest, the only thing I really believed in....really had faith in its existence, was bad luck. There was too much proof of it in my life to deny it. As it turns out, the bad luck that accompanies me wherever I go escalated to a heightened level following a visit from a long-lost relative I didn't even know existed. She starts spouting nonsense about my parents really loving me (even though they committed suicide a few days after my birth), how my mother tried using witchcraft to save their lives...and how there is a curse hanging over my head that requires my death on my twenty-fifth birthday. Supposedly all the Bailey men commit suicide on their twenty-fifth birthdays due to this curse. Total craziness, right? Wrong. A small dash of intrigue and a heaping-helping of fear cause me to pack up and head to Salem, Massachusetts – where it all started. Here's my biggest problem: my twenty-fifth birthday is only a couple of weeks away and I'm having these very sensual dreams about a man I don't know. I might not know him, but I sure want him.

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Prologue

There weren't many times in the past year that I felt any semblance of peace, but when I was stretched out on my back on the roof of my dorm, looking up at the stars, peace was so damned close that I felt like I should be able to reach out my hand and grab it. Even so, there was something missing. Like some really vital thing I should know, but couldn't quite grasp. It had all started on my last birthday and the closer I got to this year's , the more it tormented me, this thing I should be remembering, but couldn't.

My dorm was the tallest on campus, fourteen stories high, with a slightly slanted roof, making it perfect for stargazing while I was up there smoking a joint. Okay, so maybe smoking a joint on a slanted roof, fourteen stories off the ground, couldn't technically be considered a good idea, at least not a safe one, but I defended myself by arguing that we all had different opinions of what was considered good and peaceful. Mine just happened to be a bit dangerous, especially since I was fucking terrified of heights. It was one of those stupid, unexplained, irrational fears, since I'd never fallen or been caught in a situation where I was afraid of falling, but the fear was real. As in, fucking terrified.

Why do this, then? Because, obviously, I couldn't smoke a joint in my room, and once I found a way to access the roof, I knew it was the perfect place. No, I didn't have any kind of death wish, but I loved lying there and communing with the moon and stars. This may sound crazy, but sometimes I could have sworn the moon was leaning out of the sky to whisper a name to me. Even the stars chimed in one by one to softly chant the word, but the harder I tried to grab onto it, to let it slide into my conscious mind, the more it slipped away. There were some who said it was just the

weed, but I knew better.

It's well-known, among those who smoke a lot of marijuana, anyway, that to stop smoking is to invite a sudden torrent of crazy, vivid dreams. Just Google "weed and dreams" and there are tons of stories. So it was easy enough to chalk up all the weird dreams I'd been having this past year to my use of illegal substances. But I knew better. I knew that whatever it was, it was coming for me, for good or ill, and I had to be ready. And I knew that when it came, it was going to change my life. All I had to do was remember what the hell it was.

My college was a small, no glam, no prestige university called Kempler College, nestled in the mountains of Tennessee. It was a state funded school where many kids like me who grew up in the foster system, were given grants and scholarships so we could attend college for free. Tennessee was where I'd spent the last five years of my life and had, up until my birthday a year ago, been where I'd planned on spending the rest of it. Then all the dreams and yearnings started, and I began to feel like my destiny was someplace else, someplace far away from the beautiful Tennessee hills. All I had to do was figure out where that place was.

I'd gotten a late start in college, because, while I had received a small scholarship, it didn't pay all the bills and I had to work and save for a couple of years after high school to be able to afford tuition. I majored in History, maybe because there were so many gaps in my own, and I had graduated at the end of the first semester that year. For lack of anything better to do, I applied for a Master's program and had been accepted. I was taking a little break until summer session started up in June. I had some vague idea about eventually teaching, but mostly I guess I was just drifting, waiting for my future to happen.

All my plans and dreams changed abruptly one day, though, with one brief visit from a lady I'd never met or even heard of before.

I'd made plans to meet a friend of mine after class, but first I'd decided to stop by my room and change clothes. As I walked through the front door, I noticed a silver BMW parked in front of my building. An elegant, white-haired lady was sitting in it as I passed by. My first thought was that she must be some parent picking up their kid and then I wondered if she was lost because of the way she was looking around at all the students passing by. As I sauntered past the car, the window glided down and she leaned out. "Excuse me, boy. Are you Nicholas Bailey?" she asked, looking me up and down. "You are, aren't you?"

"Uh, yes ma'am that's me. But I have to tell you if you're selling magazine subscriptions or Avon or something, you're barking up the wrong tree. I'm as broke as a convict."

She looked at me like I'd suggested she might come up on the roof and light up a joint with me. "No, young man, I am not selling magazines, and I don't think people go door to door selling Avon anymore, do they?" she asked with a little sniff. "No, I don't have anything to sell you, but I have been looking for you for the past year."

"You have? Why?" I blushed a little because she was still staring at me so intently, and I was puzzled as to what this could possibly be about, but I didn't want to be rude or anything. I mean, she was kinda old. And rich. I could see that as she got out of the car, wearing expensive clothes and flashing a lot of diamonds on her fingers and wrists.

I smiled politely and began to back away from the car. "Uh, I think you must have the wrong Nicholas Bailey, ma'am."

"No, I don't think so. You have the look of your father." Okay, that got my attention.

"My father?" I replied, choking on a bitter little laugh. "Now I know you have the wrong person. My old man is dead and has been since right after I was born. And I

have to tell you if this has anything to do with him, then I'm not interested."

"Don't be rude, child. If you'll just invite me in for a minute, I can explain." She gave me a look that told me, A—she didn't like my attitude and B—she wasn't used to people turning her down. What was I gonna do? Turn my back on her? To tell the truth, I would have been afraid to. The look in her bright blue eyes was fierce. I had to admit I was curious. I invited her to follow me inside.

We rode up in the elevator without saying another word and she came in my room looking around at the empty pizza boxes and books and trash on the floor and then gave me one raised eyebrow. I smiled a little sheepishly and shrugged. Hey, she was the one who wanted to come up to my room. She sat down on the edge of the one chair in the room that I got at the Goodwill, doing one of those one butt cheek hangs, like people do when they're afraid they'll get the cooties if they sit back too far, but they're trying to be polite. I noticed she kept her expensive handbag in her lap. Good call—I hadn't vacuumed the rug in...hell, who was I kidding? I never vacuumed.

I grabbed a Coke from the little fridge I had under my desk and offered her one, which she declined with another little sniff. I shrugged and sat down.

"Lady, if this really is about my father, I have to tell you I don't really care. I'm not trying to be rude, but my parents—"

I broke off, a little choked up. I had no idea why it bothered me after all this time. Maybe it was the waste of it all. I'd always just assumed my mother and father must have been on some heavy-duty drugs. I didn't know that for sure, but they had killed themselves five days after I was born, within five feet of my baby crib. With me in it. Selfish bastards.

"People like my parents are not people I want to know anything about."

She leaned forward a little. “Young man, you have no idea what you’re talking about. Myname is Hephzibah Banks. I was your mother’s aunt, and I know for a fact that both your parents loved you very much. They were so excited when you were born...” She opened her bag and took out a little hankie. No shit. Not some wadded up Kleenex, but an honest to God white hankie with embroidered initials on it. I just stared at her as she dabbed at her eyes.

“I’m sorry. I still get emotional even after all these years.”

“Yeah, um, I see that, but look, Mrs... Uh?”

“Banks. It’s your mother’s maiden name, you know.”

“Okay. And excuse me, but I’m having a problem believing that line of—excuse my language, ma’am—bullshit, since my parents killed themselves like I said and just left me there. I wasn’t found for three days, and not another living soul understood how I even survived. I’ve spent the majority of my life thinking that they hadn’t intended for me to survive. The way I figure it is that they just didn’t have the guts to kill me themselves. So they left me to die slowly, completely alone and surrounded by the decaying bodies of people who should have loved me. What kind of people do something like that?”

She leaned forward again and fixed me with a look. “Young man, I don’t know you. But I can tell you right now, without any fear of contradiction, that you are full of shit.”

That surprised a laugh out of me and she smiled. “Young people aren’t the only ones who can curse when they need to get someone’s attention. Your mother was myniece. Iknewboth your parents well. I visited her those last few months on several occasions, and I helped her decorate the nursery, laughed with her over baby name books and watched her cry real tears of joy when she talked about the baby growing in her

womb. Your father was equally smitten with you, working two jobs so there'd be plenty of money to purchase all the things a new baby would need. Regardless of how many hours he worked, or how tired he had to be, he was always excited to come home and see the progress she'd made on the nursery. Because she worked on that room every chance she got. She was so proud of the baby boy coming to her."

That all sounded really sweet and all, but I still wasn't picking up what she was putting down. Again, I was calling bullshit in my head, but I let her keep on with her fantasy story. I hated to be rude, but I was going to let her have her say and then politely walk her out to the curb.

Then, out of nowhere, her voice got low and conspiratorial. She leaned so far toward me I just knew she was about to fall off that chair. She acted like she had some kind of epic secret to share. "I have something to tell you, young man. Something shocking. One month before you were born, someone or something frightened your parents badly. Your mother had been expecting it in a way, but when it actually came, she was devastated. Shocked. And after that, everything changed. Your parents were no longer happy and excited about your birth. They became terrified and grief-stricken. They knew they were going to die."

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I swear to God a cold breeze wafted through the room out of nowhere and slipped down the neck of my shirt. I shuddered and opened my eyes wide to really look at this woman. “Ma’am, if you don’t mind my asking—and I really hate to be an asshole and all—but just who the fuck are you?”

She smiled. “I already told you. I’m your great-aunt Hephzibah. Don’t you believe me?”

“I’m not exactly sure what to believe right now.”

“What I’m telling you is the truth. I assure you your parents’ love for you never wavered or diminished in the least, but they both changed almost overnight from excited and happy parents-to-be to paranoid people who began to let fear rule their lives. Your mother’s health deteriorated. She was doing everything in her power to keep her little family safe. Unfortunately, it didn’t work.”

She reached down in that bag again and brought out an envelope. “I made a vow to your mother that if anything should happen to her and to your father, I’d find you when the time came and give you this letter. The fact that my family did nothing to stop this thing from happening to your parents still haunts me to this day, but our hands were tied. We were devastated, but were powerless to stop it. There was a curse, you see.”

I gave her a look of blatant disbelief. “A curse?”

“Yes, and don’t give me that look, young man. Curses, like witches, have existed throughout all time. This was a curse of black magic. An evil curse so powerful that

none of us could break it. The spell was made with a blood sacrifice, you see. An unthinkable evil one.”

She held the yellowed envelope out to me, and for a minute I was actually afraid to even touch it. I felt another chill run down my back. Somebody just stepped on my grave. I looked up wordlessly at Mrs. Banks, the woman who called herself my great aunt Hephzibah, and she shook the envelope a little. “Well go ahead, boy. It’s not going to bite you.”

I jerked it out of her hand with maybe a little more force than I absolutely needed to and opened it up. The envelope contained some faded pink stationery, five pages of it stained with tears. It was written in a flowery longhand that I could barely even read. It took me a while to decipher it. It was from my mother.

Like my visitor had already told me, my mother declared in her letter how much she and my father loved me, how much they’d wanted to stay with me. There’d been sweet details about the first time my mother had felt me move inside her or how amazed my father was when she’d placed his hand on her belly and let him feel the butterfly flutters. There’d been plans for my future, all the things they wanted to see me do—like take my first steps, hear my first word, witness my first day of school, throw a football—the list had gone on and on. Then on page four, the letter had taken a decidedly malevolent turn.

“Darling, if you’re reading this, then my worst fears have come true and I wasn’t able to stop the curse from taking your father’s life. Without him, I simply can’t go on, but for you I would have tried. I would never have left you in the world alone and defenseless. So since you’re reading this now, my backup plan to save myself has failed too. I can only tell you that someone is coming for us and I’m afraid that no matter what we do to stop them, we won’t be able to survive. I’m enclosing a family tree with as much detail as I could in the short period of time we’ve had to prepare. Read the information carefully, darling. It describes an evil curse that originated in

1717, in Marblehead, Massachusetts—one that directly affects all the male descendants of your father's line.”

That page ended, and curious, I turned it over to read what came next. I had to read it three times before the words began to make any sense—before they finally imprinted themselves on my brain.

All the males on your father's side of the family commit suicide on the occasion of their twenty-fifth birthday.

I read that line again and really let it sink in. This was April, and my twenty-fifth birthday was only a few weeks away, on May fifteenth.

And despite how truly evil that is, once every one hundred years, another event coincides with that death. On that occasion, the man who commits suicide is the actual reincarnation of Nicodemus Bailey, a young man who lived and died in Salem in 1717. Nicodemus was the soul mate and true love of Corbin Hargreaves, a powerful witch who lived in Marblehead, Massachusetts, and who disappeared without a trace the same fateful night his true love died.

That terrible event—Nicodemus's suicide—takes place again every one hundred years. Nicodemus is reincarnated into the body of on one of his descendants, and this is where the story gets even murkier. That descendant somehow finds his lost love not long before his birthday and is reunited with him. He and Corbin Hargreaves are deliriously happy once again—until the descendant has his twenty-fifth birthday. Then, even Corbin's magic is unable to save him, and Corbin is forced again to watch him die. And again, Corbin disappears, not to resurface for another hundred years. The year of your twenty-fifth birthday, 2017, will be the third time this atrocity recurs. Unless you can find a way to stop it. I think you can.

I looked up from the letter and shook my head. Reincarnation? Curses? True love and

mysterious disappearances? Complete bullshit, right? Had to be. I sure as hell didn't believe in curses and I didn't believe suicide was ever the answer either.

My great aunt, if that's who she really was, hadn't been there more than twenty minutes, but she'd managed to alter my entire life in that short amount of time. Not that I believed it, of course. It was crazy! Nuts! I looked up from the letter to tell old Great Aunt Hephzibah exactly what I thought of this bullshit letter, and she was looking at me so sadly I didn't have the heart to tell her what I wanted to say.

"I'm sorry, dear," she said. "But if it's any consolation, your mother truly believed you would be the one to break the curse. She believed it with every fiber of her being."

"I don't understand. Who was my mother? How did she know all this about my father's family?"

"Your mother was Rosalie Banks. And she volunteered to come and meet your father on the occasion of his twenty-fourth birthday to try to warn him. Unfortunately, she took one look at him and fell in love. I say unfortunately, because once she fell in love, she refused to leave him and it sealed her own fate. We knew that in that year, 1991, he would meet someone, fall in love, marry and begin his family. We didn't know that it would be with our Rosalie. She was so in love with your father that she couldn't leave him to his fate. She hoped up until the last that she could manage to save him. But she was also a realist—she knew that she might not be able to. And she had premonitions of the future." She looked over at me long and hard. "Your mother was a talented witch who gave her life for you and your father. She told me not long before you were born, 'I still have hope to save my sweet husband, but if I should fail, my son, Nicholas, will be the one to stop this from ever happening again. He will find his true love, Corbin Hargreaves, and they will end this curse together. They will live happily ever after—unlike my sweet husband and I. But if the worst happens, then we will go to our deaths knowing that our baby will be the one. He will break

the curse forever and end this terrible cycle.”

“Wait a minute,” I said, wiping some traitorous tears from my eye. I didn’t believe this bullshit. Not for a second, but the love my mother felt for me shone through the words on the page. I felt it as if she’d been in the room there with me. For the first time in my life, I felt loved—both by her and my father. And I felt cheated. Something had happened to take them away from me, and if it was the last thing I ever did, I was going to find out what that was.

“If my mother’s family knew about this, like you say you did, why did you leave me in foster care?”

“To protect you. It was your mother’s wish to save your life at all costs. She cast spells to help you survive until you were found. She thought going to foster care might help stop the curse from finding you before you were ready. When you turned twenty-four, I started looking for you, and I’ve only just found you. I’m sorry you had to go through that, dear. But know that it was done out of love for you and fear for your safety.”

My great aunt left not long after, saying that she would be in touch. I didn’t ask her any questions—just let her go. That night, I got shitfaced drunk and had a pity party for one. I’m embarrassed to say I cried for a long time. I cried for my mother who had called medarling. I cried for the parents I’d never known but who were so obviously disturbed. How could they both have believed that foolishness my mother was spouting in the letter? How had she convinced my father of her craziness to the point that he killed himself right along with her and left me high and dry? I cried for all those dreams of theirs gone up in smoke. All the things they’d planned for me, all the things I missed because they were dead, by their own insane choice.

Eventually, I moved on from crying to cussing. I cussed them for leaving me behind, and for leaving me a fucking note that gave me only a cruel taste of what might have

been. For putting all these ridiculous doubts inside my head. Suicide at the age of twenty-five? Fuck that shit.

When I'd sobered up, I put my brand-new history degree to the test and began researching the small amount of information I'd received from my so-called great aunt Hephzibah and the letter, feeling one hundred percent certain that I'd find that my parents were total nut jobs and the supposed family curse was nothing more than a figment of their very vivid imaginations.

But that's not what I found at all. And that, unfortunately, was when shit got real.

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Chapter One

I didn't want to leave Tennessee, but I suddenly began to feel like I didn't have another choice. No, I didn't for a minute believe that I was going to commit suicide on my twenty-fifth birthday, which was still weeks away. And I had absolutely no fear whatsoever that I would be tempted in any way to hurt myself. But something seemed to be driving me on, guiding my actions. It sounded weird, even in my own head, but since I read that letter, I'd felt almost a compulsion to find out why the rest of my family had taken such a different and tragic path.

Since my family history had all started in Marblehead, Massachusetts, I immediately started looking for jobs there that could justify me moving in that direction. I sent a letter to the dean, requesting removal from their Master's program and I began to research jobs in and around the area of Marblehead. And—just like magic—I found one almost immediately. I came across an ad for an assistant position at the Goodheart Witch Museum in Salem, and I applied. I heard back that same afternoon and was offered the job. Again, just like that. I couldn't believe my good fortune. It almost seemed too good to be true.

The night before I left, I lay out on the roof, smoking and talking to maybe the only real friend I had at Kempler, Evie Redd. I'd met her one day on the roof, a fellow smoker, and we'd kind of bonded over a shared history as foster kids.

“Are you excited about beginning your new adventure tomorrow, Nico?” Evie asked, blowing out a column of smoke and rolling over to look me in the eye. My name was Nicholas, but Evie had always called me Nico. It struck me as really weird now, knowing that was the name of the man I was supposedly the reincarnation of.

“Who would have ever thought you would be headed to Marblehead, Massachusetts, and I would be leaving for New York City? When I imagined our futures, I always pictured us staying in Tennessee—maybe moving to Knoxville and turning into a Volunteer fan.”

“Get a grip. You know as well as I do that I’ll never be a Vols fan—I’m Crimson Tide through and through, and we hate all things orange.” Evie was the only person on campus that I would miss, actually. She was the first woman I’d ever made love to, before we realized we were better friends than lovers, and she was the only person who knew about my parent’s suicide.

It wasn’t something I liked sharing with other people. It wasn’t that I was ashamed that they’d committed suicide, exactly, but more like I was ashamed they’d left me behind. I hadn’t, however, told Evie anything about the supposed family curse that would require me to take my own life the fifteenth of May. “Anyway, who says that both of us won’t be back here in Tennessee before the year is up? There’s no reason for you to give up on your dream of us making Knoxville home—just that really stupid part about me ever becoming a Volunteer fan.”

She snorted. “That would be nice, wouldn’t it?” She reached over and wrapped our hands together. “You have to promise you won’t forget me, Nico. I really am going to come visit you, you know, just like I said. You know I don’t make friends easily and I just know I’m going to be a lost country girl in the big city. I’m afraid I’m going to be swallowed up and forgotten.”

“You’re fucking gorgeous, Evie. I hardly think you’ll be overlooked or swallowed up,” I argued. I wasn’t just doing lip service either. She was gorgeous. Tall and curvaceous, beautiful auburn hair, bright green eyes, and pretty pink lips. Every guy and a few girls had fallen in love with Evie at one point or another over the past six years. Hell, I’d fancied myself in love with her every damned day of our freshman year. Thankfully, it had only taken one disastrous fuck for us to realize it wasn’t

meant to be.

“Thank you, Nico,” she answered shyly, totally in denial of how beautiful, inside and out, she truly was. “What about you though? Isn’t Salem like really close to Marblehead? You’ll have every little witch in Salem trying to cast spells to get you into their beds. I can’t wait until I get to visit. I’ve heard that the tourists wear witch costumes and pointy hats while enjoying the local tourist traps. I can’t wait. I’m going to buy myself the coolest witch hat on the market and totally embarrass your pretty ass. It’s going to be awesome,” she teased in a singsong voice.

“You could never embarrass me, babe. Never. And I can’t wait either.”

“I’m going to miss you, Nicholas Bailey. Take care of yourself and have a wickedly hot warlock picked out for me when I come. I’ll need something to play with on my first visit.”

“I’m going to miss you, too, Evie Redd,” I said. “And don’t worry, one wickedly hot warlock will be available for you to play with when you come to visit. Witches’ honor.” All this witch talk felt weird after my great-aunt’s visit, but I played along anyway.

She growled. “But you’re not a witch! Were you a Boy Scout at least? Try Scout’s honor,” she pleaded.

I shook my head. I definitely wasn’t a Boy Scout.

I may have been teasing about witches with Evie, but I had a real purpose in mind for moving so far from home, and it had nothing to do with witchcraft. I needed to find out why the hell my male relatives all seemed to lose their minds on their twenty-fifth birthdays. In my research, I’d discovered that my male relatives had indeed all committed suicide on their birthday, and I mean likeallof them—stretching back to

my great-grandfather's suicide by walking off a cliff on his twenty-fifth in 1817 to another great-grandfather standing up and walking into the German gunfire on the battlefield in Arras, France, on April 5, 1917. My own father killed himself with a single bullet to the temple in 1992. As to why they did this unthinkable thing? On that, I came up blank. Nada. Nothing.

I keep telling myself it has nothing to do with witchcraft or curses.

Surely there had to be a logical explanation as to why the Bailey men felt the need to off themselves, and sometimes their significant others. There had to be one, but I sure as hell couldn't figure out what that fucking explanation might be.

The next morning I overslept, missed my flight and had to wait three hours for the next one. Once I arrived in Massachusetts, there weren't any rental cars available, and I ended up having to take a fucking taxi all the way to Marblehead—where I'd rented a small cottage for the duration of my stay. I didn't have a clue how long that would be, but I wasn't going into it with the idea that Marblehead, Salem, or anywhere else in Massachusetts would be my forever home. I simply needed to do some research about my family history, and, if one believed in family curses, I probably only had weeks left to get all my researching completed.

"This is the address, kid. Looks like you owe me three hundred and twelve dollars, plus a tip, of course," the man behind the wheel said.

He had a grin on his pocked face that told me he was somehow involved with the fucking car rental place at the airport. Them not having my car available and me having to pay over three hundred dollars was not nearly as innocent as they'd tried to make it appear. Fucking pricks. It was like I was cursed or something. Ha!

"I hope you take plastic," I muttered as I reached into my wallet to pull out my check card. I handed him my card as I realized my new life was starting out about as sucky

as possible. Perfect.

When the card was approved, he ran the ticket and handed it to me. “Don’t forget the tip. This here trip took me away from my little one’s birthday party.”

Here’s a tip—hygiene’s important. Instead of saying it, though, I added a generous amount and handed it back to him. I had enough bad mojo going on, and it wasn’t like I could take it with me when I died. Maybe he would invest in some soap and toothpaste. It could be my last contribution to society.

Weird, my death jokes weren’t funny at all anymore. Why did I keep pulling them out of my ass? Maybe it was like whistling in the dark—trying to get my courage up and convince myself that all this was just some crazy ass coincidence or some kind of inherited madness that I’d been lucky enough to dodge.

Forty-five minutes later, I was sitting on the front porch of the small colonial cottage, waiting for someone from the rental office to show up with a key. Because, naturally, it hadn’t been left for me as they’d promised. Seriously, what was going on? I hadn’t been the least bit surprised when taxi driver hadn’t even offered to help me get my luggage out of the back of the taxi, nor was I surprised when the key wasn’t under the flower pot like they’d promised. What I was surprised about was that it wasn’t raining. A savage New England coastal storm would have fucked up my fucking arrival even more.

Frustrated, I leaned my head back against the back of one of the cozy chairs that decorated the small front porch. A rain drop splatted against my forehead.

Fucking perfect.

By the time the guy from the rental agency arrived, I was soaked to the bone and most of my belongings were soaked as well since the overhang on the small porch

hadn't been large enough to protect it from the fierce storm that sent hail and cold rain down on me with a force that would probably leave bruises. I was tired, hungry, and pissed off. I was also lonely.

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“Sorry about that, Mr. Bailey,” the younger man said. “I swear that the key was there. I dropped it off myself earlier today. Shit, you’re soaked. I’m really, really sorry.”

Pretty gray eyes that appeared incredibly nervous and ashamed, looked up at me from behind bangs that were too long and dyed a cool lavender shade over his natural blond. The kid couldn’t be older than eighteen. His next statement made me feel like an old man instead of twenty-four years old.

“Are you gonna tell my mom?” He grinned when he said it, like there was something hilariously funny about him getting into trouble with his mommy.

My head started splitting—as if there was a tiny man standing on top of my head with a pickax, swinging for all he was worth. My clothes were soaked and plastered against my skin. I was freezing. Still hungry. Yet those big Bambi eyes got to me.

“Nah, it was just a mix-up. No big deal. Thanks for getting here so quickly,” I answered. He was sweet enough and easy on the eyes, but now I wanted him to go away. First, I was going to order a large pizza with everything on it. Then, I needed to get in a hot shower, start a fire, and snuggle up in a thick, furry blanket. Once all those things were in progress, I could start worrying about the fact that it would be around midnight which meant I probably had one day less left to walk this earth.

Another not-so-funny joke.

I paused for a second, wondering if I was beginning to believe that I was going to die on my twenty-fifth birthday? Did I secretly think something was going to happen in the next weeks that might lead to making me want to commit suicide? Or was this

whole situation just getting to me?

“Cool, man. I appreciate it. For what it’s worth, I really did drop the key off. You might want to mention to my mom that you’d like the locks changed.” He shrugged. “Not that Marblehead sees much crime, but you can’t ever be too careful.” He jammed his hands into his baggy jeans and said, “I overheard that you were going to work at Goodheart’s Museum in Salem. Cool. But be careful. There’s a bunch of freaky shit that goes on over there. Watch your back.” He grinned and then added, “By the way, they frown on magic from different covens in Salem, so you might want to tuck that energy back in a bit. Trust me on this, you don’t want Morgan Goodheart as an enemy.”

I had no freaking idea what he was talking about, but since I just wanted him gone so I could take a shower, I nodded and smiled.

He pulled his hands out of pockets and offered me a handshake. “The name’s Alastair. If you get bored and need somebody fun to show you around town, hunt me up. I’ve lived here my entire life, so there’s not a thing or place I don’t know.” After we shook hands, he tucked his longish hair behind his ear. “How old are you, anyway? You seem awfully young for somebody with a master’s degree. I was expecting somebody a little older when my mom told me to drop the key off for the new tenant.”

Huh. Odd how the news about me had traveled so fast. I’d only told the lady who hired me at the museum about my educational background. And yeah, I may have fudged a little on the Master’s degree thing, implying I already had it, instead of just being a candidate for it. I hadn’t expected the news to go viral.

Why wouldn’t he leave? He had to see the puddle of water I was standing in because my clothes had dripped a river’s worth of water. “I’m twenty-four,” I said, answering his question. I started walking toward the door, hoping he would take the hint and

pull a disappearing act. Thankfully, he followed behind me.

“Twenty-four? You look younger.”

“Thanks. I think. Well, it was nice meeting you.” I opened the door and hoped he took the hint. He did.

“See ya later, Nicholas. Don’t forget what I said about watching your back and tucking your energy away in Salem,” he warned as he moved toward the threshold.

I just nodded again and looked down at myself. Where exactly was my “energy” sticking out? What the fuck did he mean by energy? I wasn’t sending out any energetic vibes. If anything, I was begging that he pull a disappearing act. I laughed, feeling uncomfortable. “Don’t tell me you believe in all the witchcraft hype?”

“Witchcraft hype?” he asked with raised eyebrows. “I wouldn’t go around making comments like that or you won’t be very popular in Salem or Marblehead. Don’t deny the power and beauty of witchcraft.”

I saw that it had miraculously stopped storming since I got inside my rental unit and I stood in the doorway as he went to his car, looking up at the sky.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I answered dryly as he started down my walkway.

“Call me if you get bored!” His voice echoed against the cobblestone streets of Marblehead.

I frowned as I watched him disappear into the darkness. I glanced up at the sky and wondered if the moon and stars would whisper to me here. Were they still trying to give me a name? Was it the name of my true love? I came out from under the porch and gazed up at the sky, trying to get a glimpse of the moon. As I did, a lightning bolt

ripped through the clouds, lighting up the porch and scaring the shit out of me with a huge clap of thunder. I was beginning to be convinced that someone was very aware a Bailey had come back to Marblehead.

Chapter Two

The shower water never got good and hot. I never got a fire started in the fireplace. The blankets weren't furry, and the pizza wasn't all that great. But I did make it to work on my first day with a whole two minutes to spare. Amazing really, since I'd had disturbing dreams all night long. Someone kept calling to me, over and over. They were just ahead of me in a mist, walking toward me, I was sure. But just as they got closer, it seemed like a thick blanket of fog dropped down on top of me so I couldn't find my way. It even muffled the sound. Suffice to say I didn't get much sleep at all.

I was usually boringly punctual, always trying to be at least fifteen minutes early, and running late really fucked with my head. I could have very easily written this move off as a total loss, but then I met the lady I'd be working with at the museum, Anabella Buchanan or just Bella, as she told me to call her, and my day brightened immediately. She seemed incredibly nice, helpful, and very intelligent actually. Her love for history was as evident as her enthusiasm. Sure, I'd mostly accepted the job so I could research my family history in the very town where it had all started, but enjoying the new job in Salem while I was here would make the adjustment period a heck of a lot easier.

It wasn't the famous Salem Witch museum, but I could tell this smaller museum was well funded and exhibited a love for Salem's unique history while still focusing some on area history as well. From my brief research before accepting the job, I'd found that it was privately funded and had been in operation for nearly one hundred and fifty years. The same family, the Goodhearts, had maintained ownership all that time. While they dealt with the historical aspects of Salem and witchcraft, they also seemed

to focus a great deal of time and energy on the newer, more modern tales of sorcery, witchcraft, and warlocks. From what I'd seen online, their library was extensive. I couldn't wait to dig in and see what I could find regarding the Bailey name.

"We are so incredibly excited to have you on board, Mr. Bailey," Annabella gushed with enthusiasm. "It isn't often we receive many resumes with your credentials that are willing to work for our pay scale. The other museum is going to be green with envy when they hear that we've snagged someone with a Master's Degree."

I wasn't sure how to respond. Guilt over my lie regarding my education kept my lips firmly sealed shut. I was a firm believer that while education is important, experience is far more valuable. I didn't suppose there was any need to mention that little fact, though. No need pointing out my shortcomings to my new boss. "I'm the lucky one. Working in Salem has been a lifelong dream of mine. Trust me when I say I'm more excited to be here than you are to have me."

She rubbed her hands together with obvious excitement and said, "Let's give you a tour of the museum first. After that, I'll show you to your office, and then we'll review Morgan's plans for your first project. She wants to create a spell room where we display some of the more prominent casting spells, old and new, and, of course, include all the usual, unusual, and downright gross ingredients. The modern spells and items won't be a problem. Your focus will be on what our witches and warlocks used hundreds of years ago." She stood up and motioned for me to follow her. "Don't worry about that now, though. I'll give you all the information you need and point you in the right direction for research when the time comes. Right now, I want you to focus on the beauty of our museum. It is three stories of pure witchy heaven."

I tried to smile at her passion for all things witchy, but I'm afraid my face said "what the fuck" instead. It sounded a lot like Bella was a one hundred percent believer in witchcraft, and I wasn't sure where I stood on the whole witchcraft platform. If it weren't for my family history and the brutal fact that it looked like someone had put a

curse on us, I'd categorize all witchcraft as hogwash and hocus pocus.

I followed her down the hall and wondered what pure witchy heaven looked like. From the outside, I had to admit the building was above and beyond impressive. It fit nicely with the Colonial architecture of Salem but still managed to be larger and more majestic than the surrounding structures. It was newer than most of the buildings in the downtown area, but had been built to appear old. I actually found it shocking that they had managed to get a building permit in the historic area at all.

"The offices are all along this corridor and kept separate from the museum areas on the first and second floors. The third floor is where the owner, Morgan Goodheart, lives. That floor is, of course, strictly off limits. I won't take you to see your office now, but it's at the end of this hall. Morgan's office is right next to yours. I'm sure she'll be a huge asset as you learn the ins and outs of the museum's workings."

My office being located right next to the owner's sounded like loads of fun. Not.

About that time, a tall woman exploded from one of the doorways and started in our direction. She was on her cell phone, laughing with whoever was on the other end of the line. Since all her attention was focused on the phone call, I grabbed a good look at her sexy curves without her noticing.

She was fucking gorgeous—as in model material. Long legs, a trim waist, drool-worthy boobs, and inky black hair that hung in cascading waves of silk—all formed a package of perfection. Her pale skin was flawless, and she had the sexiest slanted eyes I'd ever seen in my life. Except that there was something...off about her. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I knew it was there, teasing my subconscious.

I loved women...suspected I might love men, even more, but I'd never reacted to one quite this way. My body was buzzing with an electric current that was probably a mixture of lust and arousal, but it was so strong, so overwhelming, that it felt almost

painful. The tips of my fingers started throbbing and burning, and I couldn't help but be thankful that it was my fingertips instead of my cock. Explaining a raging hard on to my new boss might be difficult or, at the very least, uncomfortable. Feeling strange, I crammed my hands into the pockets of my khaki's.

About the same time that I made a move to hide my hands, her head snapped up and purple-blue eyes locked onto me. She was holding a handful of files, her cell, and a steaming cup of coffee, all of which hit the floor of the hallway when her eyes locked with mine. For a split second, I wondered if I should be impressed with her reaction to seeing me for the first time. Thanks to good genes, I'm not hard on the eyes, but I've never managed a reaction quite like hers before. My good mood evaporated, though, when she opened her mouth.

"Nico!" She hissed in a sexy voice that, unfortunately, sounded like a mixture of shock and disgust, heavy on the disgust.

Bella had immediately dropped to her knees and began retrieving all the items Morgan had dropped, soaking up the spilled coffee with the hem of her skirt as she repeatedly mumbled one apology after another—like she'd done something to cause Morgan to lose control of her grip.

Unsure of how she knew my nickname or how I should react to her, I decided to try a professional, polite technique I used when I pretended to be an adult. Closing the distance between us, I held out my hand and said, "Nicholas Bailey. It's very nice to meet you." My hand hung in the air between us as she glared down at it, and I could practically feel the fury bubbling inside her veins. The eyes that had appeared a pretty violet just a few seconds ago suddenly looked to be an icy gray. When she made no attempt to shake my hand, I finally tucked it back into my pocket and weakly added, "It's great to be on board. I'm excited about joining your team."

She glared harder.

Bella's nervous whimper reminded me that she was still on the ground between us.

"Here, let me help, Bella," I said as I started to kneel to help clean up Morgan's mess.

"Don't. You. Move."

The words were spoken with such a cold authority that I froze in a half crouch position. "Excuse me?" I asked in disbelief.

"I can't believe you actually came here. Can you not take a hint? I did everything in my power to send you the messagenotto come here, but you came anyway. Why are you here, Nico? Did you come to Salem to make my job easier, or did you actually think you could somehow avoid your fate? At least you've saved me the trouble of having to hunt you down and take care of our usual business."

And soooo she was crazy. The pretty ones always were.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I answered softly, backing away slowly. It was my feeble attempt to not startle or scare the crazy person. When you see a wild animal in its habitat, you should try to slowly remove yourself in a non-threatening way. Wild animals and crazy people—it was all the same, right?

"This...this gentleman is our new employee, Miss Goodheart," Bella stammered nervously from her submissive spot on the floor. "You told me it was okay to hire someone, preferably someone with a history degree, to help us with the numerous projects we have on the agenda for this year. Mr. Bailey sent in his resume, and when I saw his credentials, I took the liberty of making him an offer for the open position. He's...he has a master's in history...so I went ahead and hired him. I thought you would be impressed."

"Did you now?" Morgan said in a voice that sounded eerily threatening. "Well...you

and I shall discuss that later. Run along, Annabella. Nico and I have some things to discuss.”

Bella scampered away like a scolded puppy, never once even looking in my direction. I turned back to Morgan and noticed that her eyes were changing colors again. They’d started purple, turned icy gray, and were now a dark, ugly color...headed in the direction of black. She must wear special contacts that would change colors, like mood contacts. It was probably something she wore to add some mystical magic while she gave tours of the museum. I wasn’t sure how the tourists felt about it, but they gave me the creeps.

“I’ll ask you one more time, Nico,” she said. “Why did you come here anyway after all the hints I sent you to stay away?”

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Her crazy badge, like her contacts, just flipped over to bitch badge. I had a strong feeling that Morgan and I weren't going to get along. I leaned against the wall and answered her as casually as I could, "Well, I came for the job, but it looks like I'm going to get so much more." Lazily I glanced down at the files Annabella had stacked neatly but still rested on the floor. The top file was labeled "NB May 15th". Well, well, well. I came to Salem looking for answers—maybe I'd just stumbled upon one. "Why do you think I'm here, Morgan Goodheart?" I studied her body language, looking for anything that would give me a fucking clue about what was going on, but I didn't pick up on much. She wasn't afraid or intimidated by my presence...just surprised and annoyed. The electric currents that had been sizzling through my blood suddenly fizzled away, leaving me feeling strangely weak and vulnerable.

When I looked at her eyes, they were once again purple.

"I think you're here looking for answers, aren't you, silly boy? I think you've traced your pathetic ancestors back to Salem and you've come all this way in a desperate attempt to understand why your family's cursed." She took a step in my direction. Her lips were twisted in an evil smirk. "You've wasted your time, sweet Nico. You'll find no answers to your questions here." She laughed and added, "Nor will you amuse yourself with a job with me. You're fired. Go away, love. I'll see you again in a few days. It isn't our time. Not just yet."

Panic exploded in my body. I somehow knew that all the answers I'd been seeking were right in front of me, but she, the carrier of answers, was about to walk out of my life. I'd been fired. Desperately, I asked, "What do you know about my family? About the curse?"

Those eyes glittered with amusement. “Ah, Nico,” she purred. “You look so much like the original, so much like Nicodemus, only even more handsome, perhaps. He was such a thorn in...my relatives’ sides. I’m glad it didn’t end with the death of the sweet, but oh so stupid, Nicodemus. The little bastard only did one thing right in his life, and that was getting a child started in the belly of one of my...associates. I thought it was a nice touch—so nice to be able to get rid of Nico over and over again, don’t you think?”

She stepped closer and ran the tip of her fingernail down my cheek. I forced myself to remain perfectly still, which was quite an accomplishment considering every fiber of my being was screaming for me to run for my life.

“A woman, Nico,” she said again, like the idea of my many times great grandfather impregnating a woman was totally out of the question, borderline ludicrous. “What was Nicodemus thinking? Betraying Corbin like that?” Her grin widened. “It destroyed him, you know. Broke his heart to the point that he became weak, unable to protect himself, and I was able to fill that void. The poor bastard preferred death to living in a world without his Nicodemus in it.”

Her laughter echoed off the walls of the long hallway.

Corbin again. I felt like I should know him by now, but I ignored her taunts, knowing she was only trying to distract me.

“The curse, Morgan Goodheart. What do you know about the curse?” I demanded. It was easy to see my time with her was coming to an end, and it was ending without one goddamned answer to any of my questions.

Her eyes narrowed to slits, and her laughter evaporated. “What do I know of the curse? I know you have less than two weeks left to live, Nico. Tell me, love, do you have a bastard child that will need to be dealt with, as well?” Without waiting for an

answer, she said, “Two weeks, Nico. Enjoy them...but don’t enjoy them here. If I catch you in my territory again, you won’t live long enough to see the curse fulfilled.”

I stepped in front of her to block her from walking away. “So... the curse is real? You really think I’m going to die? This is something you’ve heard about? Part of Salem’s history?”

Her singsong laughter filled the hallway again. “I’m not answering any of your silly questions, Nico. You came to Salem for answers, so let’s watch you work for them. According to Annabella, you’re a historian; let’s see what you learned while you were tucked away in those Tennessee mountains. You have time to learn the facts and see if there’s anything that can be done to reverse the curse. And here’s a hint—there’s nothing you can do about it. Tick tock, Nico.” She turned and walked in the opposite direction, hips sashaying like she was on a stage and ready for a pole dancing routine. “Leave Salem, Nico. Do your research in Marblehead, where you belong.”

I watched her leave, knowing there wasn’t a damned thing I could do about it nor would I be able to get any answers from her. So, I’d lost my job on my first day, but I didn’t call it a total loss. I’d learned some new information. On a bright note, it looked like Salem did hold the answers to my past and the family curse. On a not-so-bright-note, it sounded like the curse was real...if one believed in that kind of shit.

After today’s encounter, I was beginning to believe in that kind of shit.

I left the museum without saying goodbye to Bella. She’d pulled a disappearing act after my confrontation with Morgan and hadn’t reappeared—wasn’t even hiding out in her office when I returned to retrieve my backpack. As a matter of fact, the entire museum was eerily quiet, not a sound to be heard other than the echo of my footsteps as they clip-clopped against the expensive hardwood floors.

Fuck it. I hadn't really wanted the job, had only used it as an excuse to move to Salem and gather what information I could find on my family. So why was I feeling so disappointed? Sure, if I managed to live past my twenty-fifth birthday, I would have to find a job, but I had a feeling that looking for one didn't need to be at the top of my priority list. Maybe picking out a casket, but not looking for work.

As soon as I stepped out of the museum, I felt my energy level and strength start to return. Hell, I hadn't even noticed how weak I'd felt until I stepped outside. What the fuck was that about? Did they have some sort of protective spell on the place that left everyone else feeling weak as a kitten? Yeah, I was well past the point of wondering if witchcraft was real. Morgan had cemented my belief in the supernatural, paranormal, or whatever the fuck it was.

Outside, the sun was bright, and it was early May, so the weather was still quite pleasant. Back in Tennessee, the month of May was nice too, but beginning to get a little hot in the afternoons. I looked around, noting the tourists who were already beginning to walk the streets, some wearing witch hats and some carrying brooms. If I wasn't staring down death's door, I could have enjoyed the festive and beautiful scenery. As it was, like Morgan said, 'tick tock.' I didn't have time to waste on such silly things as enjoying life with friends.

No, I needed to worry about things like finding a vehicle of some sort to help me get from one research destination to the next, researching my ass off to find out every detail I could dig up about Nicodemus Bailey, and, most importantly, finding a way to end the family curse which would claim my life in a short while, if the curse was to be believed. Nope, no time for life. I needed to prepare for death.

With a shrug that clearly meant I didn't have a fucking clue what I needed to do next, I turned right at the foot of the museum steps and started walking down the sidewalk. I pulled out my cell and hit the number for the local taxi service. I remembered seeing a motorcycle dealership on my trip from the airport. I didn't have a clue where it was,

but knew it existed. Surely the taxi service would help me out.

“Brooms-R-Us Taxi Service. How can I help you?” The chipper voice on the other end of the line answered.

I bit back a laugh. That shit was as funny now as it had been earlier when I’d called for my morning pickup. “Yeah, could I get a pick up at,” I paused, looked down the road and said, “the Salem Witch House?” I didn’t feel comfortable hanging out in front of the museum a minute longer than was absolutely necessary. It wasn’t like I was afraid of Morgan, but she definitely wasn’t the type of person I would want to antagonize. Alastair’s warning floated around in my head.

“Flying in your direction now, sir! ETA is seven minutes. Thanks for your business and enjoy your stay in Salem!”

Ha! Flying in my direction. These people were hilarious. I could have enjoyed it if I hadn’t been so freaked out.

I turned back to look at the museum one last time before heading in the direction of the Salem Witch House. From a first-floor window, I saw Bella looking at me, a sad expression on her face. I offered a wave, but she stepped away and closed the curtains. Looking up, my eyes landed on Morgan as she looked down at me from a window on the third floor. A wave didn’t seem appropriate, so I flipped her my middle finger. Hell, yeah, it was childish and immature, but she’d fired me on my first fucking day for absolutely no reason whatsoever and then seemed to relish the fact that she believed I would die in fourteen days. So, I let the bird fly.

In response, she raised her middle finger, did a stylish little twirl with it, and I collapsed onto the concrete sidewalk as pain ripped through my head. It literally felt like my head was trapped in a vice and someone, aka Morgan, was tightening it with the turn of an invisible crank. I tried to scream from the pain, but no sound escaped

my throat. My vision started dimming and narrowing, except for the silver sparkly things that were exploding behind my eyelids. It reminded me of sparklers I'd played with as a child. I struggled to drag in a breath of air and failed. Surely I'd pass out or die before long? One couldn't handle pain this intense for long.

Even with my tunnel vision, outlined with sparks, I noticed a small child wandering down the center of the road. No one else seemed to notice she was unattended. I tried to stand, to motion for someone to go to the child before a car appeared on the road, but the pain left me unable to do anything other than watch the terror unfold around me. Within seconds, I saw a car slowly rolling in the child's direction. There wasn't anyone behind the wheel, and it looked to be an unattended vehicle innocently rolling down the road...toward the helpless child.

How could no one see what was happening? People were laughing and strolling around like they didn't have a worry in the world, like a child wasn't about to be run over by a couple thousand pounds of steel. With what I thought was my last bit of strength, I turned back toward the museum, hoping that Morgan would reverse whatever she'd done to me. Instead of seeing Morgan, though, my eyes focused on the downstairs window. Bella was back at the window, banging fiercely on the window pane. I could see her mouth opening and closing as she screamed over and over again. But like with the child, no one noticed or seemed to hear the banging. I focused on Bella and I could hear her, though I was logically speaking, too far away to actually hear, but I knew she was screaming "Please, no! Not my grandbaby."

I felt new energy suddenly flowing through me, alleviating the pain that was consuming every corner of my brain. Ignoring the remaining pain which was still crippling, I stood up and started running in the direction of the child. There was no way I would get to her in time to scoop her up and get her to safety. There just wasn't enough time, not enough space between the child and the car that had picked up speed.

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When I reached the little girl, I did something that felt instinctive. I threw my body over her tiny frame and braced for the impact that I feared I might not survive. While the car wasn't traveling fast, it was still a fucking heavy piece of machinery. I felt the steel as it crashed into my body, the pain and impact knocking the air from my lungs and a scream from my throat. I also felt another random wave of energy wrap around me, cocooning me and the small girl in some sort of protective shell. Oh, the pain was still there, and I could hear people screaming, finally acknowledging that something tragic was happening. The little girl beneath me whimpered.

And then I felt and heard nothing at all.

"Are you okay?" A voice was asking and then screaming, "Somebody call an ambulance! He needs an ambulance!"

I tried to move, moaned, and then, without opening my eyes, did a mental evaluation of all the aches and pains that were rudely reminding my body I was still alive. Since everything hurt, I assumed everything was still in working condition, or at least my back or neck hadn't been broken on impact. Slowly, I opened my eyes to find an older lady leaning over me, a concerned expression making her wrinkles even more prominent. The witch hat sitting askew on the top of her head didn't help her overall appearance of nurse extraordinaire, either.

"Don't move, Sweetheart. They've called for an ambulance. Everything's going to be fine," she assured me as her hands busied themselves by touching every inch of my body in search of injuries.

Suddenly, I remembered everything that had happened and I sat up quickly, looking all around me for the little girl that I'd tried to rescue. "Where's the little girl? Is she all right? Please tell me she's okay," I asked. The panic in my voice increased with each word because I couldn't find the tiny tot that had caused me to throw my body in front of a moving car.

The old lady moved back several inches and frowned. "What little girl, honey? There wasn't a little girl. Just you and the car. Did you hit your head?" She looked around at the crowd surrounding us. "I think he's hit his head. Someone called an ambulance, right? He needs an ambulance."

There wasn't a little girl? What. The. Fuck? There was a little girl. I saw her. She was the reason I'd found the strength to throw off whatever had hit me on the sidewalk and make my body move. If it hadn't been for her, I would still be bent over in debilitating pain.

My eyes cut through the crowd and focused on the windows of the museum. This time, both Bella and Morgan were looking out the window of the third floor. Morgan was standing slightly behind Bella with her hand wrapped around the back of her employee's neck. As I watched, Morgan tugged her away, and the curtains fell into place, blocking my view of what was happening inside Morgan's personal living quarters...which were off limits to everyone except Morgan.

Oh, and apparently, Bella.

Feeling confused and exceptionally stupid as I lay in the middle of the road with no less than fifty lookie-loos surrounding me, I was unsure of what needed to happen next. My body was telling me that I was okay, that the car must not have hit me that hard. My mind was telling me not one damned thing that made any sense whatsoever. The strange energy that had been with me since I'd entered Salem that morning was telling me I wasn't safe...at least not yet.

I looked at my rescuer again and asked, “Are you certain there wasn’t a little girl? I could have sworn she was in the road.”

She laughed nervously and looked around, like she was silently begging someone in the crowd to rescue her from my craziness. The thing was, I hadn’t hit my head. Or at least I didn’t feel like I’d hit my head. Nothing was hurting any more—not even a twinge of discomfort. If I sounded crazy to the crowd of onlookers, it had everything to do with me hallucinating and nothing to do with getting hit by a car.

I needed to make a hasty exit.

“No, there wasn’t a little girl, dear. Don’t you worry now, because the ambulance will be here any minute now. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Everything was far, far, and away from fine.

I stood up quickly and said, “I’m fine.” I took a couple of slow steps, just to assure myself that I hadn’t broken myself in any important spots, and then started moving more quickly. “No need for an ambulance. All’s good. I’m not even sure the car actually hit me.”

I kept edging away from the crowd and toward the spot where I’d asked the taxi to pick me up. I glanced around, looking for the little girl one last time, but saw the mangled car instead of the child. Again—what the fuck had just happened? The entire front end was caved in...and I wasn’t feeling any pain at all.

I fought the urge to start running, putting as much distance between Salem and myself as possible. I felt like a freak.

I felt like I was in danger.

“Hey! I bet the accident was staged!” One of the onlookers yelled.

“Yeah! That’s it! It’s part of a show!” Another person added.

My rescuer didn’t look convinced, so I gave a small bow and a wave to the crowd. Their oohs and ahhs followed me down the sidewalk and a few people started clapping and whistling their appreciation. They’d been given an unforgettable magical show in downtown Salem. The only problem was that it hadn’t been a show. There had been a child in the middle of the road, and that damned car had run over both of us. I didn’t know what the fuck was going on, but I wasn’t sticking around to find out. I had a feeling that if I didn’t get out of Salem fast, I might not get out at all.

Chapter Three

The taxi driver dropped me at the cycle shop and much to the salesman's dismay, I refused to purchase a moped, opting for a Ninja motorcycle instead. I might possess a hell of a lot of nerdish qualities, but I'd be damned if I motored around Marblehead on a fucking moped. If I was going to die soon, I wanted to at least die with some Ninja dignity.

By the time the Ninja bike and I sped back into Marblehead, I was about two hours past famished and in desperate need of food. Not a clue as to what was good and what was a tourist trap, I opted for a small fish shack in the less busy section of the coastal property. I'd just ordered a huge platter of fish and chips when I heard someone yelling my name. I searched the busy beach and saw Alastair making his way across the sand. He was wearing some shorts that were way shorter than anything I'd ever seen back home in Tennessee, and absolutely nothing else.

He was built much better than I'd thought for an eighteen-year-old, and I felt a wave of disgusting old man wash over me for noticing. I forced myself to look away before I spent too much time admiring the cool tattoos that covered most of his pale flesh.

Feeling overdressed and incredibly old, I dropped down onto one of the picnic table benches and waited for young Alastair to join me. While I waited, I made a mental note to stop off at a shop and purchase some shorts and T-shirts myself. May as well be comfortable before I died.

"Nicholas! How's it going?" He frowned as he plopped down right next to me instead of the spot across from me like I'd expected.

Masculine heat radiated from his lean yet muscular frame. I'd noticed guys before, often wondered if I was bisexual, but no other guy had ever talked straight to my cock like Alastair seemed to do. I blurted out, "How old are you?"

Fuck, I sounded like a total creeper.

Alastair's grin spread all the way across his face. "How old do you think I am, Nicholas?"

A nagging headache settled behind my right eye as I imagined what it would be like to explore my possible bisexuality with the hottie next to me. "Not old enough," I muttered.

"I'm twenty-two years old, and my youthful appearance is a curse," he answered with a sexy grin...that disappeared as he continued to look at me. "Not really. I'm just lucky, I guess. Your eyes are flirting with me, but you belong to another. That's not cool, dude. Are you guys in a fight or something?"

What the fuck was he talking about? "I don't...I don't belong to anybody else," I answered. Quickly, I added, "Not that I'm flirting with you, but I don't belong to another, as you say," I finished lamely. Fuck, but I sounded like an idiot.

"Sure. Okay," he answered like he didn't begin to believe me.

When they called the number for my fish and chips, I got up to gather my food, and when I returned to the table, Alastair had moved to the opposite side of the table. I cocked my eyebrow at him but didn't say anything about the move.

"Fish and chips. Good choice," Alastair commented. "They have the best on the coast."

Since the food melted in my mouth and caused my taste buds to do a happy dance, I had to agree with Alastair's comments. This was, hands down, the best fish and chips I'd ever eaten in my life. "Fuck, this is good," I said after I'd eaten nearly the entire platter. I was stuffed beyond capacity but still wanted to keep shoveling the goodness straight into my mouth.

"Yep, I'd be pissed at you for not sharing if I hadn't just eaten a platter myself," Alastair joked. "You're lean like me. Watch yourself when knocking back one of those platters. People tend to get pissed that we can eat what we want and still stay slim."

"We who? Are you including me in that?" I snorted out a laugh and said, "I admit that I have been lucky so far. My metabolism is just fast I guess. And by the way, you seem to issue a lot of warnings. You worried about me, Alastair? Afraid a big bad witch is going to fly in here on her broomstick and whisk me away?"

Instead of laughing, he frowned and gnawed at his bottom lip. "No, of course not. Maybe. Probably," he finally said. "I just don't understand you, Nicholas. Why did you take a job in Salem? That was just stupid." His frown deepened. "Hey, why aren't you at work anyway? I thought you were supposed to start working for Morgan Goodheart today?"

"Yep. Got fired," I answered without the slightest bit of remorse. Most of what Morgan had said to me hadn't made the least bit of sense, but I'd left the museum one hundred percent certain she knew about the curse and about seventy-five percent certain she possessed some sort of magical powers. If nothing else, she could inflict some fucking pain on a body from a fucking distance. "Apparently, Morgan Goodheart didn't like me. At all. Might have hated me, actually."

Alastair barked out a laugh. "You didn't tuck your magic in, did you? I told you that she frowned on that kind of shit, regardless of how weak the magical powers might

be. She's very protective of her coven and the power she holds over them." He grinned. "She...uh...picked up on your energy, didn't she? Why, oh why, didn't you listen to me?" He clutched at his heart like I'd wounded him but his huge smile said otherwise.

Rolling my eyes, I said, "I don't have any of that supposed energy you keep bringing up, Alastair. I'm just a boring historian, nothing nearly as exciting as you'd make me out to be."

That was right, wasn't it? I didn't have magical energy. Just a family curse.

"Ookaaayyy," Alastair answered. "Why, again, are we playing games with each other? It's not like you've been trying to keep your vibe a secret and when you didn't, I didn't either." He shook his head and reached over to swipe some of my chips. "You're a very confusing man, Nicholas Bailey."

I shoved another small piece of fish into my mouth and shrugged. "I don't mean to be. It's just that the job with Morgan wasn't the real reason I came here. I really came to investigate a thing with my family. Not that it's real or anything but the big family curse started in Marblehead about back in 1617, so I didn't want there to be any connections to that weirdness. Anyway, so I got fired and now I need..."

I stopped talking when I looked up and saw the shocked expression on my new friend's face. His mouth was hanging wide open and his gray eyes were swirling with a mixture of disbelief, fear, and a dash of...happiness? We stared at one another, each sizing the other up and me trying to figure out what I'd said that made him go white as Casper the Friendly Ghost.

Finally, I asked, "What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Your...your family curse. In 1617. Did I hear you, right? And your last name is

Bailey?”

He even sounded different as he spoke barely above a whisper. That didn't fit. Not at all. Everything I'd noticed about Alastair in our two meetings was that he didn't do anything at a whisper.

“Uh...yeah, Nicholas Bailey. You know that. What's the big deal with that?”

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“Nico,” he countered, this time his voice tinged with awe.

“That’s my nickname, yes,” I answered. Morgan and Alastair calling me by my nickname wasn’t that big of a deal. Nico was short for Nicholas. It didn’t require a rocket scientist to figure that one out.

“Nicodemus.”

Okay, I didn’t have an excuse for how they’d made that connection. I could come up with nothing. Had my ancestor been a town drunk? Or worse?

“That was my ancestor’s name,” I confirmed. I decided to plow ahead with my crazy family story. From the things that’d passed between Alastair’s lips, it wasn’t like I would offend him by believing in the unbelievable. “He supposedly started my family’s curse.” Still feeling weird about the family curse thing, I quickly added, “If you believe in that kind of bullshit, of course. I don’t.”

I soooo was beginning to believe in it.

Alastair looked all around us, his pale eyes noting each and every person that lingered nearby. “We don’t need to talk about this here. Do you have someplace you need to be or can I show you around our small coastal village?”

His eyes bored into me, begging me to understand that he was trying to pull me away from the crowd. From where I was sitting, there wasn’t another living soul paying us any attention. I did, however, decide to bow to Alastair’s knowledge of the area and the folks within hearing distance. “Since I’m officially unemployed, I have all the

time in the world. How about you? Do you have time to give me a tour of your coastal town?"

He grinned. "Yep, I definitely do, and I know just the place I want to show you." He motioned toward the parking lot for the beach. "My Jeep's in the parking lot. Wanna ride with me?"

"I could. Or, I just bought a cool Ninja motorcycle if you don't mind riding bitch?"

His eyes darted toward the parking area and landed on my shiny new toy within seconds. Once he spotted it, he grabbed my upper arm and started tugging me in that direction. "I always ride bitch, Nico." When we reached the bike, he turned and said, "But then I bet you do, too."

He continued to stare at me as his words sunk in. Was he implying that I was gay? And that I liked to bottom?

Was I gay? I'd definitely been attracted to Alastair, and he wouldn't be the first guy that turned my head. I'd never acted on my attractions, but that didn't mean that I hadn't wanted to. If, and that was a big 'if', I was gay, would I want to be on the receiving end? No, I hadn't done it, but it seemed like a rather...tight squeeze to me. I'd never been one that got into pain.

Finally, I shrugged and said, "Don't roll that way, or at least I haven't ever yet, so I wouldn't know. You ready?"

He slid onto the seat and patted the spot in front of him. After I mounted the metal speed machine, I expected him to wrap his arms around my waist, seeing as how he'd flirted off and on since we'd met. Instead of that, though, his hands gripped the seat.

"Turn right when you leave the parking lot and drive up the coast. We're going to the

highest point in Marblehead. I'll give you directions as we get closer."

"How far is it?" I asked as I turned the key and listened to the motor purr to life. I'd always loved motorcycles, all of them, but the Ninja was my favorite.

"Don't worry, Nico. It isn't far. Marblehead's a small area. Nothing's very far away. Let's go. I can't wait to see your reaction to what I'm going to show you."

I frowned at his words, wondering what the fuck he meant, but pulled out of the parking lot and onto the small curvy road instead of questioning him. Within minutes, any of my doubts or worries vanished as we cruised along and I admired the beautiful scenery around me. Marblehead was amazing in May, and I could only imagine how gorgeous it would look in the Fall. As we drove, he would yell out certain landmarks, telling me what everything was as best he could over the roar of the Ninja's motor. We cruised higher and higher in altitude until he finally motioned for me to turn off onto a dirt road, or at least what used to be a dirt road. It was evident that there hadn't been traffic in the area in a long time. Just when I started to really worry about damaging my new bike, we broke through the canopy of trees and into a clearing. A huge gothic house, badly neglected, stood not-so-proudly in the middle of the clearing. When we were close to the structure, I cut the engine and climbed off. Alastair quickly followed.

"Damn, I bet this place was beautiful back in the day," I said as I soaked up all the different angles, peaks, pointed arches, and, of course, a flying buttress. The detail, although old and unmaintained, were ornamental and eye-catching. Two large gargoyles protected the entrance to the front porch. I immediately wanted the beautiful house. I wanted to buy it and restore it to its grand splendor of earlier days. Of course, I didn't have the finances to do such a thing, but a guy could dream. "I'm in love with this house. Who owns it? Why have they let it run down so much?" I turned and looked at him. "Would you be interested in a joint venture to restore it?"

His eyes narrowed as he pondered my words. Finally, he asked, “Fix it up and flip it?”

The thought of selling the house made my blood run cold. No, I could never sell it. Hell, I was beginning to wonder if I’d ever be able to leave it. There was some sort of invisible tether tugging me toward the house, making my desire to possess it hit unnatural peaks that I wondered if I’d be able to control.

“No. No, I wouldn’t want to flip it,” I answered honestly. “Forget I said that. It’s just...it’s just gorgeous. Fuck, man, it makes me sick to think that one day it will finally collapse in on itself. How could anybody let it fall into such disarray?”

“We’ll get to that soon enough,” Alastair answered. For the second time that day, he grabbed my arm and tugged me away from the house. “Let’s see what you think about this view. If you think the house is attractive, wait until you see the view that comes with it.”

We walked about fifty yards before I realized we were on a cliff-side, with ocean waves crashing below. I started to feel queasy and my feet felt heavy, like they were trying to convince me to stop walking. I felt dizzy and my hands started trembling. Inside my chest, my heart was racing so fast, beating so hard that it caused an ache in the spot where my heart was. While it was unseasonably cool, sweat drenched my back, chest, arms, and neck. Worse than all that, though, were the images rolling around in my brain. There were vivid images of me walking toward the cliff’s edge and...not stopping. My feet carried me right over the edge and I’d plummeted to the rocky shoreline below. I saw my mangled body sprawled on those rocks, my blood mingling with the salty ocean water.

With every small step I took, I was assaulted with images of me plunging to my death. I could see air and then water as my body somersaulted out of control. The rocks, jagged and deadly, were coming toward me with lightning speed. Each time,

right before I crashed into the rocks, I would see a man flying through the air towards me, hands reaching out for me in an effort to stop my plunge before final impact.

He didn't make it.

I literally felt my body hit the rocks. I felt the bones breaking and my vital organs rupturing. The pain was crippling, but my last thoughts were of the beautiful man who had tried to save me. The look of horror on his face caused a wave of sadness to wash over me. How he screamed in agony when he was unable to reach me on time made me want to take him in my arms and comfort him.

I dug my heels in and jerked my arm away from Alastair's grip. For a fleeting moment, I wondered if he'd brought me to the middle of nowhere to kill me. I didn't know the guy, not really. It could have been his plan all along to lure me up here, throw me over the edge, and no one would ever see me again. I hadn't picked up that vibe from him, but then I suspected serial killers probably didn't send out much of a vibe.

"I'm not taking another step," I told him. "Why did you bring me out here, Alastair? What's going on?" Just for safety's sake, I took a step back from him. Alastair and I were about the same size. It'd be an equal physical match...unless I completely froze up being so near the edge of the cliff.

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“Fuck, man! Are you afraid of me?” He gasped in disbelief. “If you’re who I think you are, I’d never hurt you. Hell, I’d give my life to protect you.”

Of all the things I might have expected to come out of his mouth, those words were absolutely nowhere on the list. Who in the hell did he think I was? Nobody worth giving two cents for, much less their life. What was up with this guy?

“That’s some strange-ass talk coming out of your mouth,” I said. “Here’s the deal, between talking to you and Morgan Goodheart, I’m about as confused as shit, and I don’t know whether I should laugh at you, feel sorry for you, try to get you some help, or, the very last option on the list, believe the hocus pocus tumbling out of both your mouths. One minute I think you’re drunk-ass crazy and the next minute you have me wondering if there isn’t some smidgen of truth to what you’re saying.” I ran my fingers through my hair in frustration and then pinched the bridge of my nose. “It’s just that I got some strange information about my family history awhile back and it’s completely knocked me off kilter. When I start adding what you’re saying into that mix, I sure the fuck don’t know what’s going on.”

“Okay, Nico,” Alastair said. “I’m not the most diplomatic or politically correct person in the world, so I’m sure I’m going to fuck this up. I apologize ahead of time. I’m going to tell you why we’re here and then we’ll talk. I need to know what you know about your family tree, and I’ll tell you what I know. Fair enough?”

I felt queasy again, but tried to play it off with a joke. “You never struck me as the politically correct or diplomatic type, so no worries. Okay, go ahead. Let’s hear the craziest witch tale you’ve got.”

“Well, first of all, you’re a witch, but you shouldn’t be...or, at least, Nicodemus Bailey was all human, all mortal, all male hottie. He, from everything I’ve read, didn’t have an ounce of mystical power in him. You, on the other hand, are buzzing and sparking all out of control. One minute you’re sending nothing out and the next minute, you’re overboard with that weird vibe you’ve got going on. It isn’t anything too strong, or at least I don’t think so, but there’s definitely magic flowing in your blood.”

I remembered what my great aunt Hephzibah told me and nodded at Alastair “I have reason to believe my mother was a witch. But I don’t have any magical powers, Alastair. Trust me on that one. I’m about as boring and down to earth as a guy can be. Hell, I probably couldn’t even perform a magic trick after taking a magic class taught by Houdini himself!”

Frowning, Alastair said, “That’s not funny, Nico. Houdini was a charlatan. He didn’t have any magical powers but tried playing games. He made our kind look bad.”

I felt my eyes shifting to the left and then the right, unsure of the proper way to respond to his comment. Should I apologize?

“Forget Houdini,” he said in exasperation. He waved all around him and asked, “What do you feel when you’re here? Does this place mean anything to you at all? Do you feel something calling to your spirit?”

I thought about lying because the minute I said something that sounded remotely like I was agreeing with him, I would officially be as crazy as he was. Yeah, I thought about lying but opted for the truth. “I was drawn to the house the moment it came into view. That energy you keep referring to? It went wild as we got closer. I’ve never wanted anything so much in my entire life. I felt...like I was home. I felt like it was mine.” I frowned. “Does that make any sense?” Answering myself before Alastair could, I said, “Hell, no, that doesn’t make sense. That was stupid to say, right?”

“Not at all,” he answered quickly. “You being drawn to the house doesn’t surprise me at all. Your ancestor Nicodemus spent a lot of time here...in the bedroom, if you know what I mean!”

That might have been too much information, even if it was about a relative I’d never met or even knew existed until a couple of weeks ago. I looked back at the house, and that warm feeling washed over me again. My legs automatically started wanting to walk in that direction. Something or someone was calling out to me, begging me to come closer. I stayed right where I was.

“Are you implying that my old grandfather Bailey had him a woman tucked away in this secluded wonderland?” The words, meant in jest, left a bad taste in my mouth. It was as if I was being disrespectful to something that was beautiful and majestic.

“No, not a woman,” Alastair answered. “His lover owned the house, but nary a woman was involved in what went on between Nicodemus and Corbin.”

My head whipped around to look at him. “Whodid you say?”

“Corbin Hargreaves,” he answered sadly. “Corbin was the high witch of the Marblehead coven many, many years ago. He protected and took great care of his coven and made them all proud to be members of a group that was not only powerful, but good and pure, as well. When Corbin was alive, the coven in Marblehead was one of the strongest in the country.” He looked around and then whispered, “When he disappeared, the coven fell apart. Most of the families moved away, and the ones that stayed behind were and still are harassed and tormented by Morgan Goodheart on a damned regular basis. She’s a bitch of the highest calling. Unfortunately, she’s the most powerful fucking witch I’ve ever encountered or read about in this area...next to Corbin, of course.”

My head was spinning. “So, Corbin and my ancestor were...lovers?” I looked

around. “Here? This was their place?”

“Not exactly,” he floundered. “I mean, yes, they were lovers. More than that, they were very much in love. They hadn’t moved in together, but it was going to happen. The more time Corbin spent with Nicodemus, the stronger his craft became. It often happens that way with a soul mate or a true love. With Nico at his side, there was no stopping him.”

My eyes wandered over to the edge of the cliff, some twenty yards away from where we were standing. All the pieces of the puzzle started sliding into place—the incredible witchcraft filled puzzle that made no sense whatsoever and was totally unbelievable.

Yet, I believed it.

Of course, believing the magic part of what Alastair was saying also meant that I might end up having to believe the whole family curse thing...which was really bad for me.

“Is this where Nicodemus died?” I stammered on the last word. “Is this the place where he took his own life?”

“Yes, this is where Nicodemus committed suicide,” he answered solemnly. “It destroyed Corbin. He disappeared exactly seven days after they recovered the body of his lover. Without any trace. Eventually, he was presumed dead. Nobody ever understood why Nicodemus killed himself, or what drove him to walk off that cliff, and, as far as I’ve ever read or been told, Corbin never told another living soul why he thought his lover would have done such a thing.”

I felt like I was shutting down. Everything that had been dropped into my lap today was just too much. I felt the need to find someplace private and have myself a good

cry, which was way out of character for me. Being brought up in the system had taught me early on not to waste my time on tears. They accomplished nothing. The small cottage I was renting didn't feel anything like home, but I wanted to be there. I looked at the huge Gothic structure out of the corner of my eye. No, that's where I wanted to be.

"I want to go inside the house, Alastair," I declared. "Can we? Would we get into too much trouble if we broke in? I don't know why, but I've got to get inside."

Alastair shook his head from side to side. "Sorry, Nico. It's restricted."

I rolled my eyes. "I'm not really worried about the law right now, okay? I want in. You don't have to be a part of it if you don't want to risk getting into trouble, but don't try to stop me. I'm going in."

I took one step before he grabbed me by the arm. "Fuck the law, Nico. That's not who I'm worried about. Somebody, probably Morgan, cast a spell on the house, and no one can enter. Trust me, many have tried, and while some survived and were only injured, some didn't. When I say you can't go in, I seriously mean you can't go in. I'm not going to risk something happening to you."

"I'm not understanding this strange obsession you have with trying to keep me safe. You realize we just met last night, right?"

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“It’s my duty to protect you because you’re connected to Corbin, and he was the high witch of my coven. If he were living, that’s what he’d expect me to do.” He winked at me. “So, I’m doing it. Please don’t make my job difficult.”

My eyes narrowed. “When you said some people survived and some didn’t, what, exactly, did you mean?”

“I meant just what I said, Nico. Some people were simply injured when they tried to cross the threshold. Some were incinerated. Some were blown off the front porch and flew through the air, toppling right over the cliff. Bottom line is this, we ain’t going in there.”

I studied his words and found myself surprised that I was still contemplating going inside. For some reason that I couldn’t begin to explain or understand, it felt it was worth the risk. It wasn’t, however, worth risking Alastair’s safety. While I wanted to go home and rehash everything that I’d learned today, I still had more questions, so many things I couldn’t begin to understand.

“If...if Nicodemus and Corbin were lovers, and Nicodemus committed suicide on his twenty-fifth birthday, where did I come from? I mean...well, you know what I mean. It sounds like it should have all ended with the death of Nicodemus, but the family name, and curse, made it through several more generations.”

“I don’t know, Nico. There was never anything written about Nicodemus having a child, nor did he have any brothers or sisters. It doesn’t add up, but trust me on this, there’s no doubt you are one hundred percent Bailey, a direct descendent of Nicodemus Bailey.”

“Morgan said something as she fired me. Something about him getting one of her associates pregnant.”

Alastair’s eyes widened. “Really? Well, that would explain it, all right. If it’s true.” His frown deepened. “What’s this curse you keep talking about?”

“Oh, nothing important,” I said sarcastically. “I just found out that apparently, all the Bailey men commit suicide on their twenty-fifth birthday. Dead and gone. Happy one day. Suicide the next. Sometimes they shoot themselves. Sometimes they hang themselves. One drove straight off a cliff. Nicodemus started it all by walking off a cliff.” My eyes returned to the house. “And I’m up to bat next.” I tried for a grin but probably just ended up looking sick. “My twenty-fifth birthday is coming up on May fifteenth.”

“Shit,” he whispered in disbelief. “Shit, Nico. This is bad. They all committed suicide? On their birthday?”

“All of them,” I confirmed. “On a bright note, I don’t feel suicidal,” I said with a weak laugh. “I hate pain, and I kinda like me.”

“Not funny, Nico. If it’s a spell, placed by a witch, how you feel about living or dying won’t matter. If the witch is powerful, the spell will succeed.” He started walking toward the Ninja. “Come on, Nico. Let’s head back to town. I need to talk to my mom and some of the other coven members. I don’t have a clue how to keep you safe from this spell.”

Ah, a spell instead of a curse, but just as bad. Perfect. I followed behind Alastair. “Who would cast a spell that caused the Bailey men to kill themselves? And why? From the information I received, none of the other descendants lived in Salem or Marblehead. They all moved away and tried to start a new life. What witch would benefit from making them suffer and then die?”

Alastair climbed onto the bike and motioned for me to hurry up.

“Tell me, Alastair,” I demanded. “Morgan? No, Morgan wouldn’t have been alive then. Who?”

“Maybe Corbin himself,” he whispered.

“Corbin?” I asked in disbelief. “But...I thought he and Nicodemus loved each other? Why would he cast a spell that would hurt the family of the man he loved?”

He shrugged. “Gotta talk to the coven, Nico. Give me some time. Can we meet for lunch tomorrow? I’ll know more by then.”

I climbed onto the bike and answered, “Sure.” I forced my eyes not to look up at the house again. If I did, I wouldn’t be able to make myself leave, as the urge to go inside was almost too strong to ignore. Instead of following my heart, I pointed the bike back toward the hidden drive and started back in the direction we’d come. With every mile that passed, my heart grew heavier and heavier.

Other than Nicodemus’s past life, what was my link to that house? Why did I feel like that when I’d pulled away, I’d made the biggest mistake of my life? Was there something to this reincarnation thing after all?

Chapter Four

After dropping Alastair back off at the beach where we'd met earlier, I'd hunted the small coastal town for a package store, bought the biggest, baddest bottle of whiskey that they had to offer, and went straight home to my cozy cottage. I was more tired than I even realized and after a few drinks, I couldn't keep my eyes open—just a little nap would set me up for a long night of research. I was sure of it.

I stretched out on my back and the next thing I knew, I heard the water running in my shower. Not even stopping to think it was strange, I got up off the couch and wandered into the bathroom. Some part of me knew I had to be sound asleep, but another part of me was intrigued by this dream and wanted to see where it was going to lead.

I stepped into the bathroom and saw someone moving behind the glass shower door. The door was fogged up with steam, but I could still see pretty well. I leaned against the bathroom sink to watch.

After letting the water run till it was nice and hot, the man that I somehow knew was Corbin took some liquid soap in his hand and slowly worked it into a lather. "This is nice," he said, glancing over his shoulder at me. "We didn't have this in my day." He slowly rubbed it over his chest, making sure that I was silently watching his every move. Smiling a little, he turned to face me and lowered his hand to his own beautiful thick cock. I'd never really looked at another man's junk before. I mean, not really looked at it. That kind of thing was frowned on in the locker room and the showers by other guys as a rule, so I had always stifled my interest before. Now I could look all I wanted to. I glanced up at Corbin's face and we locked eyes. Having

all that potency and intensity directed at me gave me a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach. I felt suddenly shy and wet my lips. Turning my head and pretending not to look, I couldn't stop myself from stealing another quick glance, and I saw that Corbin was smiling gently at me.

“Come in with me,” he said, but there was too much heat between us, and I couldn't seem to catch my breath. I stirred restlessly, and Corbin repeated his offer. “Come on, sweetheart. I want to touch you again.”

There was no way for me to be unaffected. I met Corbin's scorching gaze and slowly nodded. I didn't even hesitate much because I knew this was just a dream and people always did crazy things in dreams that they'd never have the courage to do in real life. Right? I began taking off my clothes, my hands trembling as I continued to steal glances at Corbin. He rubbed his hand slowly, sensuously, up and down his engorged shaft, knowing I was watching. He stood with his strong, muscular legs apart and lazily stroked his cock, his eyes half closed. He was a lot bigger than I had imagined him to be. His hair was a lighter shade too. I thought that when it was dry, it would probably be a dark blond. He opened his eyes a little more to look at me—those sinfully long, wet eyelashes had been covering some amazing, sapphire blue eyes. God, I'd never seen anything so beautiful. Or so hot.

I tore my clothes off faster, and soon I was naked and taking the few steps over to the shower to climb in beside Corbin. I was still feeling shy, but my excitement was even greater.

“You're so beautiful, Nico,” Corbin said as he stepped back to let me in, opening his arms for me to step into them. He pulled me close, and the first touch of his hard, hot body was like coming home. I shivered and pressed my body even closer, gazing up at him.

“I-I can't believe you're here.”

“I came for you. I’ll always come for you, darling. You know that.” He dropped a kiss on my upturned face, grinding his cock against me.

“Tell me this isn’t just a dream and you’re not dead. I can’t bear the thought of it.” I pressed my face into Corbin’s throat and rubbed my erection shamelessly against Corbin’s thigh. He moaned, picking me up effortlessly with one hand so that I could wrap my legs around him. I did it too, shamelessly, feeling like he was my anchor in a storm. I clung to him harder, and I guess I must have murmured something about hoping this wasn’t just some crazy dream because he smiled at me.

“This isn’t just a dream, sweetheart. I’m waiting for you.”

I pulled my head back and gazed up at him. “For me? But I’m not your Nico. You know that, don’t you?”

Corbin smiled down at me. “You’re different from my Nico, but you’re the same too. I’m glad of that.”

Corbin reached for a bottle of bath oil on the tile shelf in the tub, holding it out to me so I could spread some on my fingers. “Get yourself ready for me.”

I looked up at him with some real trepidation. “I-I’ve never done this.”

“I know, baby. It’s all right. I promise to take care of you.”

I put the oil on my fingers and slowly reached around behind myself to prepare, feeling awkward and embarrassed. I really had no idea what I was doing, but it seemed like a good idea to get as slick as possible, and I was glad Corbin had let me do this to myself. It would have been embarrassing either way, but he was still a stranger to me in so many ways, even though in others I felt like I’d known him my whole life. I closed my eyes and my breathing came faster as I touched myself. Corbin

kissed me again and I nuzzled against him, overcome by the idea of what he was about to do to me. Corbin had one hand braced on the tiles above me, but after a moment, he seemed to be getting too excited watching me to keep still. He brushed my fingers aside and pushed in his own oily finger instead. I jerked upright and gasped as Corbin found my prostate. Honest to God, my toes curled and I made noises like a little girl. My head fell back on my shoulders, and Corbin chuckled softly and kept stroking me relentlessly. “That’s right, sweetheart. I want you out of control—as mad for me as I am for you.”

My hands were on his chest and I could barely catch my breath. My cock was painfully hard as Corbin worked his finger inside me. Why had no one ever told me about this? I was going to come in seconds if Corbin kept touching me that way. Overcome, I threw my arms around his neck and captured his lips again, moaning into them. They were so sweet and soft. I could have stood there tasting him forever, with Corbin’s fingers deep inside me and his hard dick nudging my body, but my need to have Corbin bury himself deep within me—to claim me—was becoming urgent. I had no idea where it was coming from since I’d never been with a man before this, but Corbin was making deliciously aggressive sounds of pleasure that sent little shock waves through my body and headed straight to my dick. Corbin pulled one of my legs up higher on his hips, pulled out his finger and suddenly buried himself inside me. We both groaned and Corbin pulled me even closer.

There was a little pain, but nothing like I’d thought it would be. Just an uncomfortable feeling of fullness until Corbin raked his big cock over that spot inside me again and lit me on fire. I cried out and put my head against his chest, overcome with emotion.

“It feels so damned good to be inside you, wrapped up in you like this.” Corbin whispered. He pulled out and then pushed back in again, impaling me. “That’s it—let me all the way in.” Corbin thrust against me, pushing in and sliding back out in a rhythm that hurt a little at first, but the longer it went on, got sweeter and sweeter.

Soon it made me wild with passion and I couldn't stand still. I moaned and cried out, as Corbin delivered hard, quick thrusts into me that lifted me up to my toes and made me grip my cock and begin working it. I sucked in a deep breath as Corbin pushed deeper into my body. This wouldn't last long. It was too powerful, too wonderful to be real. I could feel the heat coiling and curling in my belly and knew I was about to come.

Corbin brushed my hand aside and wrapped his own hand around my cock, moving the skin up and down in the same rhythm as he thrust into me. He was like silk over steel. He smiled and kissed my throat as I arched my back and opened my mouth in a wordless cry.

Corbin's orgasm overtook him suddenly, exploding out of him in a rush, and he strained against me and shot again and again deep inside my body. It felt like little licks of flame, but it didn't burn me. It filled me with pleasure. I began to spurt long, milky streams of cum into Corbin's hand.

When it was over, I felt boneless and breathless. I slid gently down Corbin's body, unwilling to be parted from him so soon but literally unable to stand. Both of us trembled with passion, but Corbin reached for me and pulled me back up to rest against him, wrapping his arms around my waist.

I clung to his shoulders, and after a while, Corbin gently held me under the spray from the shower, his hands moving lazily over my body and washing me off gently. I felt totally spent and looked up at Corbin to see him smiling down on me. I was almost asleep, standing up in the shower. Corbin smiled and settled me more comfortably in his arms. "I've got you, sweetheart. I'll always have you. This is exactly where you need to be."

I opened my eyes and looked up at him through a blur of tears. Where had they come from? I'd never felt so emotional after sex before, but now I felt so full of happiness

and passion that it filled me completely and had to find some outlet. “I love you so much,” I murmured, and closed my eyes, again, rubbing my cheek against Corbin’s chest. “Nothing could ever change that, could it? We’ll always be together, won’t we? Will you promise me?”

“Of course, darling,” Corbin said, but I heard the slight hesitation in his voice. I shook off the shiver that came over me and pulled Corbin closer, whispering in his ear. “I won’t let her come between us. Not ever again. I’ll never let you go. And if we’re separated, I’ll come and find you wherever you are. I’ll come to you over and over again. I promise you that.”

I woke up alone, and it hurt me so much that I couldn’t even breathe for a moment. I lay there for a long time, telling myself it had only been a dream—a wonderful, passionate dream, but that’s all it was. It took me a long time to get a grip on my emotions, but finally, I was able to sit up. I buried my face in my hands and just trembled for a long time. The dream had seemed so real.

Later I was able to get up and go to the bathroom to clean up. I hadn’t had a wet dream like that since I was a kid, and never one so intense. So real. I took a long look in the mirror and then walked back out to get back to work. I must have been much more tired than I’d realized.

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For hours, I did online research to see what I could learn about Nicodemus Bailey and Corbin Hargreaves. There was a significant amount of information about Corbin, but none of it involved questionable tales of witchcraft or an illicit affair with Nicodemus. The internet contained plenty of information about his significant contribution to Marblehead society, his love of nature, and his dedication to the growth of their small community. When I read of his mysterious disappearance, tears had streaked down my face. He'd simply vanished, and eventually, his friends had put up a marker to him in the Old Burial Hill Cemetery next to his dear friend and acquaintance, Nicodemus Bailey. As far as Nicodemus Bailey went, there was mention of his birth on June 3, 1792, and his tragic suicide on June 3, 1717. He'd been born in Salem and died in Marblehead.

For Nicodemus, that was all the internet had to offer. I suspected the local libraries wouldn't offer much more, but planned on digging around in the archives tomorrow. The one glaring tidbit missing was the mention of a child belonging to Nicodemus. The tiny obituary had said there was no family remaining and Corbin had paid for all the arrangements before he disappeared.

Since I was sitting in Marblehead, Massachusetts, getting shitfaced on whiskey while researching fucking witchcraft, there was a fairly significant problem with the fact that Nicodemus had no remaining relatives. There had to have been a child. Per the documentation my father and mother had left behind, his name had been Noel. He'd lived in New York, and he was born on January 5, 1718, and died on the same date, twenty-five years later. He was married to a neighbor girl, Tabitha Winstead, and they'd had one son, Nathaniel Bailey. Both Noel and his wife, Tabitha, had died during an Indian attack. When their bodies had been recovered, they'd been holding hands. Their son, only seven months old at the time of the suicide had been found

completely unharmed.

It felt strange reading about the family I'd never known, especially because I'd finally found out about my own father and mother, the couple I'd spent most of my life disliking since they clearly hadn't loved me enough to stay with me. After today's shit-show, I questioned whether their suicides were beyond their control. There they were, staring back at me from the computer screen of my laptop—Nigel and Rosalie Bailey. It was a wedding photo, and they were smiling from ear to ear, looking at one another like they were madly in love. Apparently, my mother came from money, and the family had funded a rather extravagant wedding ceremony and reception. Like I already knew, they'd been married in 1991, and I was all too aware of when they died the following year.

My mother's family, Edgar and Glinda Banks, may have hosted a huge wedding, but that was where their generosity had apparently ended. Maybe my dad was too proud to accept money from them. My parents had lived a lower middle-class life for the brief time they were together.

Like the rest of the Bailey men, my father didn't leave much behind to be found online. He'd died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, after ending the life of his young wife with the same gun. That was about it. It was as if the entire universe was working against me. Hell, when I couldn't dig something up on the internet, the shit was buried deep.

Frustrated and about three whiskey sours past being sober, I closed the lid to my laptop, stripped out of my clothes, and tumbled into bed. As I closed my eyes, I realized I'd accomplished close to nothing today. Sure, I'd gathered more pieces of the puzzle, but I was still no closer to solving it than I was on the day I read the letter my parents left me. I was, however, very possibly, one day closer to dying.

It was that horrible thought that accompanied me off to a night of nightmares.

They were both beautiful people. My father was tall and lean, with dark hair like my own, and bright blue eyes...drowning in tears. My mother was petite and curvaceous, inky black hair that was a tangle of curls, and angry brown eyes. Like my father, tears streaked her face, but her eyes were flashing with defiant anger and hatred. The only time they would soften was when she'd look down into the crib. When she looked at her tiny baby boy, love would immediately overtake the other emotions swirling around. My father, though, was broken. The pain radiating from his body took my breath away and caused my heart to seize. The guilt he felt was only surpassed by his heartbreak.

I watched as they stood there together, gazing down at the infant and their hands locked in a tight embrace.

He looked upward and he said, "Please don't make me do this. Please don't turn me into this monster. Whatever has happened in the past has nothing to do with my wife and son. If you must take someone, let it just be me," he pleaded as his voice quaked with emotion.

I had no idea who he was talking to. My eyes were locked on the scene in front of me, and my eyes wouldn't stray from the parents and child.

A woman's voice answered, "Don't be such a pussy, Nigel. I detest a man who cries and you Bailey men always cry. It's such a bore. I keep telling myself that one day a Bailey will finally generate a real man, but it never happens. You all cry your pathetic tears. It honestly makes me hate you even more."

"Bitch!" My mother hissed. "You're nothing more than a heartless bitch who's terrified of something. You only keep doing this because you're afraid and inadequate." Her smile was absolutely sinister when she added, "My son will be the one to destroy you!"

The other woman laughed, but even in my dream state, I recognized a hint of fear.

“Perhaps I should kill him now then?” The woman suggested when she stopped laughing. “How would you like that? Want to watch your infant son die, Rosalie? I’d be delighted to grant you a final request.”

“No! Don’t antagonize her!” My father pleaded. His blue eyes turned to the mystery woman again. “I’m begging you. Let my wife and son go. You can end this. I know you can. End the curse with my death.”

My mother said, “Don’t beg her, Nigel. She can’t kill him or she would already have done it. She feeds on your heartache. It’s what keeps her young and powerful. Don’t give it to her. She can’t kill our son now, or it would break the rules of the spell. She has to wait for his twenty-fifth birthday.”

“Aren’t you such a smart one?” The woman teased. “My, my. A Bailey man finally did well for himself,” she remarked.

I watched as the woman reached down to touch the chubby cheek of the baby in the crib.

“Don’t touch him.”

The woman hissed at her as she pulled the hand away. “Anyway, it’s time. Nigel, take four steps back, please.”

I watched in horror as my father obeyed the commands the woman issued. I saw how he struggled with his own body, how he desperately tried to disobey. I also saw and realized he didn’t have the strength to fight against whatever hold the woman had over him. Tears coated his face as he silently begged his wife and child to forgive him.

“It’s okay, Nigel,” my mother said quietly. “This has to happen today, but I’ll go to my grave knowing that it will be our son who will eventually destroy the spell along with this horrible creature.” She turned and looked at my father. “I’ll go to my grave with you, my love.” She moved toward him without the woman demanding it of her and didn’t stop until she was standing directly in front of him. “We’ll watch from above and one day, twenty-five years from now, we’ll get to see our baby boy put an end to her.”

“Kill her, Nigel.”

I watched as my father pulled a gun from his back waistband, and without any hesitation, he placed the gun to my mother’s temple. As his finger moved to pull the trigger, I screamed, “No!”

He didn’t stop, though. He pulled the trigger, sending the bullet straight into my mother’s forehead, sobbing as he pulled the trigger. I watched as she fell to the ground, dead before she hit the floor. My father’s tears dripped down onto her lifeless body as he wept in despair.

He hadn’t acknowledged me when I’d screamed...but my mother had. Her eyes had flickered up and toward me, and her lips had formed the most serene smile when she’d heard my voice. She’d been smiling when he’d pulled the trigger and, even now, she lay on the floor with a soft smile on her face.

“And now yourself, Nigel,” the woman ordered. “Hurry along. I have places to be, things to do.”

I heard my father whisper to me, “I love you, Nicholas.”

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Then he pulled the trigger for the second time.

I woke myself up screaming. My face was bathed in tears, and my heart ached from a pain like I'd never experienced in my life. I looked around the room, trying to figure out where I was and what was happening. I was in the cozy cottage. Alone.

I'd just dreamed about my parents killing themselves.

Wait—no, it wasn't a dream. It was a vision of something that had really happened. But I'd felt like I had been there. Not just as a child but as my adult self, too. My mother had known I was there. The mother that I'd spent most of my life not loving... I felt such shame and heartache.

She had faith in me. She thought I could end the curse, or the spell, or whatever the hell it was.

My parents had loved me. They were watching me now like she'd promised they would.

Oh, and the fucking bitch that forced my parents to kill themselves? None other than Morgan Goodheart. I would have recognized that bitch's voice anywhere. That motherfucking bitch was behind the curse that destroyed my family, and I was so going to fuck her up.

I didn't have a clue how, but I was going to. The problem was, I didn't have long to do it.

The rest of my night was spent watching the rest of my descendants take their own lives. I was there when Nathaniel Bailey hanged himself, at the orders of Morgan Goodheart, of course. I watched when Noel and Tabitha were killed and scalped by the Indians and put up no fight at all, with Morgan sitting up in a tree nearby, laughing hysterically. Within about three hours, I'd watched my entire family tree decimated...and the worst of all was Nicodemus. I saw the whole thing, along with Corbin's attempt to save him in living color and it was the worst thing I ever saw. I didn't even want to think about how it made me feel.

I'd woken up disappointed that my dreams ended before seeing what started the curse. What caused Morgan Goodheart to force Nicodemus to walk off that cliff? I knew having to watch it would break my heart, just as it had with the rest of my family, but I also knew it was necessary if I had any hopes of reversing the curse. If something didn't change, I'd take my own life less than two weeks, but after last night, this had turned into something much more than me just trying to save myself. I would, somehow, find a way to get revenge for the ones who went before me. Before I died, I would see that bitch go straight to hell for all she'd done. I hoped to send her there myself.

After I admitted to myself that I wasn't going to fall back asleep, regardless of how hard I tried, I'd rolled out of bed and called Alastair immediately. I needed to hear what he'd learned last night when he talked to the coven, and I needed to tell him about the dreams. We set up a lunch date for noon. It wasn't until after I hung up that I realized I only had about thirty minutes to get ready and get there. I'd slept longer than I thought.

Chapter Five

A newspaper magically appeared in front of me with a loud thump as it smacked against the table. Alastair slid into the booth across from me and said, “Did you have something to do with that, Nico?” He pointed to the front page of the paper he’d dropped.

I looked down at the paper, gasped in surprise, and jerked it up. The front page held a picture of Annabella Buchanan. She’d committed suicide late yesterday afternoon by walking off a pier. Unable to swim, she’d drowned before anyone could rescue her. Annabella’s face gazed up at me, a huge smile on her face. The picture had been taken at a recent museum function, and she looked so fucking happy, just like she had yesterday at the beginning of my job interview. Exactly three hours after I’d left the museum, she’d ended her own life. Fuck, I damned well knew who was responsible for that shit.

Looking up at Alastair, I asked in disbelief, “You think I killed her?”

He shook his head wildly, like I was crazy. “No, I don’t think you killed her, Nico,” he answered quickly. “We both know who killed her and it wasn’t her own fucking self. It was Morgan. The question was, did you have anything to do with it?” he explained. “Something had to have happened at that museum between you and old Bella that made Morgan feel threatened. What was it? She’s way too old for you, but did you and Bella do the dirty dance in a broom closet or something as equally...gross?”

I rolled my eyes. “She was old enough to be my mother, Stair,” I countered,

shortening his name. It was getting really difficult to call him Alastair when we were in heated conversations. “There definitely wasn’t any broom closet action going on, but Morgan was pissed because Bella had hired me, thus bringing me to Salem.”

“Stair,” he said thoughtfully, trying the nickname on his tongue. “I like it. Most folks try for Al...which I don’t like. Stair will work fine for me. Now, back to Annabella and Morgan,” he said, leaning in closer to me. “So, the heartless Goodheart got pissed at Bella for bringing a Bailey on board, eh? I bet she nearly shit her panties when she looked up and saw you in her museum.”

“Nah, no shitting of the panties,” I said with a laugh. “It was more like she wanted me dead. Graveyard dead.”

“I’ve been thinking, I bet Morgan’s behind the curse. Not Corbin. Corbin was in love with Nico. Even though Nico’s committing suicide destroyed him, he wouldn’t have cursed Nico’s family. He loved him too much.”

“It’s definitely Morgan behind the curse,” I agreed. “I had some dreams last night. I’ve got to tell you about them. It was some really scary shit, but it opened my eyes to what I’m up against. Before we go there, though, I need to ask you a question about Bella.”

“Yeah?”

“Did she have a granddaughter, by any chance?”

“Yep. She has a daughter named Megan and Megan has a little girl named Paige. Why?”

“Something strange happened after I left the museum yesterday. I was on the sidewalk, writhing in agony because Morgan had hit me with something after I

flipped her off, when I noticed a little girl standing in the middle of the road. A car was rolling straight toward her, and nobody was doing anything about it. I managed to get to her and use my body to block her from getting hit. When I woke up, people were standing all around me, amazed that I'd survived, but there was no little girl. They all swore no little girl had ever been there and that it was just me and the car. Was she making me see things? Hallucinations or something?"

Stair's eyes widened. "You saved Paige's life?"

"No, you aren't listening," I countered. "There wasn't a little girl there. Not really. I was the only one who saw her. I think Morgan was making me see things that weren't real to maybe get me to throw my body in front of the car, hoping I'd die? Who the fuck knows? She's crazy, right?"

"She isn't crazy, Nico, she's evil. There's a difference." He sat back in the booth and rubbed his chin. "I don't think she was making you hallucinate with the child. My guess is she masked the little girl's presence from everybody else. If she was mad at Bella for bringing you to Salem, killing Paige would have been a good and proper punishment, Morgan style."

"She would have honestly killed a child to punish one of her employees? That seems a bit drastic, even for the most evil bitch to walk this earth." When his brows shot upward, I said, "Yeah, had some dreams or visions about her last night. Learned some things. She's a fucking evil bitch."

"Trust me, Nico, you're preaching to the choir. I know what Morgan's capable of. Bella wasn't just one of her employees, though. She was a member of her coven. Apparently, bringing you to Salem was a super huge 'no-no' and Bella paid with her life. Don't go shedding any tears, though. She wasn't a good person either, Nico. None of the Salem coven witches are. She might have seemed nice, but if she had a heart, Morgan would have gotten rid of her years ago."

They called our number for food, so we got up and grabbed the goodies. When we were seated again, Stair said, “If you saved Megan’s daughter, that’s kind of a game changer, Nico. Megan is a witch in her coven, and now she owes you. Witches are required to pay their debts. This is something we could use in your favor.”

“Uh...yeah, that sounds creepy. You make it sound like I only saved her life to cash in a favor. That’s not how it happened. I didn’t know who she was or, more importantly, what she was. All I saw was a little girl about to get hurt.”

“Doesn’t matter, Megan owes you. Put it in your back pocket for now, but always remember that you have it. You never know when you might need a witch’s help.”

“You’re a witch, aren’t you?” I asked quietly, feeling incredibly stupid for saying it out loud. When he gave me an affirmative nod, I said, “I need a witch’s help, and since you’re the only witch I know, it looks like it’s gonna have to be you. Can you help a guy out?”

“Only if it’s something I want to do. Officially, I don’t owe you anything,” he said with a laugh. “So, what’s this favor? Need a love potion brewed?” he teased.

“Haha. No, I need you to take me to the graves of Corbin and Nicodemus,” I told him.

“Why do you want to do that?” he asked with a frown. “What do you hope to find there?”

Shaking my head, I answered, “I don’t have a clue, Stair. All I know is that I’m having weird dreams. I’m seeing things happen. I’ve seen all my male relatives die. With everyone except Nicodemus, I’m watching it happen, like a voyeur. When Nicodemus is involved, I’m seeing things through his eyes.”

I sure as hell was doing more than seeing things through the eyes of Nicodemus. I was feeling lots of things, too. Things like Corbin's hands all over my body, Corbin's lips on mine, or Corbin's cock in my ass. Things like that. Yeah, I was feeling all those things and enjoying them too.

His teeth nibbled at his bottom lip as he pondered what I'd said. "Are you thinking reincarnation?"

"I'm not thinking anything, Stair. I haven't got a clue. I'm too clueless to even try and make an educated guess as to what is going on. I can only go on what I'm experiencing. Trust me, none of this shit is making sense to me. Hell, I didn't believe in witchcraft until yesterday!"

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He stared at me blankly before replying, “Well, that’s just stupid, seeing as how you’re a witch. How could you not believe?”

“We haven’t established that I’m a witch yet,” I corrected. “You think I am because you’re picking up this weird energy from me. I, on the other hand, am on the fence and leaning heavily toward the not-a-witch side. I mean, I can’t do anything...cool. I wanna be able to do something cool if I’m going to be a witch,” I teased.

“Like what?”

“Fly. I want to be able to fly,” I replied smoothly. I wasn’t kidding either. I’d always fantasized about being about to soar through the air. Sure, I’d always been Superman in my visions, but a witch on a broom would work, too.

He barked out a laugh. “Hell, Nico. Why not start right at the top of the list? Only the most powerful witches possess enough magic to be able to levitate objects. Why don’t you start out with being able to turn the lights on with a snap of your fingers?”

I frowned. “Because I don’t need to be able to turn on lights with a snap of my fingers. They make light switches that do that when I clap my hands. No, I want to fly.” I took a huge bite of fish that I’d coated in tartar sauce and shoved it into my mouth. Marblehead had the best fucking fish and chips on the planet. They might have other good foods, but I wasn’t sure I’d ever know. I couldn’t get past the fish and chips cravings. Thinking about what Stair had said, I asked, “Anyway, you said levitate objects. I’m not interested in levitating objects—just me. I want to levitate me.”

“Aww, how cute,” he purred. “You’re such a cute little virgin witch. It’s like I can take a piece of clay and mold you into anything I want. Okay, here’s your first witch lesson. They don’t fly. They levitate objects through the air and ride them. That’s why you’ve always seen witches flying on brooms and the historian usually only get partial facts. They’ve made it into something cute when it really was just the necessity of needing an object to ride as they soared through the air.”

I stopped chewing and stared at him. He was messing with me, I was sure of it. He looked fucking serious. “Are you kidding me? Do some witches really fly? I was just fantasizing about the possibility, never really thought it could happen.”

“I’m not messing with you,” he answered with a grin. “But I’m going to have to break it to you now, you aren’t going to be able to fly, Nico. You aren’t powerful enough. I feel magic buzzing around you from time to time, but nothing that would indicate high witch level. Anyway, Morgan wouldn’t have allowed you to set foot in Salem if you possessed that type of mystical magic. Absolutely not,” he assured me. “She doesn’t take kindly to threats, and that type of power would be considered a threat to her.”

“Corbin could fly,” I answered smugly. “How did she deal with that...or did he never go into Salem?”

His eyes narrowed at me. “How did you know Corbin possessed that particular power?”

“Because you told me he was a high witch,” I answered. Paused, and then added, “And because I feel it somehow. And because of what I saw in my dream.”

He leaned in. “You saw him fly?”

“Yeah, he was trying to get to Nico when he walked off the cliff. In my vision, I was

Nico. I was falling, and I saw him flying toward me, but he couldn't make it in time. A column of fire shot out of his hand right before I hit the rocks." I shrugged. "Then I was dead."

"A column of fire? Are you sure?" he demanded.

"Uh...yeah, I'm pretty sure. Forgive me for not remembering every detail as I was about to splatter. My mind may have been on other things." It hadn't been though. When I'd been Nico, rocketing toward those rocks, I'd only been worried about Corbin, not myself. "What does it mean? Anything?"

"It means he was casting a spell. A strong spell. Only the strongest magic causes fire to fly." He stroked his chin.

"Well, it sure the hell didn't work, because I splattered. Nico, out."

His eyes rose up to meet mine as he said, "You don't know what spell he was casting, so there's no way of knowing whether it was successful, or not." He grabbed his plate, tossed it into the trash, and said, "Let's go. Hurry up. Shake your pretty ass, Nico. We've got things to do."

I looked at my food sadly. There were still a few bites left. As I tried to decide if I needed to make him wait while I finished shoving every delicious morsel into my mouth, he took the choice away from me when he snatched up my plate and tossed it. I tried not to growl as I stood up and followed him to the parking lot. "You better be glad I'm not a practicing witch because I would have turned you into a toad for that shit. I was going to eat that!"

He snorted. "You're only a non-practicing witch because you don't know what the hell you're doing or how to control your magic. I feel pretty safe around you right now," he mocked. "Let's take my Jeep this time. I know where the graves are and it

would be easier to drive you there than trying to yell every twist and turn into your ear from the back of your bike.”

He climbed into a brand-new, cherry-red Jeep that was totally tricked out. I found myself bitten hard by the jealous bug. As soon as I climbed in, he shot out of the parking lot, going much faster than the signs posted all around allowed. I held on and enjoyed the ride.

Five minutes later, we were out of the Jeep and he was striding across the ancient cemetery with determined steps. I followed without saying a word. The moment he’d pulled onto hallowed ground, my body had started doing strange things. The energy was off the charts, and my chest ached. Still new to what was happening to me, I wasn’t sure if it was because of the surrounding death and decay or if it had something to do with me closer and closer to Nico and Corbin’s graves. Of course, Nico wasn’t really there, but it was powerful all the same.

After we’d walked for what seemed like forever, we came upon a black iron gate that looked to enclose a fairly large family plot. He unlatched the gate with a twist of his finger, like Morgan had used to knock me on my ass yesterday, but then raised his hand to tell me to stop walking. “There’s a protective spell that keeps everyone out except for members of the coven. Give me a second to see if I can grant entrance for you, okay?”

I don’t know how I knew, but I knew I was welcome inside the coven plot. I’d guess it was my mysterious connection to Nico, Corbin’s lover. “I don’t think that will be necessary, Stair. Let me try without undoing the spell.”

He giggled. “You’re going to get the shock of a lifetime, Nico. It’s a rather strong deterrent devised to keep people out of our…”

He stopped talking when I walked through without feeling even the slightest twinge. I

turned and smiled at him. “Told you I was welcome.”

“Smartass,” he accused as he entered the area and locked the gate behind us. He smacked me on the ass as he walked by and said, “Follow me.”

The tightness in my chest grew as we traveled deeper into the coven’s hallowed plot. By the time we reached a raised spot in the center, I could barely catch a breath. I wasn’t sure if it was excitement or fear. Looking around, I noticed that the tombstones were arranged in the shape of a pentagram, with Corbin and Nico’s stones being in the center. I couldn’t help but notice that there weren’t a lot of graves when one considered how old the hallowed plot was. “Why so few?” I asked quietly. Whispering felt more respectful.

Alastair dropped to his knees in front of Corbin’s stone and bowed his head. I could see his lips moving but couldn’t understand the words. I remained quiet as he paid his respects to the man that had once been the high witch to his coven. After a few moments, he stood back up and turned to me. His eyes were damp with unshed tears. “Your energy is buzzing all over the place, Nico. You feel more powerful than ever before. I don’t know how, but you’re going to be the witch that gets revenge against Morgan for killing our high witch.”

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Frowning, I asked, “I thought he just disappeared after losing Nico?”

“Yes, but he must be dead, or he would have returned to us. Corbin was destroyed when he lost Nico, destroyed to the point that his powers were nearly dormant while he mourned. I’m not certain Corbin would have ever recovered from losing his love, but I do know that he would not have committed suicide and left his coven defenseless against Morgan’s power. It would have broken his heart to have to keep living, but he would have done it for his coven. No, he disappeared because of something Morgan did to him. That bitch killed him while he was weak and hid the body from us.”

I didn’t know what to say or if I should try to say anything to comfort Stair. I wished I could say that I would, indeed, find a way to avenge Corbin’s death but I damned well knew Morgan would wipe the floor with me. Hell, she was coming for me soon and there wouldn’t be a damned thing I could do to stop her.

“A high witch can live for hundreds and hundreds of years, maybe more. She took all that away from him.” He looked around the cozy resting place for his coven. “After Corbin died, most of our coven opted to leave the area instead of doing battle with Morgan. She didn’t intend for any powerful witches to be left in the Marblehead coven.”

I studied his sad expression and tried to imagine how much hate and damage Morgan had inflicted on the people he loved. A thought dawned on me. “You said you were twenty-two years old,” I remarked. “Why am I getting the feeling that you’ve been dishonest with me about your age?”

He chuckled. “Well, I hardly could have told a complete stranger that I was several hundred years old, now could I?”

Was he being serious right now? He was hundreds of years old? I’d thought he was a high schooler when we’d first met. He’d made me feel like a dirty old man!

“Are you being serious?” I asked. “Because you look twenty-two years old, not hundreds and change.”

“Ha!” He barked out. “I looked that age because that was how old I was when the aging process slowed down to almost nonexistent.” He grinned. “Now, stop looking at me like I’m a creepy old man. I’m still quite young for our coven.”

“Young...rriigghhtt. You keep telling yourself that, old man,” I teased. Finally, I moved toward the graves. I’d put it off as long as I could. I wasn’t sure what I was hoping to find...or feel. All I knew was that my dream lover had gently pushed me in the direction of the graveyard. Now it was time to find out what Corbin has been trying to tell me.

Alastair watched me, a strange expression on his face. “What are you planning on doing?” he asked.

“Don’t know. I just know I’m supposed to be here. There’s something here for me to find,” I answered. Without knowing what else to do, I knelt down next to Nico’s headstone and slowly reached up to touch it. The second my hand made contact, a vision flashed inside my head. I saw the old casket, lined with torn and dirty satin that had long since fallen victim to the assault of time and vermin.

The vision immediately assaulted me. I saw Corbin coming to the cemetery to grieve over the body of his lover and falling down on top of the grave, completely overwhelmed with heartbreak. I heard his sobs. I saw Morgan gliding up behind him

in the darkness and making passes over his body, her lips moving and muttering incantations. His body quivered and then simply vanished into thin air. I saw her smile secretly to herself. It was Morgan who had done this to Corbin—whatever it was. She had made him disappear. But to where?

“What is it, Nicholas?” Alastair demanded as he dropped to his knees next to me, helping to keep my body from falling completely to the ground by placing his chest against my back. “What’s wrong?”

Part of me would like to tell him that I saw Morgan make Corbin disappear and that his high witch might still be alive somewhere. The other part, the one that seemed to be controlled or at least influenced by Corbin, told me not to reveal the truth to him yet. I knew what I needed to do, where I needed to go, and I also knew Alastair would never allow me to do it alone.

This was something I needed to do alone.

“It’s just emotional for me. Nothing to worry about.”

“Oh. I thought you saw something about Corbin. His body has never been found, and it would be nice to lay him to rest at last.”

I heard his deep sigh. There was no doubting it in my mind, Alastair hero-worshipped Corbin Hargreaves, but was there more to it than that? Had they known each other... in the biblical sense? Jealousy coursed through my body and I felt a spark on the tip of my finger.

Alastair jerked back. “You made magic!” He cried. “I saw it! Did you see the flame on the tip of your finger? What were you doing? Were you trying to cast? I didn’t think you knew how,” he exclaimed excitedly. “You need to be careful with that shit, Nico. If you don’t know what you’re doing, it can be dangerous. As teenagers, we all

received training on how to control our powers. You haven't had that." He ran his fingers through his hair. "Fuck, we've got to get you some training. What were you trying to cast?" he asked as we both stood back up.

"I wasn't casting anything," I answered. "I think I was just emotional." Yeah, make that jealous. "This wasn't easy, I think I need to go home and get some rest." I looked at him and asked, "Maybe we could meet up again tomorrow?"

Disappointment flashed over his features. "Oh, okay," he answered. "Yeah, I guess that did drain your energy. I've never known another witch that had that particular power. You've really got to meet the rest of the coven. Are you sure you don't feel like it tonight?"

Oh, I couldn't tonight. I had someplace to be. Alastair couldn't know that, though. "Maybe tomorrow?" I offered. "I really am tired."

He unlocked the gate, and we walked out. I expected my heart to do something weird when I left the graves, but I felt nothing. I was worried about that until I realized it was because I realized neither Corbin nor Nico were really there. Nico was here inside me, and Corbin was at that house, waiting for me to find him. I just knew it.

I watched, with admiration, as Alastair twirled his finger and locked the gate with a magic that would keep intruders out. As we walked back to his Jeep, I asked, "What are your powers, Stair? You said witches have different ones. What do you excel at?" I had no idea how to word that question, so I did the best I could.

"Eh," he muttered in obvious disgust. "Nothing exciting like levitating objects so I can fly, or making fire fly from my fingertips while I'm casting spells," he whined playfully. As we climbed into the Jeep, he said, "If I concentrate really hard, I can freeze people for a grand total of about three seconds. I'm actually hit and miss on that one. Sometimes I can make it happen, but most of the times, I fail. I'm fairly

good at love spells, although I don't have a significant other. Oh, and I craft a mean magic wand."

He acted like his powers were nothing, but they sounded cool as shit to me. "Have you not had any luck getting a love spell to work on somebody you're interested in, or have you not found the right person to try it on?" I asked as we pulled back out onto the busy road.

He blushed. Oh my. Alastair had a crush. I wanted to know more and intended to pry it out of him...just another time.

"You're blushing like a schoolgirl," I quipped. "I'm kinda brain dead right now, but you might as well get ready to tell me who it is tomorrow. You can't keep a secret like that between friends. Can I meet him? Soon?"

"He doesn't like me, and I won't stoop to using a love spell to change his mind. Hell, I don't even know why I like him. He's an arrogant ass." His blush deepened. "Just forget I said anything. You can't meet him, anyway. He's one of the witches who had to move away because Morgan felt threatened by his power. Just left without saying he was sorry...or even goodbye." He pulled back into the parking lot where my Ninja waited for me. "It isn't ever going to happen, so there's no point in talking about it." After he whipped in right next to my ride, he turned and said, "Get some rest, Nico. You've got to meet the coven tomorrow. I'm sure you haven't forgotten, but we've only got a short time till your birthday to figure out a way to kick Morgan's ass...before she kicks yours."

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I noticed that he was calling me by my ancestor's name. I didn't think he even realized it.

"Shit, yeah, I forgot about that," I answered sarcastically. "I'll meet the coven tomorrow. I promise. That was just too damned hard on me, man. I need to sleep away the rest of the day and night. I'll call you in the morning."

"Okay, rest well," he answered. I felt like shit for lying to him, but I told myself it was necessary.

"Hey, should I get Spellman to come by your place and cast a protective spell on your cottage?" He asked. "Morgan hasn't ventured into this territory since she ran off most of the coven, but you can never be too careful. Let me get him to drop by this afternoon. We won't even disturb you."

Shit. Shit. Shit. If they dropped by, Alastair would know I'd lied to him.

"Hmm, I don't know, Stair. I don't even know this Spellman guy. Let me meet him first, okay?" Yeah, I felt like a lying sack of shit that somebody just dug out of the kitty litter.

"All right, but no later than tomorrow. I don't like leaving you unprotected. I'll call him tonight and line it up for tomorrow. He's a nice guy, but a total science nerd. All he does is write spells and mix potions. He never wants to leave his lab."

I laughed, glad that he was going to drop it for today. "Sounds interesting. We'll talk in the morning. Thanks for taking me today."

“Yeah...” He stopped then and stared into my eyes. “You’re Nico, aren’t you?” he said intently. “The reincarnation spell was Corbin’s. He said he would bring you back to him.” Sadness covered his face. “We thought it was just his grief talking. It’s so wrong that you’re here, and he’s gone. It makes his story even more heartbreaking.”

“How well did you know Corbin?”

His eyes flashed. “I knew him well. He was our high witch. I admired him to the point I looked like a puppy dog following its master around. When I think back, it’s embarrassing, but there was nothing romantic between us if that’s what you’re thinking.”

Frowning, I asked, “How did you not recognize me as Nico right away? Morgan recognized me the minute she saw me.”

“I’d been away at the training academy when Corbin met Nico.” He smiled wickedly. “Nico was a Salem boy. Leave it to Corbin to throw caution to the wind and fall in love with a human from Salem. Every male witch in our coven and other surrounding covens were vying for Corbin’s attention, but he went and fell in love with Nico.” He looked at me oddly. “With you.”

“You say Salem boy like that was the dregs of society,” I teased.

“It was. Especially to the Marblehead coven. The thought of bedding down with a Salem boy should have made Corbin’s toes curl, and not in a good way. They were all religious nuts. Bigots in my opinion—not wanting to allow for any customs or religions other than their own. On top of the Salem shit, Nicodemus was a preacher’s son.” He laughed. “Yeah, preacher’s sons and witches usually aren’t compatible.”

I wrinkled my nose at the thought of Nicodemus’ father being an old fire and brimstone preacher. Gross. Just gross. Preachers were hard enough on homosexuality

these days. I couldn't imagine how much pressure Nicodemus faced hundreds of years ago. "Hell, I might not even be compatible with Nicodemus. I was ready to defend his Salem boy status, but I'm not sure about preacher's son." I waggled my eyebrows. "Of course, the children of preachers are usually the most out of control."

Alastair snorted. "Yeah, that goes without saying in the case of Nicodemus. Not only was he—you—sleeping with a male high witch, but he'd obviously gotten a girl knocked up, too." He shrugged when I frowned at him. "Your ancestors had to come from somewhere, dude. Sorry. Nicodemus was unfaithful to Corbin."

That comment didn't settle well with my heart. I frowned as something tugged at my memory, something that caused a wave of sadness to wash over me. Struggling to come up with a defense, I said, "Maybe his parents had other children after Nico died? Another son could be the answer to my ancestors." No, that wasn't right. Morgan had told me that Nicodemus had gotten a woman pregnant. Fuck, he had cheated on Corbin.

I had cheated on Corbin.

"Nope," he answered with an exaggerated popping of his lips. "They'd had Nico late in life so were probably too old to conceive another child. Morgan, however, wasn't willing to take any risks and had them killed shortly after Nico committed suicide."

"She's a real peach, isn't she?" I commented dryly.

"Yeah, she's a peach all right. She's also the woman that's coming for you. We've got to come up with something to protect you. Fast."

That was exactly what I was about to do.

"Trust me, I know. We'll start on it tomorrow. I promise." Hell, no. I was starting on

it as soon as Alastair left me. I had a feeling my only hope lay at the top of that cliff...where it had all started.

Chapter Six

The emotions racing through my blood as I raced toward Corbin's old house were a mix of excitement, fear, and trepidation, all causing a cocktail of nervous energy to flow inside me. Actually, I suspected it was flowing outside of me, as well. If Alastair were here, he'd say I was buzzing.

Hell, to the fuck, yeah. I was buzzing.

I had no idea what, if anything, I was going to find once I reached the clifftop, but I felt like I'd been waiting on it my entire life. When I pulled the Ninja off the road and onto the overgrown driveway, I suspected every resident of Marblehead could hear my heart thumping.

Alastair was going to kill me when he found out what I'd done. I thought about what he'd told me about the people who'd tried to enter the house. I'm pretty sure he'd used the word incinerated. Yeah, that wasn't my thing. Of course, neither was getting blown through the air and over the side of the cliff. Been there. Done that. Not much fun.

Finally, I reached the clearing and pulled the bike right up next to the porch. After cutting the engine, I got off and studied the house. Strange, it looked different than I remembered, not as neglected. Sure, one could still see that no one had lived there and made any home improvements in years, but it seemed...different. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but knew there were changes. The paint appeared brighter, and the windows were no longer covered with cobwebs. The steep gables were more erect and proud. The eyes of the gargoyles glittered dangerously.

It would be nice to say I wasn't afraid, but that would be a big fat lie of epic proportions. If I allowed it, my teeth would be chattering from fear. It was that word, "incinerated". Boom. Head over ass if the spell blew me over the side of the cliff. I turned and looked in the direction of the cliff and chills raced down my spine. No, I wasn't interested in doing that again.

My fear was strong, but my pull to the house was even stronger. A voice whispered in the back of mind, pleading for me to come home. The sexy huskiness of that voice was my driving factor as I slowly raised my foot and gently placed it on the first step. I was holding my breath and waiting for the smell of burnt flesh. My eyes were closed.

When nothing happened, I peeked one eye open. Nothing had changed. No spell had blown me to bits. Birds were still chirping in the background, and I could still hear the waves crashing against the rocks at the bottom of the cliff.

This was my home, where I belonged. I bounded up the remaining steps and walked straight up to the door. Morgan's fucking spell wasn't going to keep me from what was mine. Mine. Corbin was mine. This house was mine. This life was mine.

Anyway, I felt confident that Corbin was inside that house somewhere and he would protect me from any of Morgan's bullshit. He had cast a spell to bring me home...and here I was. Morgan could go fuck herself.

That was my last thought as I felt myself flying through the air as soon as my hand had wrapped around the ancient doorknob. I didn't have time to scream or even curse the bitch. I didn't have time to plead with Corbin to help. No, I flew through the air, slammed into a tree, and hit the ground with a thud.

Then my entire world went black.

His eyes, a beautiful combination of violet, amethyst, and bright blue, sparkled with anger as he gazed down at me. Oh, it was more than anger, anger I could deal with. It was the pain and betrayal that was making it impossible for me to draw in my next breath of air. Ever since I'd first met Corbin eight months ago, he'd looked at me with nothing but love and lust. He was always happy, always making me laugh. For the first time in my life, I'd felt special. For a boy who'd lived most of his life feeling inadequate, being special to someone was an aphrodisiac. I was addicted to Corbin Hargreaves, body, soul, and heart.

"Please don't be mad at me, Corbin. I...I don't even know how it happened. Please forgive me," I pleaded. Tears were already streaking my face. I'd known admitting my infidelity to Corbin would be difficult, but I'd always thought he would forgive me. I'd thought our love was strong enough to conquer everything.

He'd told me so.

"Don't be mad at you?" He growled as he paced back and forth in front of me. "You don't know how it happened? Give me a break, Nico! It happened when you took her to your bed! When...when you gave her a part of you that belonged to me. Only to me!" He yelled.

We were in his front yard, but there wasn't anyone around that might be able to hear us. Corbin relished his privacy. From the looks of things surrounding me, he'd planned a romantic evening to celebrate my twenty-fifth birthday. A dark canopy, the color of the sky at night, was nestled in our favorite spot next to the edge of the cliff. Inside that canopy sat a mattress and more pillows than a man should be interested in owning. Jar candles floated all around, casting a romantic glow on the seduction scene he'd set.

The same seduction scene I'd ruined when I'd told him about the pregnancy. I couldn't do it, though. I couldn't allow him into my body for the first time without

revealing the truth to him. I hated lies and secrets, even if secrets shrouded Corbin's life due to his witchcraft. I would have felt like the biggest of liars if I hadn't admitted the truth to him.

"Please, Corbin," I tried again. "You know how much I love you. You have to know this was a mistake!" It had been a terrible mistake. I didn't even fucking remember most of the details of what happened between myself and the girl I called my intended as a way to thwart my father's questions.

His eyes narrowed in disgust. "Yes, I'm beginning to think this was a mistake. This!" he said as he motioned between the two of us. "Were you so fucking ashamed of your feelings for me, a man, that you had to sleep with a woman to prove to everyone that you aren't homosexual?"

That wasn't fair. Corbin knew how I struggled with my feelings for him. He knew the things my father preached about, the things he said about people who had feelings like Corbin and I did. When a person heard that their entire lives, it was hard to just cast it aside without feelings of fear and misgivings.

"That isn't fair, Corbin," I said softly. "You know I struggle with what I've been taught, but you also know how much I love you. I told you I needed time to come to terms with my desire for you."

I hated myself. I hated how weak I sounded. I hated that I allowed my father's hate to damage my love for Corbin. Most of all, I hated the look on Corbin's face. More than anger was dwelling there. He was finished with me. Contrary to what he'd promised, there was something I could do that would make him stop loving me. And I'd done it.

Corbin snorted in disgust. "Yes, Nico, I know you needed time. You told me you needed time. I accepted that you needed time. I, unfortunately, thought time meant a few months, even a year, maybe. I had no idea it meant that you intended to start a

life with another person. You'll have to marry her, Nico. You can't allow a child into this world without a father!"

"I...I know, Corbin," I whispered. "I guess I thought...I hoped that we could still be together. I, uh, hoped we could keep what we have now." That wasn't fair, and I knew it. I also knew I was desperate. I couldn't live in this world without Corbin.

He laughed. "What, Nico? You want me to be your dirty secret? You'll sneak away from your wife and child when you can and meet me?" He stepped closer, putting us only inches apart. "What? You think you can run to me when you need a dick in your ass?" He laughed. "Oh, wait. You don't let me put my dick in your ass, do you? Think that will make you too gay? Think again, Nico. It doesn't work that way."

His words were angry. His eyes told a different story. His heart was breaking. I'd done this to him. I'd destroyed the love we'd shared.

"Be gone when I return, Nico," he said quietly. "Be gone and don't come back. Not ever."

I watched, through tears, as he caused a large tree branch to break off and tumble toward the ground. He caught it before it hit and, within a blink of an eye, he was on the branch and flying through the air away from me.

He took my heart with him.

How could I have done this? How could I have betrayed him in such a way? Why? Had I gotten drunk? It was hard for me to even imagine that I'd been capable of performing with a woman, but I remembered that part of the encounter. There were flashes of images of us having sex, but, thankfully, most of the details eluded me.

I stared at the spot in the sky where I'd last seen Corbin. He'd already disappeared. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I refused to accept that it was over between us. I'd find a way to win him back. My love for him was too great...too powerful to walk away from. I'd give him some time, but I would be back. I had to come back. I would die without him.

"Well. Well. Well." A voice purred from behind me. "Someone has a fiery temper, don't they?"

I whirled around to find Morgan Goodheart standing there, a look of wicked delight masking her features. I didn't know the woman, other than the fact that she was the high witch of the Salem coven and Corbin's enemy. She shouldn't be in Corbin's territory, much less on his personal property. "You aren't welcome here, witch. You should go before Corbin returns and finds you here. He'll make you pay for entering his territory."

"My, my, it seems that Corbin has shared all sorts of information with his little whore, hasn't it?" she said.

She didn't seem at all intimidated by my threat that Corbin would be angry for her

trespassing in his coven's territory. Actually, she looked quite pleased with herself. Unease tickled my senses, and I glanced around at the empty sky, wishing Corbin hadn't left me.

“Don't bother looking around for your lover, Nico. I'll know of his return long before you. I assure you that I've planned his destruction down to the very last detail. No room for mistakes when Corbin's involved,” she said in a sing-song voice. “Did you know, Nico, that being with you has made him stronger? His powers have grown over the past months. Isn't true love just beautiful?”

Corbin's destruction? Morgan wasn't strong enough to destroy Corbin. No one was. Were they? My eyes searched the sky again, this time hoping he wouldn't return. Whatever Morgan had planned for him, I didn't want her to have the opportunity to pit her powers against his.

“Why are you here, Morgan? You're violating coven rules. You need to leave.” I didn't know much about witchcraft, but I knew she didn't belong here. I also knew that she should be powerless while in Corbin's territory. Frowning, I realized she didn't look powerless.

I tried to sound brave but knew my voice sounded weak...like the pathetic human I was. For the hundredth time since meeting Corbin, I wished for some of his magical powers.

“I'm here to take care of a problem.” She made a tscking sound and smiled at me. “Take a step toward me, Nico,” she purred.

In my mind, I was telling her to fuck off. In reality, I obeyed and took the step she'd requested. I frowned, wondering why I could no longer control my own body.

“Very good,” she complimented. “Yes, you've made our Corbin much stronger with

your love, albeit your love has come with secrecy stipulations, hasn't it? Did you know that you made him weaker with your betrayal? It's that very weakness that opened the portal and allowed me to step inside." She took a step backward and said, "Another step toward me, please."

I obeyed.

"As his heart is breaking, he gets weaker and weaker. I suspected it would happen and, with a little nudge of magic, it looks like I've confirmed my suspicions. Another step, please."

"I had one of my witches cast a spell on you to make you have sex with her and to impregnate her with your child." She laughed. "Oh, you didn't know Abigail Hawthorne was a witch? She hides her true nature well, and so does her family. They're all a part of our coven. Don't worry, we'll take care of the child—no need for you to worry about leaving a child behind with no father to protect it. I've decided to send Abigail and her family north to Easthampton to join a coven there, so a part of you will still exist. All the more to torment Corbin with."

She forced me to take another step and then another, putting me closer and closer to the edge of the cliff. I wasn't sure when I realized what her plans were, but I suddenly knew she planned to make me kill myself. She was going to make me walk off the fucking cliff, and she was doing it so Corbin's powers would be weakened in grief.

"Two more steps, love. Come along. I don't have all night," she cooed and then laughed maliciously.

"Don't do this," I pleaded softly. I wasn't going to lie to myself, I didn't want to die. My biggest pain, though, came from thinking that Morgan might actually succeed in her quest to destroy Corbin. I doubted that losing me would weaken his magical powers, but that didn't mean I wasn't worried.

“Tsk. Tsk. Don’t be such a whiny little human. You made a high witch fall in love with you, so surely you have some strength inside of you somewhere. It’s time to pull on that strength now, poppet.” Her eyes drifted toward the sky and then back to me, her smile growing even wider. “Take that last step, Sweets. Corbin is coming. I want him to almost get to you...but not quite make it.” She giggled like a child. “I think it’ll hurt more that way, don’t you? I need it to really hurt him.”

“He’ll see you. He’ll know you made me do this,” I hissed as I raised my foot into the air. I tried. I fucking tried so hard not to take that last step. I was scared. It would hurt. I didn’t want to leave Corbin. I needed to tell him again how much I loved him.

I needed to hear him tell me that he loved me. I didn’t want to die with our last words having been so angry and bitter. He’d torture himself with telling me to never come back.

“I’m invisible. He’ll only see his beloved walking over the cliff. Aww, here he comes. Last step, Nico. Goodbye.”

I took the last step and plunged over the edge of the cliff. I screamed in shock as I tumbled through the air. I could see the water below, then the sky above. The rocks were coming toward me fast.

I heard it, then. I heard Corbin’s scream of horror. He called my name, despair making him sound different. I’d never heard him sound anyway except confident, in love, and, a few moments before, angry. The fear and horror in his voice now made my heart explode in pain.

With my twisting and turning, it wasn’t until the very last second that my eyes finally locked with Corbin’s. It was as if time froze for a split second. His face was streaked with tears. His hands reached for me, but I knew he wouldn’t...couldn’t...get to me in time. Seconds before I crashed into the rocks, fire flashed from his fingertips,

exploding in heartbreak and fury.

Then...nothing.

It was pitch black when I opened my eyes. Twinkling stars hung in the sky, laughing at me in a mischievous way. I looked around and took stock of my injuries. None. Okay, maybe a mild headache. I was lucky. I'd flown probably fifty yards and slammed into a tree. Several branches were broken where I'd hit the thousand-year-old oak tree. I should be dead.

But I wasn't. What I was, was fucking pissed.

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Morgan was behind it all. It had been Morgan who had caused Nico to betray Corbin. And Corbin, wherever he was and whatever physical state he was in, had thought Nico killed himself following their argument. Morgan had been correct—Corbin had been weakened by his grief from losing Nico. On top of all that shit, those fucking rocks had hurt like a motherfucker.

That bitch was so fucking dead.

Angrily, I stood up and stomped my way back toward the house. Energy, stronger than I'd ever felt before, flowed through me. I could see a glow radiating from my body and my fingers sparked with power. Alastair was correct. I had no idea how to control my powers. I didn't know how to call upon my inner witch, or cast spells, or protect myself. The only thing I knew was that I was fucking pissed and she wasn't going to win.

I stomped up the stairs and paused in front of the door that had zapped me into Never-Never land a while ago. Unskilled, however, didn't mean I was completely without weapons.

I pushed my hands in front of me and cast the only "spell" I knew.

"You mother fucking bitch! It's time to pay for your sins."

Fire flew from my fingertips, and the biggest part of the front wall exploded. Like an idiot, I closed my eyes and blocked my face with my hands. When the dust settled, the front doors were still standing tall and strong. The windows that had lined the front entrance stood firm. The walls surrounding the doors and windows, however,

were blown to smithereens.

“Take that, bitch,” I muttered as I walked through a portion where the wall used to be. Nothing happened, not even a twinge of pain.

As I stepped into what used to be Corbin’s living room, I felt invincible.

Three hours later, I was so frustrated that I wasn’t sure if I should cry, cuss, or build a blanket fort. I’d combed every inch of the magnificent fortress. I’d sensed Corbin in every room, every corner and crevice. I could fucking smell him, and I wasn’t even sure how I would know what his scent was. I even felt Nico’s presence, stronger than ever and residing deep inside of me.

He was there...but he wasn’t. He was with me. But not entirely.

See me. Corbin’s voice called inside my head. See me, Nico.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” My head swiveled around the study. Everything was just as Corbin had left it that day. I walked over to his oversized desk and looked at the aged papers. There were handwritten spells that he’d been working on. There were notes from the last meeting the coven had held. I smiled. There were notes of Alastair’s training progress that his mother had given during the meeting. Next to the update, Corbin had written: “This one will be important.” Alastair would bask in that tidbit of info...if I could ever share it with him.

“Where are you?” I whispered to the empty house.

My favorite place. The voice answered plain as day in my head, nearly causing a yelp of surprise to tumble out of my mouth. My eyes darted around the room, certain he was there somewhere if I could just open my fucking eyes and see him. His favorite place. His favorite place. The problem was, I wasn’t Nico—not really. I didn’t know

where his favorite place was.

I paused. What would any man's favorite place be? Well, any man before man-caves had been invented. The bedroom...where he fucked. I was probably way off base, but since my options were limited to, well, absolutely none, I decided to give it a try. I left the study and raced up the curved staircase, stumbling a couple of times in my haste.

From the spot inside my head, I heard Corbin's husky laughter. I'm excited, too, my love. Come to me.

"Well, stop hiding then, asshole," I answered loud enough for him to hear, regardless of what space Morgan had locked him in.

The laughter grew louder.

It was strange how I was already in love with Corbin Hargreaves. I'd never really seen him face to face, never held him except in dreams, but I was in love. Madly in love. Like, fairytale love. The kind of love I'd never believed in before setting foot in Marblehead. That was the love I felt for Corbin.

I love you, too, Nico. The voice answered. I've waited so damned long for you to find your way back to me again.

"Stop getting inside my head!" I yelled. "That's rude. I might be thinking inappropriate thoughts." I opened his bedroom door for the second time that night and peeked inside. Everything was exactly as it had been the first time I'd scoured it from head to toe...the same as it had been a hundred years ago. And a hundred years before that. Corbin was meticulously tidy. There wasn't even any dust, because of the spell Morgan had cast.

I hope you're thinking inappropriate thoughts. The voice answered and was accompanied by yet another husky chuckle. It's been a while and I've missed your body. I miss how well you fuck me. I miss those lovely sounds you make right before you come. I miss how your bright blue eyes turn midnight blue when you're wanting me to touch you. Hell, Nico. I miss everything about you. I'm so sorry for the things I said. I didn't mean them. I was angry. Hurt. Confused. I never stopped loving you. Not that night and not in the thousands of nights since then.

I felt my blood rush straight to my cock. Straight. To. My. Cock. I'd never had sex with a man in my life, never really thought I would want to. I fucking wanted to have sex with Corbin.

Now.

I searched the entire room again, looking in places where common sense told me there was no reason to look. Seriously, did I really think Morgan had trapped Corbin under the bed for a hundred years? Nah, probably not. Nearly an hour had passed since I'd entered the bedroom and I'd made zero progress. And with every minute that passed, I was growing closer to death at the hands of Morgan Goodheart.

No! She will not win, Nico. Don't even think it. I won't allow Morgan to hurt you. This time the voice in my head was even louder. So loud, I looked around the room, expecting to see Corbin standing there.

So, he knew of the curse. She'd probably flaunted that in front of him, mocking him every time she killed a Bailey descendant. I remembered then that he'd been through this twice before with other reincarnated versions of Nico. They had found their way to him too, only to eventually be thwarted by Morgan again.

Third time's a charm, they say.

My head turned to look at the large mirror that covered one entire wall—the wall adjacent to the bed. Smiling, I wondered if Nico had ever watched Corbin fuck him through that mirror. Had Nicodemus been a kinky slut like me?

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My eyes widened. What better way to torment Corbin than to make him spend eternity looking at the bed where he and Nico had made love over and over again. Well, I guess we had. Other than the visions Corbin had put inside my head, I had no recollection of Nico's time spent with the high witch. I only knew that Nico loved him. That I loved him, too.

Then. Now. Forever.

Slowly, I walked to the mirror, concentrating on trying to see if there was an illusion there, hiding the man I loved. No, trapping the man I loved. There was nothing though. Only my own sad reflection gazing back at me. I tilted my head. I looked like Nicholas, not Nicodemus. Was I a disappointment to Corbin?

Never. I see only your heart, my love. Another breathless laugh. Okay, I see more than your heart. You're even more beautiful than before.

"I bet you say that to all the Nico's," I teased to the empty room. I was only a foot away from the mirror, and I began to realize my energy level was spiking. My fingers tingled and sparkled.

I watched myself in the mirror as a smile curved my lips. "Nico never betrayed you, Corbin. It was a vicious spell. One of Morgan's witches cast a spell on him and made him have sex with her. There was no betrayal. He wasn't even aware of what he was doing. I swear it." I raised my hand and placed it flat against the mirror. I took a deep breath. "Around and around we go, Corbin. Come back to me."

I felt warmth touch my hand and then the mirror exploded into a million pieces.

Every instinct inside me begged that I try to protect my face and body from the shards of glass that flew through the air, but the newfound energy that accompanied all things magic assured me I wouldn't be injured. One second I was standing there, hand flat against the mirror, and the next minute, Corbin was standing in front of me. His hand was flat against mine, causing sparks to flicker and then erupt into flames. I'm not sure how long we stood there, hand to hand, eyes locked together, with magic flowing through the air between us and all around us. The only thing I was certain of was that I'd spent my entire life waiting for this moment. For this touch.

Even in crowds or with friends, I'd always felt alone, and now I knew why. As my hand rested against Corbin's hand, I knew I'd never be alone again.

When the glass finally settled, and the flames stopped flickering, I saw Corbin, standing there in his old-fashioned clothing and looking as young and alive as I was. He really was blond, like I had thought, and he had the same jewel-toned purple eyes as in my dream. Corbin murmured, "Hello, Nico. Welcome home, my love."

My heart exploded. All the things wrong in my life suddenly turned right. Where there hadn't been love, love now existed. I felt...shy.

"I'm...I'm not Nico," I countered, trying to keep gazing into those incredibly intense eyes. He was beautiful, so fucking beautiful. He was too beautiful for the likes of me. "I'm Nicholas." What I felt for Corbin was so all-consuming and so powerful. But I didn't want me to be madly in love with a man who thought I was someone else. He needed to know that while parts of Nicodemus might reside deep inside of me, I was still ninety-nine point nine percent Nicholas.

Corbin's hand dropped away from mine, causing a wave of loneliness to wash over me, nearly drowning me. "Ah, my love. I know who you are," he said softly. "I also know that my Nicodemus is inside here," he tapped the side of my head. "But, more than that, I know that you're Nicholas, the beloved that I've spent years waiting for. I

can't wait to learn everything about you, Nicholas Jeremiah Bailey.” After he uttered those words, he reached up, gripped the sides of my face, and his lips crashed against mine. Splinters of light and sound exploded in my head. Peace and happiness wrapped a loving cocoon around my heart. I felt loved and cherished. Warm. Content. Every fucking good word I could come up with. That’s what Corbin’s kiss did to me.

He broke off the kiss but didn’t remove the hands that held my face captive. His smile was seductive and held a promise that made me want to collapse against his strength. “That kiss, my love, was to show you all the love I feel for you, and how much you mean to me. It was my way of laying claim to your heart.” He winked. “When I kiss you again, it’ll be to show you how much I crave you physically. I’ll lay claim to your body then, as well.”

“Oh...okay. That sounds...good.” Fuck, I sounded like a total idiot. If I didn’t snap out of it and show a dab of intelligence, he might try climbing back into the mirror. “I mean, fuck, yeah.”

His eyebrow arched and his eyes widened. I was afraid I’d offended him, but then a huge grin split his face. “My goodness,” he remarked. “Yes, you are a bit different than Nicodemus. I like it. I like it very much. He was always quite shy and never cursed.”

He was laughing at me but not in a bad way. Still, he was definitely laughing.

“Yeah, I might be a little shy, too,” I mumbled.

“I suspected as much.” He stepped closer and pulled me against him. When he wrapped his arms around me, I felt so fucking safe.

I felt Corbin’s body tense up and then relax again. What had I done wrong? Had I

already fucked it up?

“What?” I demanded. “Did I do something wrong?”

His grip on me didn’t loosen in the least.

“Absolutely not, Nicholas,” he answered quickly. “The power of your magic surprised me for a moment. I suspected there had to be a small amount residing inside in order for you to have found your way back to me, but the witchery inside of you is...amazing.” He frowned. “I heard what you said earlier about Morgan using one of her witches to cast a spell on Nicodemus to force him to have sex with her. I can’t imagine that Morgan would have risked using a powerful witch, but your magic rejects that theory. You’re strong.” His frown deepened. “High witch, strong. Unless...who was your mother, Nicholas?”

“Her name was Rosalie Banks. From the Banks family of witches in Easthampton originally. That’s what I discovered lately anyway.”

“The Banks family,” Corbin answered with a smile. “An old and revered coven. Nathaniel Banks and I were friends after a fashion. He was incredibly strong.”

“My research said that Rosalie was his descendant.”

“Ah. A high witch, then?” His eyes widened, and I thought how sexy those eyes of his were. He smiled and said, “You’re, um...sexy too. If I understand the term.”

“Okay, let’s not do that anymore. Can you stop? I want you to stop. When we have conversations, they need to be vocal. Don’t dig around inside my head. It makes me feel weird, and I don’t like it.”

“Of course, Nico. I’ll refrain from digging inside your head. I apologize.”

“Apology accepted,” I said. “High witch, eh? I doubt that. I mean, she couldn’t save herself or my dad from Morgan. As for me, I didn’t even know I had any powers at all until two days ago. I can’t imagine it would be possible for me to have high witch powers tucked inside of me and not have known it. Surely some of it would have shown up at some point in my life, right?”

“Not necessarily. It could have taken you coming back home or interacting with the coven to awaken your power. Without proper training, witchcraft can lie dormant in a person. As for your mother, the spell Morgan used was too dark to fight. It was drenched in blood.”

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He took my hand and led me over to the bed. “Enough talk of Morgan for now. I need to regain my powers so I’ll be able to destroy her before the hour of your birth on your twenty-fifth year.” He motioned toward the bed and my cock twitched. “Will you lie with me?”

I gulped. Literally gulped. “Uh...yeah...sure. I mean, I would have expected you to buy me dinner first, but I’ve put out for less before. Sure, this will work.” I started ripping off my clothes and toeing off my shoes, in a hurry to get this over with so we could get to the main event. I climbed on the bed, knowing my attempt at a joke had sounded above and beyond stupid. I was nervous, though, at what he would think about my body. Incredibly nervous. Yes, I wanted to have sex with him, more than I wanted it to be the day after my twenty-fifth birthday with me still alive. I wanted it...but I was afraid of it. No, apprehensive might be the better word. I’d never had sex with a man except for that time in my dream. I looked around the tidy room. Was there lube here? That was important, right? Had lube even existed a hundred years ago, and had Nicodemus and Corbin used it? And maybe condoms? Though considering the man had been locked up behind a mirror for over a hundred years, it wasn’t like he’d had a lot of dates. And I was babbling in my own head. Nice.

Corbin’s eyes widened appreciatively as he climbed onto the bed and gathered me in his arms. “God, you’re so gorgeous. All these muscles—Nicodemus’s body, though beautiful, was very different. But I wasn’t asking you if we could engage in carnal relations, Nico. I just want to feel your body against mine. Still—since you seem to be all right with it...”

“Um, yeah. I-I’m fine with it except...I’ve never exactly...I mean, this will be my first real time with a man.”

His face changed, and his eyes became moist and so sweet as he looked down at me. He took my hand in his and kissed the back of it. Yeah, I guess it was hokey, but damn it felt good. I'd never had anyone look at me like they loved me before and it took my breath away. I closed my eyes, slightly overcome and he leaned down to kiss the side of my face. "Thank you, love, for trusting me. I promise I'll take care of you, just like the time before in your...your water closet. Only this time it will be real."

"My water closet? You mean the bathroom? With the shower? You're going to have to get up to speed on all the modern conveniences, but it will be fun to teach you. Wait till you see television. And video games. You're gonna love those." I was babbling away, I think, to try to handle the intensity of my emotions, but Corbin saw right through it.

"It's going to be fine, darling. We won't do anything you're not ready for. I promise." Then he bent down and claimed my mouth in the fiercest, filthiest kiss I'd ever experienced. And I thought some of those sorority girls had been dirty. I had a feeling I was about to get schooled.

He slid his tongue inside my mouth, and there was something about me being naked and him being fully clothed that my dick really appreciated and what the hell was that about? I had no idea I was so kinky. Still kissing me, he made a little motion with his hands and suddenly, his clothes just fell away, like all the seams had come out of them at once. He pushed them aside, and I feasted my eyes again on that same strong body I had admired in my shower. He had muscles everywhere, though not in an over-exercised, bulky way. He was lean and athletic looking, with the body of a runner and the thighs of a rugby player. Damn, he was hot as hell. He put his fingers up to my mouth and whispered to me.

"Get them wet, love."

I opened my lips obediently and sucked his fingers into my mouth. He even tasted

good. He pulled them out after a moment and reached around behind himself, looking at me with an arch smile. “I want to watch your face while I ride you, sweetheart. I want to see you come apart.”

The air rushed out of my mouth, and I could only stare at him. He wanted me to fuck him. Unbelievable.

“I don’t—I’ve never done this with a man.”

“It’s not all that different,” he said, trailing his fingers down my throat. “Just let me do all the work.” He lifted himself onto me and sank down over my cock in one swift move that left me gasping and him groaning with pleasure. God, the heat of him! Velvet soft and so tight and hot I thought I’d die now and be a happy man. And just when I thought it couldn’t get any better, he reached up and twisted my nipples with his hands, and I almost flew up off that bed with him still wrapped around me. How come no one ever touched me there before? I didn’t even know my nips were an erogenous zone, but I began to buck up and down so hard as he teased and twisted them so hard I almost threw him off me.

He smoothed his hands up my sides then and murmured to me. “Slow down, love. We have all night.” He scooped up some of the cum leaking from his cock then and smeared a little of it on my lips before claiming them again in what had to be the most sinful kiss in the history of Salem. The taste of his cum in my mouth made me moan and thrust my hips again into all that heat. I felt almost out of control, and so close to coming I was embarrassed. “Corbin,” I said urgently. “Corbin, I’m gonna...I can’t...”

“Shh,” he said in my mouth, soothing me and passed his hand over my head. “Now you won’t come until I allow it.” Until he allowed it? Well, if that wasn’t the fucking most hot thing I’d ever heard I didn’t know what was. In just a few minutes, he’d reduced me to his moaning little bitch, and I fucking loved it. What the hell was

wrong with me?

Nothing, I heard him say in my head. There's not a thing wrong with you. We were made to be together. I only want to pleasure you, darling.

He raised himself up until just the tip of my cock was kissing his hole, and then he slammed back down on me all the way to his balls. I could feel the weight of them with his soft hair on my thighs. I thought I was dying—I wanted to come so bad. He began to writhe on my dick, rocking his body over me. He leaned over and fisted my hair to kiss me again and finally, finally, he made that little pass on my forehead again and said, “Come for me, love. Come harder than you ever have before.’

He didn't have to ask me twice. My body bowed up in an arch until only my shoulders were still on the bed. My toes curled, and I screamed at the top of my lungs as my orgasm exploded out of me. I bucked and strained against him and he held onto me, his ass hot and tight around my cock. I think I may have bitten into pillow beside my head and ripped it with my teeth. He had come at the same time and I felt his molten cum splash on my stomach. Again, he scooped up some of it and fed it to me. He fell off on the bed beside me, and it was a long time before either of us had the energy to speak. I actually may have passed out. When I was aware of my body again, I realized he was wrapped around me, his leg slung over mine and his arms around my waist. It was where I wanted to be forever.

Eventually, we had to move though, and Corbin was the first to drop a kiss on my forehead and get up. He went to his cabinet thing that my history degree told me was called a chifferobe and pulled out some clothes. I lifted up on one elbow. “How are those things not rotted by now?”

“The house was under Morgan's spell to be frozen in time. She wanted me to know all my things were here waiting on me. Part of her torture.”

“I’d like to torture that bitch,” I said, sitting up. “I’ve never wanted to kill somebody before, but in her case, I’d make an exception.”

He smiled and started to say something when we heard a loud voice calling to us from the front yard.

“Nicholas! Are you in there? Answer me! So help me, if you’ve gone and killed yourself, I’m going to...shit, I don’t know what I’ll do. Nico!”

I glanced over at Corbin in surprise. “It’s Alastair. He must have come looking for me. He’s really been helpful since I got here. He’s been trying to look out for me.”

Corbin smiled. “Yes, I’m quite fond of Alastair. If I recall correctly, he spent too much time chasing a man when he should have been focused on his training.” Nicholas watched as a smile crossed his face as he remembered a younger, rebellious Alastair Harlowe. “I’d like to think he’s finally moved on from his youthful indiscretions, but I suspect, knowing his stubbornness, that I’d be disappointed.”

I would have defended Alastair’s good name if the look on Corbin’s face had been anything other than affectionate when he talked about my new friend. Alastair had moved around to the back of the house, still yelling my name, and I could sense how nervous and upset he was becoming with each passing moment.

I scurried out of bed and started digging around the floor and under the bed for my clothes. When I hopped around the room on one foot for several seconds as I tried to get into my jeans, Corbin finally took pity on me and, with a wave of his hand, I was completely dressed. Giggling, I said, “Damn, but that witchcraft is useful.”

“Yes, it is. You should try it sometime, Nico,” he said with a sultry smile that made me want to remove each and every clothing article and climb back into bed with him. It wasn’t like I’d spent my life as a prude that didn’t enjoy sex, but, damn, I feel like

what I'd just shared with Corbin was my first real taste of the joys of carnal lust. I couldn't get enough of him.

"I told you, Corbin, I don't think I have any real magic-nothing of significance." Of course, I had blown Morgan's fucking spell to smithereens when I'd been determined to get inside to Corbin. Fucking smithereens.

"Yes, love, you do," Corbin corrected. "You just haven't had the benefit of someone training you to properly and safely use your powers. That's going to change."

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Thoughts of being sent to a witch school dampened my spirits. Leaving Corbin was one hundred percent out of the question. “Nope, no witch school for me. I’ll just stick with using magic when I get pissed off...or horny.” I shrugged and winked at him. “I think that’s the only time I need it anyway.”

“Ridiculous,” Corbin argued. “I’ll train you myself, love. Your powers are great and they will not be wasted. As soon as we speak to Alastair and I get an update on the status of the coven, we’ll begin your training immediately.”

Ah, Corbin would be training me. That was a different story entirely. That, I could live with! Maybe he’d have to punish me if I was a bad student. That could be fun.

Excited, I started out the door to fetch Alastair—he was going to shit when he saw Corbin was still alive. I made it two steps before I returned to the bedroom. “Uh...you aren’t going to be naked when I bring him up here by any chance, are you? There’s a pretty big chance that I’m possessive of what belongs to me.” A feline smile stretched across Corbin’s face at my possessive comment. “No nakedness around anybody but me,” I ordered. “Alastair is my only friend in Marblehead, and it would be awkward if I had to punch him in the face.”

“How about to avoid any awkwardness I just meet the two of you in my library?” He grinned and with a wave of his hand, he was dressed in different clothing. In jeans and a T-shirt. Identical to mine, except his shirt was black. With a shrug, he said, “I believe my clothing is somewhat outdated. I thought perhaps I would be more acceptable in something more modern.” His hand rubbed the denim of the jeans. “What is this fabric? It feels most...rugged.”

I whistled through my teeth. “Damn, but you fit a pair of jeans nicely, Corbin Hargreaves! Very nicely, indeed. I’ll explain the fabric later. Right now, I’ve got to grab Alastair before he tries to enter the house and hurts himself.”

“Oh, Morgan’s spell is no longer intact. Alastair should be fine to come inside.”

“Did I do that, or did you?”

“We did—when we touched through the mirror. Our connection dissolved all her spells regarding me and my home.”

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “Take that, Morgan, you bitch.”

It took nearly an hour of Alastair babbling hysterically, crying tears of joy, ranting about Morgan the bitch, and, finally, manning-up before we could have a conversation. As the three of us sat in Corbin’s library, Alastair’s left leg was still jiggling uncontrollably with excitement. Since I wasn’t raised in a coven, or even believing in witches, for that matter, I hadn’t fully understood the significance of Corbin’s return...until Alastair. The boy was beside himself with pure joy.

“What of the coven remains intact, Alastair?” Corbin asked quietly.

The pain of having to listen to what Morgan had done to his beloved family was etched all over his handsome face. I wanted to kill Morgan. Slowly and with extreme prejudice.

“My mother is still here. Genevieve and Brax remained behind. Ruby and Crimson live close-by and still do what they can to support us, but Morgan refused to allow them to live within the Marblehead borders--something about Violet’s ability of time

traveling.” He snorted in disgust. “Yeah, I guess she wouldn’t want anybody to be able to go back in time and see how she fucked us all over.”

“Morgan will get what’s coming to her, Alastair. Leave her to me.” He glanced over and me and said, “Both of you need to leave Morgan to me. Nicholas, I don’t want you leaving the Marblehead territory. Do you understand me?”

I snorted at his bossy attitude but then quickly nodded in agreement when his frown deepened. My lover had enough to worry about without me piling on. Anyway, where would I go? Why would I leave? He was all I needed, and he was in Marblehead. End of story.

“Anyone else?” Corbin asked Alastair.

“Yes,” he answered. “We’ve still got Keller Spellman and the Carlisle family. Well, except for Esmerelda. She disappeared shortly after you died, er, I mean...uh, before you got fucked over by Morgan.”

Corbin frowned. “Esmerelda left but her family remained?”

“Yes, sir,” Alastair answered.

“Still puppy-loving over August, Alastair?” Corbin asked with a narrowing of his eyes. You realize you belong to another, don’t you?”

Completely fascinated, I moved to the edge of my seat and enjoyed watching Alastair squirm beneath Corbin’s fatherly frown. If he belonged to another, he sure the hell had never mentioned it to me. Then again, he hadn’t mentioned anybody by the name of August, either.

“I...I know that you think Riker is the man for me, Corbin, but I don’t agree. He’s an

ass—a total ass. He’s the poster child of assholery.”

Alastair argued with a perfected pout that had probably helped him get his way through the majority of his life. One glance in Corbin’s direction and I knew it wasn’t going to work this time, not on the high witch of Marblehead.

“I see,” Corbin answered slowly. “When is the last time you spoke with this ‘poster child of assholery’?”

I could tell I would need to explain what poster child meant after Corbin was finished with Alastair.

Alastair blushed. “It’s...it’s been awhile, sir.”

Under his breath, I heard him mutter “not long enough”.

“So, Roman and Riker Keegan are no longer with us. I can understand why. The twins were very powerful.” His eyes locked with Alastair. “Although I’m certain Riker has weakened somewhat since he’s been separated from you.” Alastair opened his mouth, probably to argue, but Corbin silenced him with a glare. “Brodie Salvatore is gone. Royce and Chelsea Teague were forced away. Kingston and Teagan Godwin were, of course, forced to leave by Morgan. Do we know of their whereabouts or will we need to conduct tracking spells to locate them?”

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I watched as Alastair gulped nervously. Something bad was about to follow.

“Brodie Salvatore was murdered by Morgan, sir. He refused to abandon his home, and he was destroyed. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here to protect him...to protect all of you,” Corbin answered. He was furious, quivering with his need for revenge. I watched as the tips of his fingers sparked in outrage. “It won’t happen again. Morgan is going to get what she has coming to her.” His eyes softened when he looked at me. “Morgan will pay for what she’s done to your ancestors, too, Nico.”

“For what she plans on doing to me,” I added. “I’m certain she plans on my death, as well.”

Alastair spoke up. “What are we going to do about that, Corbin? I know you must still be weakened from the spell she cast on you. How will you protect Nico when the time comes?”

“Nico will be perfectly safe in Marblehead and by my side. There are rules to her curse. First rule, she can’t set foot in Marblehead, and a projection won’t be strong enough to tangle with my magic, even in my weakened state. Second rule, the Bailey descendant is only susceptible to her magical influence for a small window of time. She must take your life the very second of your birth. After that, you are no longer powerless to fight her.”

“Sounds simple enough,” I muttered...knowing there was probably nothing simple about the curse.

“What can I do to help, Corbin?” Alastair asked, once again on the edge of his seat, bouncing around like an energetic puppy.

“Gather the remaining members of the coven and tell them what’s happened. After that, I need you to bring my coven back to me, Alastair. Meet with each of them and let them know that I’ve returned and that I humbly request that they return home, where they belong. If they are happy where they are, I understand, but I would love to see our family together once again.”

Alastair was damned near preening with the responsibility Corbin had given him. I thought back to the words my lover had written all those years ago, this one is going to be important. Even then, Corbin had recognized Alastair’s significance to his coven.

“They are scattered, Corbin. This could take several days.”

“I understand,” he answered. “Go to Keller or Spellman first and have one of them cast a protective spell on you. You need to be invisible to everyone except members of our coven. Morgan will know I’ve been freed from her spell, so she’ll be desperate to do anything to weaken our coven. I won’t lose another loved one to her evilness.”

Alastair cringed at Corbin’s words. “You think she’ll know? How? Your own coven isn’t aware yet,” he declared.

Corbin’s eyes drifted lazily to me and he winked. My knees felt weak. “There’s no way she didn’t feel my lover’s magic when he incinerated the spell she’d cast on the house and then when our combined magic released me from my prison. Yes, she’s aware of what’s happened, and I’m certain she’s plotting her next move. Go see Keller first. I mean it, Alastair.”

“Of course, Corbin,” he answered submissively. “Keller and I are friends. He’ll take

extra care of me.”

“Riker would take better care,” Corbin remarked under his breath.

Chapter Seven

Days later, I was lounging on a super soft blanket, completely naked, in Corbin's front yard. I'd told Corbin that I was trying to work on my tan, but the bottom line was I was trying to get his attention. I needed his attention. I craved it. The sad part was that I had his full focus, body and soul, but all our physical time had been with me making love to him—which was good. Beyond good. It was like nothing I'd ever experienced in my life. But, I knew he wasn't fucking me to be patient due to my lack of experience, but I also knew I wouldn't feel complete until he'd taken me.

I had an itch that only he could scratch, and the itch was inside my ass, and his cock was the only thing that was going to scratch it properly. So, I was lying stark naked in the sun, junk probably getting sunburned, in a feeble attempt to lure him into fucking my ass into the mattress. But so far, I was failing miserably.

I was propped up on my elbows, legs spread wide, and watching him work magic. Yes, that was magnificent—something I never in my life suspected could actually happen. Not only was it majestic, but it was sexier than fuck. It was also making me even hornier.

Alastair had been gone for three days and we hadn't heard a word from him, but three coven members had returned—Ruby, Crimson, and Royce. Chelsea would be returning by the end of the week. That left Kingston and Teagan Godwin and Roman and Riker Keegan. Secretly, I couldn't wait to meet Riker. I was dying to meet the man Alastair had called the “poster child of assholery”. One just didn't get that opportunity every day. I had met August and could easily see how Alastair could be so smitten with him, but the guy was as straight as...well, as I used to be. He was also

as dull as un-iced doughnuts. The only time I'd seen a spark enter his dark eyes was when the lesbian couple, Violet and Amethyst, had shown up while he and his parents were visiting Corbin. I suppose he was all into imagining watching those chicks get it on. Hell, I wouldn't have looked away, so I couldn't really blame him, could I? Although it was a pretty dick move, I have to admit.

Poor Alastair. I'd done some research on homosexuality since I'd embraced a gay relationship myself—four days and counting—and, apparently, Alastair was breaking the cardinal rule by falling for a straight guy. According to the internet, that shit never worked out, and we all knew the internet couldn't lie, right?

Corbin had also shared some information regarding the Alastair/Riker feud. Apparently, Riker had done something that totally humiliated Alastair when they were away for their training. Something really humiliating. Corbin didn't believe it was Riker, actually. He thought it was probably Roman pretending to be Riker but never got the opportunity to investigate before Morgan's diabolical plan kicked in. Whatever. I was siding with Alastair on this one. Either Riker did it, or he didn't kick his twin's ass if it was Roman. Either way, it was a lose-lose situation for Alastair.

I was still dying to meet him.

Deciding to up the ante on my own love life problem, I reached down between my legs and gave my cock a long, slow tug. Corbin's eyes shot in my direction the second my hand made contact with the heat between my legs and a naughty smile spread across his face.

"Are you trying to distract me?" he asked.

"Maybe," I answered. "Is it working?"

His clothes vanished with a flick of his finger, and following another twirl of that

same finger, I yelped in surprise when the blanket I was lounging on suddenly lifted into the air, and like a magic carpet, carried me over to where Corbin was standing. When I was in front of him, the blanket fluttered gently to the ground and my ass made contact with a hard surface again.

“Levitating objects. I like it,” I commented with a smirk. My hand went back to doing lazy strokes up and down my cock. I noticed his hand was busy mimicking the same movement.

“Nicodemus always liked it, as well. As a matter of fact, it was his favorite magic for me to perform.” He was smiling...stroking...

I was fucking panting. He’s thicker and longer than I am, which should probably bother me, but it didn’t. Not in the least. All I could think about was what that monster would feel like inside of me. When I hit that special spot inside of Corbin, he went insane. Would it be the same for me? I had to find out. Soon. No, now.

“That’s funny. I told Alastair that being able to fly would be the one magical gift that I’d want above all else. Think it will ever happen?” I felt my eyes growing dark and heavy with desire. My hand was doing the job, but it wasn’t what I wanted. “Actually, Corbin, I’d like to fly right now...if you know what I mean.”

“I believe I can make that happen for you,” he answered. Then, with a languid wave of his hand, the canopied king-sized bed from upstairs magically appeared in the grass next to him.

I watched as he studied the darkening sky and then used his magic to change the color of the bed linens. When he was finished, the bed looked like it could blend in with the sky. Excitement bubbled inside of me as I realized we were about to take his bed for a ride. I thought back to my vision of when Nicodemus and Corbin had fought the night Morgan had forced Nicodemus to commit suicide. This very bed had been sitting

outside under a canopy of trees, with candles lighting it. It broke my heart to realize that Corbin must have planned a romantic night for them, but Morgan's bitchery had gotten in the way.

I stood up, went to Corbin, and wrapped my arms around his waist. My chest was to his back, and I stood up on my tip-toes just enough so I could rest my chin against his shoulder. The moment we touched, he melted against me and I knew he was imagining the exact scene that I was...and his heart was breaking.

"She took so much from us, Nico. So many years and so much love that we could have shared. She stole it from me, but knowing you now, this beautiful mixture of Nicodemus and Nicholas, I have to admit there is a peace in my soul and a love in my heart that I never thought could exist." His head rested back against me when he added, "I can only hope you feel the same, Nico."

"Head over heels, babe," I answered with a soft kiss to the sensitive spot below his ear. "I'm crazy in love with you. I can't explain it, and don't even care that there isn't an explanation for how quickly I've fallen for you. All I know is that there's this...old part of me that has always loved you, even when I couldn't put a face to my fantasies, and there's the Nicholas part that's going crazy wanting you to fuck me."

He chuckled softly. "That's another difference between Nicodemus and you—that nasty mouth. I love it when you talk dirty. I love the fact that when you want something, you aren't afraid to ask for it." He turned around and wrapped his arms around me. "And that you aren't ashamed of the intimacy we share."

"While I don't remember anything of my time as Nicodemus, other than our argument and my death, I'm well aware of the differences between what I face now and what Nicodemus faced years ago, babe. I'm sure he was afraid. He didn't have the power of witchcraft to protect him from the hostility, hate, and possible death he would have faced if people had learned of his love for you. Add his religious

background into the mix, and Nicodemus must have felt terrified, Corbin. Please don't ever doubt his love for you, though. When I experienced his death, his last thoughts were of you-not of his own death. He was worried about the pain his death would cause you."

"I just wish I could have taken those fears away from him. He had an easier time accepting me being a witch than he did with accepting him wanting a man in his bed. That knowledge made me sad then and still saddens me to this day. In my arrogance, I overlooked or down-played his fears. He didn't deserve that from me."

"Corbin, don't think that," I begged. "Trust me when I tell you that Nicodemus felt nothing but love for you. I feel that love and peace in my heart. I don't have to remember the past to know that Nicodemus died loving you...and still loves you, through me."

Wanting to steer Corbin away from his sadness and melancholy, I decided to shuffle our conversation back to the magnificent bed that was still calling my name. "You'd brought the bed down the night that Nico died, hadn't you? I remember seeing it in my vision. There were candles and pillows." I got on my tip toes to kiss his full lips. "You're quite the romantic, aren't you?" I would give anything to have Nicodemus's memories. I'd bet ten years of my life that Corbin Hargreaves was the most romantic man alive...and still is.

He captured my hand in his and walked me to the bed. After pulling the canopy curtains aside, he motioned for me to climb in. I obliged with an extra wiggle of my ass, of course. I was finished topping. My ass belonged to Corbin tonight. After settling myself in the center of the bed, I patted the spot next to me. "Are we just going to fuck outside or does this bad boy do something else?" I wagged my eyebrows at him as he climbed in beside me. "Because in my deepest, darkest fantasies, this bed is going to fly high in the sky while my lover fucks me senseless," I said.

“This bad boy, as you call it, does fly...with a little help, of course. Are you interested in giving it a test run?” he asked with a Cheshire-cat grin.

“Oh, hell, yeah,” I answered quickly. “I want two things to happen tonight,” I told him. “I want this bed to soar across the sky, and I want you to make love to me. To claim me as your own. I’ve been doing all the claiming and I’m ready to try it the other way.” I smiled up at him. “Tell me, Mr. Hottie, how did I enjoy sex as Nicodemus? You’ve said I didn’t talk dirty, but tell me a little bit about what I was like. In the sack, of course,” I amended. “Please tell me I wasn’t a boring drag.”

A sad expression crossed Corbin’s handsome face, causing my heart to lurch in pain.

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“Nicodemus didn’t let me...” He stopped talking for a few seconds and then corrected, “Nicodemus was afraid to let me take him physically. I’m...I’m not sure if he was concerned about the physical discomfort or if there was something else holding him back.”

I frowned, suddenly one hundred percent sure that I didn’t like me as Nicodemus very much at the moment. I don’t think ‘old’ me treated Corbin very good. That, of course, left a nasty taste in my mouth. “Listen, I’m getting mad at Nicodemus, which really, in a way, means I’m getting mad at myself, so let’s end this conversation.” I looked around the bed and then asked, “Is there a seat belt for me? I’m not sure what kind of driver you are, Mr. Hargreaves.”

“No seat belts required. I’m a perfectly safe driver.” He frowned and scratched his chin. “Of course, it’s been a hundred years since I last flew this thing, but I doubt that’ll be a problem.”

“Nah, no problems with that,” I agreed excitedly. I would have agreed to pretty much anything at that point. I couldn’t believe I was about to get to fly, even if it was on a bed. There were bed linens hanging from the sides of the canopies, but the top of the bed was completely open. Since we’d been talking, the sun had gone completely down, and twinkling stars were in the sky, winking down at me. Even though I’d been afraid of heights for my entire life, I’d always felt a desire to be able to fly. Seeing that Nicodemus jumped off a cliff and plunged to his death explained my fear of heights. I had a feeling Corbin was about to show me why I loved the idea of flying. “Ready for take-off,” I teased, immediately feeling like a total fool.

“Me too,” Corbin answered as he wrapped his arm around me.

We were propped against the headboard, our legs entwined. My cock was wide awake and wanting to play. His was rock hard, and, I hoped, wanting to play hide and seek.

“You get us off the ground, and I’ll take care of the rest,” he said. My excitement plummeted. Me? I couldn’t do a vertical jump very well, much less levitate this damned bed off the ground. What in the hell was he thinking? Had being trapped in that mirror fried his brain cells?

“Uh, yeah, about that,” I began. “That’s your thing, not mine. I’ve got zero skills when it comes to magic. How about you make us fly and I’ll give you the best blow job you’ve ever had?” I had a funny feeling that beating Nicodemus at blow jobs was going to be a breeze. No, I’d never given one before, but knew exactly what I enjoyed and, unlike Nicodemus, I wasn’t afraid of a cock. Nope, not at all. Especially Corbin’s cock.

“Concentrate and lift the bed off the ground, Nico,” Corbin said in a patient, not-patient, voice. “I’m not asking you to fly us across the moon, just get us off the ground.”

“I can’t, Corbin. Stop wasting time. I’m horny. I need to feel that thing inside of me. End of story.” I gave his hard cock a tug as I talked. Fuck...it felt so fucking good—like iron wrapped in silk. When I finished my gripe session, my hand stayed right where it was.

“Get us off the ground, and you’ll get the blow job and the fucking you keep referring to,” Corbin promised. “You’re much stronger than you realize, Nico. You simply lack the focus to perform...”

The bed jerked and then steadied. Unable to believe that I’d actually accomplished moving the bed at all, I leaned over, pushed the bed curtains aside, and then gasped

when I saw we were hovering along the rooftop of Corbin's gothic mansion. Hovering. The second I realized I was levitating the bed, we started crashing toward the earth with such ferocity that I nearly tumbled right over the edge. I would have if Corbin hadn't grabbed me and hauled me tightly against his chest. In a split second, he'd taken over and the bed, courtesy of magic, was moving higher and higher.

I'd never been more mesmerized in my life. After about fifteen minutes, I whispered, "Can people see us?"

He chuckled and kissed my cheek. "No, love, they can't see us. There's a cloaking spell on the bed to hide it from mortals." He leaned in closer and said, "They can't hear you either, so whispering isn't necessary." He nibbled at my bottom lip. "As a matter of fact, you can make as much noise as you like."

"Ha-ha," I replied with a punch to his upper arm. "Why do you change the colors of the bed, then? I noticed you making the bed and linens match the color of the sky earlier."

"The cloaking spell works with mortals, but some witches, if they tried hard enough, could see through it, especially now while I'm weaker. I thought you might enjoy some privacy from prying witch eyes."

I flung him down on his back and straddled his chest. Testing my magic, I twirled my finger and made the bed linens disappear. To my amazement and I have to say, to my delight, it actually worked. Looking down at him, I said, "Listen to me, Corbin. You can drive me down to the busy beach, plant me on my hands and knees in front of the biggest crowd Marblehead Cove has ever seen, and fuck me right then and there, in front of everybody, if that's what turns you on," I told him. "Thisdigging dudes is totally new for me, but, babe, believe me when I say I'm all on board with letting the whole world know I belong to you and you belong to me."

As I straddled him, his cock, hard and hot, was burning the crease of my ass. If I leaned up just a little, positioned myself just right...

Before I could move, Corbin had flipped me on my back and was straddling me, a sultry look on his gorgeous face. "Are you certain you're interested in me...taking possession of your body?" he asked, almost shyly.

Well, his tone and words sounded shy. The lust in his eyes was opposite of all things shy. I focused on those eyes.

"I only have one question about that, Corbin," I told him.

"Yes, I'll be gentle, love. I know this is your first time," he said softly.

"Nope, not looking for gentle," I countered. "I feel like I've been waiting for this for over a hundred years. Gentle is off the table. I only wanted to make sure you could drive this bed and drive my body at the same time."

His eyes locked with mine and the intensity swirling in those depths made me squirm beneath him. Nobody had ever looked at me like that before, with such love and devotion. The love, shining so brightly, made me long for the memories of Corbin and Nicodemus' brief love affair. I loved Corbin and knew he was my soul mate, but I felt like our past had been stolen from me. I wanted to feel all the things Corbin was feeling right now, and I hated Morgan for taking those things away from me.

"I love you, Nico," he whispered. "I've always loved you. Thank you for the gift you are about to give me."

I squirmed again, feeling warm all over. "My ass?" I tried for humor and more than likely failed.

“Nicodemus never could, but you seem so...willing. You have no idea how much your eagerness calls out to my soul.”

His lips found mine and his kiss started out seductively slowly as explored every inch. He teased and then tormented. He tasted. All the while his naughty tongue was working on my mouth, his even naughtier hand was...exploring. At first, it had been an innocent touch to my jawline, a soft caress that made me quiver with desire. The hand moved lower, tweaking my right nipple and then pinching it lightly. I nearly came off the fucking bed when he did that. Hell, I would have if his body hadn't been pinning me to the mattress. Our cocks were lined up perfectly, dancing against each other and the heat of both felt like it was one level above smoldering. His fingertips danced even lower, teasing my stomach muscles and toying with my hip bone. I felt a seductive caress against my cock, and then it moved even lower to give my balls some attention. Chicks tended to steer clear of the balls, like they had no idea how badly they craved attention, too. Corbin knew exactly how to touch, tease, and twist. By the time his wicked hands had made it to my ass, I was moaning and writhing with an enthusiasm that I should have found embarrassing. Hell, what did I care? I was flying in the sky--who was going to see or hear me? With that thought, my back bowed a little more and my moans grew louder.

When he slid a thick finger inside me, I felt a moment of discomfort, but it was quickly overshadowed by a burst of pleasure when he hooked his finger and stroked my prostate. “Fuck, Corbin!” I yelped in shock. “That feels...hell, there aren't words for how good that feels.”

He chuckled softly, but never stopped his assault on my mouth and ass. After a few minutes and a couple more fingers, I was begging him to fuck me. Literally, begging. Incoherent words of begging. I knew what I was trying to say, but I wasn't sure he could decipher the point I was trying to get across to him in this unknown language I was suddenly speaking. All I knew was that if I didn't feel him inside of me within the next few seconds, I was going to self-combust. Every nerve ending in me was

tingling and burning.

When I felt him line his cock up with my hole, I almost wept tears of joy. Sure, I knew there was going to be some pain or discomfort involved, but I also knew that I would never be complete until Corbin was inside of me, claiming me...owning me.

“Make me yours, babe,” I pleaded as I wrapped my legs around his waist and tried to force him inside me. “I’ve waited nearly a century for this.”

He pushed inside of me, breaching the snug entrance and not stopping until I felt his balls bounce against my own. I’d expected some pain. I’d been certain of some discomfort. There’d been no doubt that there would be pleasure. It was all those things, but so much more. When Corbin was buried as deep as possible, memories flooded my mind and heart. Snippets of Corbin laughing at something Nicodemus said, or racy visions of us kissing or me fucking Corbin, or, the most beautiful of all, peaceful segments of us sleeping together with our limbs entwined.

My hands moved to grip the globes of his ass and I held him there as memory after memory danced inside my head. We’d decorated the house together. We’d talked about getting a pet. Hell, we’d tried a little bondage.

“Are you okay? Did I hurt you?” Corbin’s husky voice demanded. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, love. I’ll stop,” he assured me.

“Don’t you dare try to stop this,” I yelled. “Memories, Corbin. I have our memories.”

Chapter Eight

Alastair stood outside Riker and Roman's apartment building and squinted as he tried to see the top of the skyscraper from his lowly perch on the ground. From the information he'd collected on the Keegan twins, they each had their own penthouse on the seventy-sixth floor. Arrogant asses. Alastair wasn't poor by any means, because a person didn't live as long as he had, possess magical powers and not manage to squirrel away a nice, fat savings account. He just didn't feel the need to flaunt his shit in front of the entire world like the Keegan assholes obviously did. Corbin Hargreaves was his hero, but the high witch was wrong about Riker being the yin to his yang. He'd hated Riker since his eighteenth birthday, and he suspected he'd hate Riker until the day he sucked in his last breath.

What could he say? Riker had that effect on him. Always had and always would. Whatever emotion he felt for Riker, it was strong. He either loved him—or hated him. For the past hundred years, he hadn't been sure which one.

The fact that Riker lived in a penthouse on the seventy-sixth floor of the nicest apartment building in New York City was simply more kerosene for Alastair's hate bonfire where his supposed beloved was concerned. Add to that the unpardonable nugget that both Riker and Roman were absolutely, positively fucking gorgeous and Alastair felt steam coming out both his ears. If he wasn't so damned over-the-moon happy about Corbin still being alive, he would have begged his mentor to not make him participate in this particular visit.

Realizing he was just putting off the inevitable, he shrugged, gathered his magic, or at least what there was of it, to form a barrier around his ego, and strutted into the lavish

building like he owned the place. He didn't, and the Keegan twins did, but there was no reason to let himself be dragged down by the facts. His magic might not be as powerful as that of Riker's and Roman's, but he did the best he could with what he had. On top of that, he was besties with Corbin's beloved. That had to rate him high on the importance food-chain, right?

Without pausing or asking directions, he moved straight to the private elevator that would lead to the twin's penthouse floor. He felt their magic throughout the building and answered with some of his own. He was certain that he shouldn't have been able to use the private elevator without some sort of special key or something as equally mundane, but used his magic to override the human barriers. As the elevator carried him upward, he felt his stomach twist and turn in what he could only describe as twisted tummy due to an extreme case of hatred. It couldn't be anything else.

Against his better judgement, his mind traveled back to his eighteenth birthday, or as he thought of it—the day he started hating Riker. Roman and Riker, three years his senior, were graduating the training academy the year he started, and both twins were popular, powerful, and passionate. He'd envied them from the beginning, and while Roman was aloof and untouchable, he'd mistakenly thought Riker was the man of his dreams. The older witch had welcomed him on his first day on campus and had continued to lure him onto the dangerous ground of complacency with every seductive smile, sexy wink, or helpful idea on how to improve his magic. Being the fucking pushover he was, he'd fallen for the beautiful witch-hook, line, and sinker. Little by little, day by day, he'd fallen madly in love with Riker Keegan.

Three days before his eighteenth birthday, he'd finally succumbed to the witch's charms and joined him for a night of frolic and fun in the bedroom. It wasn't the first time he'd had sex with another man. No, he'd fucked and been fucked many times before Riker and many times after Riker. The problem for Alastair was that the one time with Riker Keegan had been the only time that his heart had participated. The first and the last time.

He'd been flying high from their night of bliss and hadn't really focused on his training like he should have been. There had been a huge visual exam in one of his spellcasting classes, but instead of practicing the spell that had been issued to him, he'd been daydreaming about Riker. That, in itself, was bad enough. Add to that the fact that Riker had sneaked into his class that day and the situation became even worse. As Alastair had been in front of two hundred students, struggling with his inability to perform his task, Riker had cast a spell on him that made his clothes fall off and had left him standing naked in front of everyone. Naked and unable to cast. He'd become the laughingstock of the training school. Riker, the man who had stolen his heart, had laughed the loudest that day. Riker Keegan had broken him that day.

He'd broken his body, his soul, and, if Alastair was honest with himself, he'd broken his magic, as well. Both Riker and Roman had left the training academy the next day, yanked out by their parents after they heard what had happened, and his magic had stopped growing. Sure, he'd gone through the requirements of school and did the best he could, but he'd never shown the proper growth and improvement required by the academy. He'd been sent home during the early part of his third year due to his poor performance. He'd returned to a destroyed coven and, other than losing Corbin, he hadn't really cared that most of the witches he'd grown up loving and admiring were gone. If they'd been there, he would have probably been the punchline of every joke.

When he'd told Nico that he could freeze time, he'd stretched the truth just a bit. He'd said he was successful about fifty percent of the time. In reality, he'd been successful one time.

He felt like such a fucking loser.

The elevator dinged, indicating that he'd reached his destination. Never in his life did he think he would have to face Riker Keegan again, but here he was, ready to swallow his pride and pretend like there wasn't an ugly past between them. He could do this, right? Tell Riker and Roman that Corbin was alive and needed them back

home. End of story. How difficult could it be?

The doors slid open, and he saw Riker standing there, propped up against the wall and watching him like a cat watched a mouse before pouncing on it. Riker looked as fucking beautiful as Alastair remembered. He literally felt the little bit of confidence he'd gained over the past few years melt into a messy puddle as he stepped off the elevator.

“Well, well, well,” Riker said with a smirk that twisted his handsome face into something incredibly ugly. “The rumor mill said that Roman and I would be getting a visit from naked-boy, but I didn’t believe it.” He stepped closer, closing the distance between them and getting right into Alastair’s personal space. “I would have sworn that you would have been too big of a pussy to show your face around here, Alastair Harlowe. Don’t you have a shred of pride in that cute little body of yours?” he asked as his eyes traveled down Alastair’s body in a way that made Alastair feel like he’d just been stripped naked and fucked rough. Not in a good way, either.

“Shut up, Riker,” he hissed as he took two steps back in an attempt to put some distance between them. Something felt off about Riker. He...smelled different. “I see you haven’t changed a bit—still an asshole.”

“Ooh, that really hurts my feelings,” Riker teased. “Hey, do you remember that time I fucked you senseless and then ditched your pretty ass in front of the entire school?” He burst out laughing. “Ahhh, those were good times right there. Good, good times.”

He hated Riker but hated himself more because his ex-lover’s words and hateful attitude made him want to break down and sob. It was so fucking hard to believe that he’d once fancied himself in love with this man.

He sniffed the air again...and frowned. Riker’s magic had always smelled of toasted marshmallows. The magic aura around Riker now reeked of something rotten. Had he

gone dark? He'd absolutely refused to follow Riker's life in any way, so there was really no way for him to know what the last hundred years had brought to the other man's life. He wrinkled his nose, smelling...warlock.

He took another step back. "What...what have you done, Riker?"

"Whatever do you mean, love?" Riker asked with a shit-eating grin. "Do I smell funny to you?" He raised his arm and sniffed his pit. "Nah, just a bit of masculine sweat," he laughed. "You used to love it when I'd been working out. Not so much now?" he asked.

Accusing Riker of turning dark was out of the question. Actually, he didn't give a fuck what Riker was. The other man meant nothing to Alastair. He was there to perform a task for his high witch and nothing more. "Corbin is alive, Riker. He wants you and Roman home as soon as possible. The other members of the coven have already returned to Marblehead. You and your brother can rejoin the coven or fuck off. I don't much give a shit."

There that sounded like he could care less about their past or their future. He was quite pleased with himself and his display of indifference. His heart was being ripped out, but Riker would never need to know it. He turned to get back on the elevator, but Riker blocked his escape. The other man wasn't much larger than him, but his magic was powerful.

The magic was black. Riker was a warlock.

"Get out of my way, Riker," he demanded.

Riker didn't budge.

"Corbin wants us home, does he?" The warlock asked with a sinister smile. "That's

funny. You've got a message for me, and I've got a message for you."

Alastair's eyes jerked up to look at Riker's, and when they turned black, he turned to run. What the fuck? Riker was an asshole, but Alastair would've never thought he would have turned into a warlock. Of course, he hadn't thought he would strip him naked in front of his entire class either.

"Don't run, my sweet Alastair," Riker said in a voice laced with black magic.

Alastair felt his feet freeze as the black magic worked its way inside of him, rendering him helpless against its power. In desperation, he pulled up his own powers and tried to fight against the darkness. Nothing happened. It was as if his power never even existed.

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He felt Riker move to stand behind him, thrusting his cock against Alastair's ass and then laughing when Alastair hissed in frustration. Hissing was all he could do, though. Alastair felt fury and shame burning inside of him. He knew his powers weren't strong as Riker's. Never had been and never would be. He thought he'd accepted that he would never be like many of the other witches in his coven...or from the training school. Being humiliated by Riker, again, made all his insecurities blast to the forefront of his mind.

"Morgan wants to see you, love," the warlock whispered against his ear. "She needs you to do a job for her."

"She's a fool! You both know I'll never help Morgan do anything!" He yelled. "Anyway, Morgan is so dead, Riker. Corbin won't allow her to live. Not after what she did to Nicodemus and to him. You've chosen the wrong side, Asshole." Sure, calling him names was childish and accomplished nothing, but it was all Alastair had at the moment.

"Sorry, doll-baby," he cooed and then swiped Alastair's earlobe with the tip of his tongue. "I wasn't really asking if you'd help Morgan. I was telling you that you were going to help Morgan. You've always made dumb-ass decisions, Alastair. Always." His hand reached down to cup Alastair's limp dick through the denim of his jeans. He squeezed hard enough to make Alastair whimper in pain. "First you used this gorgeous body of yours to lure my brother into your bed. I was so disappointed in his infatuation with such a pathetically weak witch." He chuckled softly at Alastair's frown. "Yeah, I was so disappointed that I had to find a way to humiliate you to the point that you'd never want my twin again." He started kissing the side of Alastair's neck, nibbling and sucking. "You had no idea that was me who cast that lovely spell

on you that day, did you, Alastair? Me, Roman.” He laughed out loud. “That, my dear boy, was one of the first spells I learned to cast. I always knew I’d need to be able to make other people think I was the high-and-mighty Riker. The thing is, sweetheart, you’re the only one that falls for it every time. You know what I think? I think you like to believe the worst about my brother, don’t you? You loved thinking Riker was an asshole and you were his victim.”

Roman? He was talking to Roman? It had been Roman all along?

No, that couldn’t be the case. This had to be Riker, playing a trick on him. He wouldn’t have been foolish enough to not to be able to tell the difference between the twins. Oh fuck, who had he made love to? Had it been Roman that he’d given his heart and body to that night?

“Nah, baby-cakes, that was my brother that you let fuck you,” Roman answered. “But, you know what? Morgan has promised that she’ll give you to me once you’ve fulfilled your part in her plan. Won’t we have loads of fun? Trust me, if you enjoyed my brother’s cock in your ass, you’ll really moan for mine,” he boasted.

Alastair felt his magic start to boil over. He hadn’t felt so strong in years. “Fuck you, Roman,” he hissed as he found the power to move again. “I’ll never help Morgan or you!”

“Well, look at that,” Roman whispered. “My brother gets close, and your magic suddenly runs amuck. What about that?” he said with a laugh. “Oh well, we’ll have time to analyze what that means later. For now, we’d best hightail it out of here before Riker makes it up to the penthouse.” Roman leaned and stole a kiss from Alastair’s mouth. “I think he still has a bit of a crush on you, Alastair. Even after all these years. I think it’s best that we get out of here before he shows up.” His eyes glowed red. “Take a nap, Alastair, and when you wake up, it’ll almost be over.”

Alastair felt the warlock's magic wash over him like hot lava and then felt nothing. No, he felt Riker right before he slipped away. His ex-lover was close. Riker's presence stoked his magic, but not enough to fight off whatever Roman had just zapped him with.

Chapter Nine

Nicholas

The crackling and popping sounds of Corbin casting spells woke me from my exhausted slumber. The lower part of my body, especially the ass area, ached in the most delicious of ways. It had been three days since Corbin had laid claim to my body for the first time, and to say that we were practicing under the premise of practice makes perfect might be an understatement. We'd had days and days of it and we couldn't seem to get enough.

Ah, yes, life was good. Well, except for the whole birthday, aka death-by-suicide, looming just around the bend--in twenty-four hours, to be exact. Corbin kept assuring me that I had absolutely nothing to fear from Morgan, that her powers are virtually nonexistent in Marblehead and that as long as I stayed here, with him, I'd be perfectly safe. I'd mentioned to him that Morgan had managed to force my other descendants, including Nico who was right here in Marblehead at the time, to commit suicide, but he explained that with all the others, with the exception of Nico, Morgan hadn't been intruding on another coven's territory. With Nico, which was really me, since I finally had Nico's memories, Corbin hadn't known he would need to have protective spells to block Morgan from using her magic while projecting her image. It had never happened with another witch before. This time, he was prepared. Protective spells were woven around every inch of his territory. She might be able to project her image to me, but she would have absolutely no persuasive powers to use over my mind.

It all sounded perfectly safe and simple...but there was still a nagging fear that wouldn't allow me to feel completely at ease. I supposed I wouldn't feel any real

peace until after my birthday hour tick-tocked over tomorrow night.

I slid my legs into some jeans and then sprinted down the steps to see what naughty magic Corbin was currently up to. His magic grew stronger by the hour, and he assured me this was due to him putting his cock in my ass. I figured that was just some mumbo jumbo nonsense he was using to get me on my knees with my ass in the air, but I was good with that. Hell, I wastotallygood with that.

When I didn't find him in his study, where he usually worked his magic, I checked the front yard. Sure enough, he was out there, totally naked and looking fucking awesome. Fire flew from his fingertips as his hands waved seductively in the air. I felt my cock harden just from watching his graceful display of power. As I stepped closer to him, I wished that I hadn't bothered with the jeans--I didn't plan on keeping them on very long.

"Hey, sexy," I said when I was standing mere inches away. "Wanna mess around?"

When he whipped his head around to face me, I gasped at the furious look marring his normally beautiful features. Taking a step back, I realized that the only other time I'd ever seen Corbin look this angry was when Nicodemus had told him about the pregnancy.

"What's happened, Corbin?"

He looked away for a few seconds before answering, "I've lost touch with Alastair. We've been so busy and happy together I'm afraid I didn't think of him at first, and now I'm worried about him. When we last connected, he only had the Keegan twins left to visit. That was days ago. There's some bad blood between Riker and Alastair, but I certainly wouldn't have thought it was enough to interfere with Alastair's duty to the coven."

Those words didn't settle well with me. Alastair was my friend, and I'd witnessed, first-hand, the affection and loyalty he felt for Corbin. I was one hundred percent certain Alastair wouldn't have allowed anything to prevent him from fulfilling Corbin's request. I frowned at Corbin, thinking that we were probably about to have our first fight. Well, our first fight with me as Nicholas. Shit, this Nicodemus and Nicholas thing got confusing really fast inside my head.

"If there's a problem, it's with Riker," I answered as calmly as I could. "Not Alastair. His loyalty to you is unquestionable."

Corbin crossed his arms over his chest. "Easy, sweetheart," he ordered softly. "Alastair is a member of my coven, which makes him a member of my family. The safety of my coven comes second only to your safety. I said I was worried about him, not that I thought he wasn't performing his task."

"No, you said that you didn't think the bad blood between Riker and Alastair was bad enough to prevent him from fulfilling his duty to the coven. It sounds a hell of a lot like you think Alastair is shirking his responsibility all because of an old lover's spat. Alastair isn't like that." I took a step back when I saw his magic bubble to the surface. I wasn't afraid of him by any means, but as when another wolf shows an alpha its belly, I felt the immediate need to show Corbin my respect.

It pissed me off, but I couldn't stop myself from feeling submissive.

"Send another member after that Riker guy and see what they find. I assure you, Alastair didn't shirk his duties."

"I've already done that, love. I sent someone out yesterday and Riker visited the house this morning while you were...resting. He told me that he'd thought he sensed Alastair's presence a few days ago, but that he'd never materialized." Corbin smiled softly. "A witch can usually sense when their beloved is near, as I can with you. Even

trapped in Morgan's mirror, I knew the exact moment you entered Marblehead." He leaned in and kissed my lips, which were probably forming a pout. "My heart started beating again, and magic that I'd thought had died, awakened with a yearning that gave me the power to escape the mirror to join you in your dreams."

My lips were still tingling from the sweet kiss. That, of course, pissed me off even more. I wasn't at all comfortable with the fact that he could turn me into a puddle of testosterone just from one seductive kiss and a few sweet words...but he could.

"Stop...stop changing the subject, Corbin," I argued. "You aren't playing fair." I took a step back to put some distance between us in hopes that the head on my shoulders would start working and the one between my legs would stop. Another thought crossed my mind and I felt the jealousy bug bite me straight in the ass. "First of all, were you, my beloved, out here talking to Riker while you were completely naked? Secondly, what did the asshole have to say for himself?"

I didn't know much about this Riker dude, but I knew that if Alastair didn't like him, then I didn't either. I also knew that the thoughts of anyone seeing Corbin naked, except for me, pissed me off.

A cute grin tugged at the corners of Corbin's full lips and I knew the bastard was trying not to laugh at my jealousy. Oh, yeah. I needed to fuck his ass again and it needed to be real soon. My being on my hands and knees for the past three days had turned him into a cocky bastard.

Why did that shit turn me on? I should be mad.

"I wasn't naked when Riker visited--I save that for you, Nico," he answered, but that damned smile was still fighting to take over his mouth. I pictured me shoving my cock between those puffy lips and it helped calm me down...somewhat.

“Fine,” I hissed between gritted teeth. “What about the asshole part? What did he have to say for himself?”

His eyebrow arched. “I wasn’t aware that you knew Riker enough to make the asshole judgment on him. Did you meet while I was mirror-trapped?”

“Didn’t have to meet him,” I retorted. “If Alastair doesn’t like him, he’s an asshole. End of story.”

“You’re loyal, anyway,” he answered.

“One thing you need to know about me, Corbin. I grew up without a family, so friends are really important to me.”

“I know, sweetheart. I was only teasing, and I’m really glad you and Alastair made a connection. But as I was saying, Riker said that he could have sworn that he sensed Alastair’s presence in his apartment building, but when he got there--nothing. No Alastair. No note. Nothing. The next day was when the other coven member visited him and Roman at their home. He came home immediately. Roman has business to attend to, but will be here by tomorrow night.”

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I frowned. “Where’s Alastair, then?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to find out. I’ve reached out to him with magic, but there’s nothing there. I have connections with all my coven members, but it feels like my connection with Alastair has been severed.”

A gasp escaped my lips. “He’s...he’s dead? You think he’s dead?” I asked softly. “You think Morgan killed Alastair, don’t you? Oh, fuck. I’m going to kill that bitch. Corbin, there has to be something we can do.” I wasn’t one prone to panic attacks, but I felt one coming on.

“Calm down, babe,” Corbin whispered as he wrapped his arms around me. “Alastair isn’t dead. I would know if he was--I would feel it in my soul. He’s hiding from me, though...or someone is hiding him.”

“Someone’s hiding him? Why would anyone hide him? I don’t...”

Horror slapped me in the face. Morgan had Alastair. She’d taken him because of me--because she couldn’t get to me. I felt Corbin’s arms tighten around me when he realized I understood what happened to my friend. They say your entire life flashes before your eyes when you’re faced with a life-threatening experience, and in my case, I could say that two lives flashed before me, mine and Nicodemus’s. Morgan was going to win. Again.

My decision to go after Alastair was made instantly, but I knew that convincing Corbin that I had no such intentions wouldn’t be easy. My lover would never agree to allow me to enter Morgan’s territory, especially with my ‘death’ looming over us in

the next few hours. It was more than going after my friend...so much more. It was about all the shit that Morgan has pulled on the Bailey men over the years, starting with my very own forced suicide as Nico, and ending with her plans to continue ruining lives and hurting innocents. It had to do with the fact that she'd kept Corbin trapped in a mirror for hundreds of years, forcing him to suffer alone and blame himself for something that wasn't his fault. It had every fucking thing to do with how much I hated that bitch, Morgan and how much I wanted payback.

"Morgan has him, doesn't she?" I asked quietly. I already knew the answer. I knew she had Alastair and I knew she had him as yet another way to hurt me and Corbin.

Corbin's body trembled against mine as his hatred for Morgan and love for Alastair roared through his body. He took a deep breath and confirmed, "That's my fear." When I remained quiet, he added, "Riker has gone to be with Alastair's mother right now. They'll gather the remaining coven, and we'll meet them later this evening. Don't give up hope, Nico. We'll find a way to bring Alastair home."

Corbin's tone told me that he didn't believe that statement any more than I did. "I know we will," I lied. All I could think was that Alastair needed me, and I knew I had to do whatever I could to help, but I also knew I could be signing my own death sentence when it happened. I kept telling myself that if the worst happened, Corbin would be able to bring me back, like before. I wasn't sure I'd have the strength to go through with it if I didn't have that hope buried inside of me. While I didn't want to die and knew it to be painful...again...the agony I felt was coming from the fear of never seeing Corbin again--never touching or holding him. But this was something that I had to do and still call myself a man.

"Stop thinking what you're thinking, Nico. You know I won't let you do it," Corbin said, his voice quiet and emotional. I love Alastair, but I won't do anything to risk losing you. I can't lose you." He kissed the top of my head. "Give me some time to fix this."

There wasn't any time.

"Of course," I answered--another lie. "What time will we meet the coven?" I pulled away and looked into his eyes. My magical powers were sketchy, at best, but I tried to use everything in my arsenal to memorize each and every beautiful detail of his face. How many years would it be before I got to see him again?

"We'll leave in a couple of hours. I'm nervous. I want to discuss our options as soon as possible."

The big lie tumbled out of my mouth. "I'm going to go upstairs and rest for a bit, then. Is that all right?" The words sounded stupid to my own ears. I could only hope Corbin trusted me enough to believe the bullshit I was shoveling at him.

He cupped each side of my face and said, "You believe me, don't you, Nico? You know I'll do everything in my power, with the exception of endangering your life, to bring Alastair home to us."

I kissed him...like I might never get to kiss him again. "I know you will, Corbin. I know how much you love Alastair, and I'm sorry about earlier." I turned to walk back to the house, but then turned around to look at him again. "I love you, Corbin Hargreaves. I always have and I always will."

"Through all eternity, my love," he answered softly.

My heart hung in my throat as I climbed the stairs leading to our bedroom. Our bedroom. It was strange how I'd known this house belonged to me the moment I'd first laid eyes on it. I belonged here. How fucking long would it take for me to make my way back home again? How many lives would Morgan claim before Corbin and I had another chance at happiness?

As I stepped into the bedroom, my mind was whirling with ideas on how I could sneak away from Corbin and find Alastair. Maybe I could stay home while he visited with the coven? It wasn't like I thought he would allow me to waltz out the front door. No, I'd make the trip into town with him and while he was distracted with coven talk, I'd slip off and make my way to Salem. Since that was where Morgan was the strongest, that's where she would be holding Alastair captive.

"Did you forget that I could read your mind, love?" Corbin's voice interrupted my plans.

I swung around to find him standing in the doorway of the bedroom, a sad frown on his beautiful face. He looked...disappointed. Worried. Sad. Angry.

Since I'd been caught, there wasn't much I could say to defend myself. I had forgotten about the mind reading. Standing taller, I said, "I'm pretty sure I asked that you stay out of my head; it's rude."

He smiled sadly. "I guess it's a good thing I disobeyed you, my love. I won't risk your safety. I can't lose you again, Nico."

Before I could answer or think to move, he took one step backward, taking him out of the door way, and the door slammed closed. There weren't the ominous sounds of locks sliding into place, but I knew without a doubt that magic would ensure the door wouldn't open. In three strides, I was standing next to the door and banging ferociously against the heavy wood. "Open the damned door, Corbin! I'm not going to let you lock me away like a helpless child while you risk your life. Open the door now!"

The door didn't open, but then again, I never thought it would.

"I can't open the door, Nico," he said, his muffled tones coming through the door.

“You’ll be safe where you are. I have spells protecting the house, so no one, especially Morgan, can get to you. The door won’t open, and if you jump out of the window, the fall would probably kill you--so keep your pretty ass safe and in this room.”

I laid my hand on the door and immediately felt his hand through the wood, like we’d done with the mirror. “Don’t do this, Corbin. Don’t leave me here like this. I need to help. I have to help. Alastair’s my friend.” I couldn’t believe he was doing this to me. The thoughts of me trapped in this room, doing absolutely nothing to save Alastair from Morgan sickened me. She wasn’t going to take one more thing away from me. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was part of something and now that something was in danger of being ripped away from me. But not if I stopped her.

“Stay safe, my love. I’ll be back before your birthday, and I’ll have a plan to rescue Alastair.” There was a pause before he said, “I love you, Nicholas. I love you with all my heart.”

I felt his energy leave the door and then leave the house. He’d done it – he’d left me behind. I felt like he’d just put me in time-out. I felt...useless.

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The same useless feeling I'd felt my entire life.

I heard my motorcycle roar to life and figured Corbin had not only stolen my heart but had just stolen my bike. The only means of escape I had available if I could figure out how to get out of the damned house without breaking my neck. When I could no longer hear the motor, and knew he was gone, really gone, I had a temper tantrum of epic proportions. My magic, which was normally piddling unless Corbin was with me, flashed and flared...well, flickered. Fire singed my fingertips and then every piece of furniture in the room.

As I ranted and raved, cursed and cried, I felt my magic start to grow stronger. I blasted the door with everything I had...but Corbin's spell remained intact. Nothing. Nearly an hour later, I was ready to give up.

"Fucking, egotistical, son-of-a-bitch," I hissed in outrage and exhaustion. The only thing I'd been able to accomplish was to give myself a throbbing headache. Oh, and I might have cried a little. I was so fucking pissed...so hurt.

"Watch your mouth, young man!" A soft feminine voice tickled my ear. I whipped around, expecting to see that Morgan had somehow managed to break Corbin's spell and was there to destroy me a day early, but the room was empty.

"Fuck off, Morgan," I said to the eerily empty room, just in case the bitch was there, lurking in the shadows the way evil did.

"Nicholas Bailey. Cursing your beloved is one thing, but cursing your mother is another. I must say that it is not only unacceptable for a Banks or Bailey descendent,

but it's a disappointment to the woman who gave birth to you."

And, just like that, a sweet calmness settled over me as tears swamped my eyes. For the briefest of moments, I feared that my heart would burst with love—love for a woman I'd never really gotten to know. I thought back to the letter, to all the things she and my father had wanted for me. My eyes immediately went to the mirror that Corbin had magically repaired, and when I saw the blurry vision of a beautiful woman looking back at me, the tears slid down my cheeks. Rosalie Banks.

"Mother," I whispered. It wasn't a question. I knew it was her. My heart knew.

"Yes, my love. It's me," she answered. "You are so handsome, Nicholas—just like your father. We are both so proud of the man you've become."

While the vision in the mirror was blurry, I could still make out the tears streaking her face. "How are you here?" I asked. "Is father with you?"

The image looked sad. "No, Nico. Your father was mortal so he couldn't make the trip with me. It's just me, and I don't have long," she explained. "Your birthday is tomorrow, so Morgan will be coming for you." The image looked around the room and then returned her gaze to me. "Corbin has you in a safe place, yes?"

"Yes," I muttered, furious all over again for being tucked away like a helpless child. "He's protecting me from Morgan, but that's not what I want. I want to help. I have to be able to help in some way. I know I'm not strong like Corbin and the other members of his coven, but I have powers." "Sure, I did. I couldn't even get myself out of a locked room.

Her laughter danced around the room. "Yes, my dear, you have powers," she agreed. "Those were gifted from me and trust me; your powers are strong--stronger than Morgan could have ever had nightmares about." The image winked at me. "And, oh,

how she would have had some nightmares had she known that Banks' witchcraft flowed through your body."

"So it was true. You were a powerful witch?" I asked.

"From the Easthampton coven, my son," she answered. "I masked my heritage from Morgan once I knew of the curse. Perhaps I could have saved myself, but I wasn't sure I could have saved your father from the curse. The spell that Morgan cast was an evil one, steeped in blood sacrifice. The most difficult to break. But I also knew, through magical guidance, that you, my son, would be the one to unlock the Bailey curse. I...I didn't want to leave your father to face death alone." The image looked down and back up. "I'm sorry, Nicholas. I know it sounds like I chose your father over you, but that isn't the case. I'd seen the future and knew that it was going to be up to you to face Morgan in a final battle."

The image in the mirror flickered, and her face sobered as she gazed at me. "We must hurry, Nico. There isn't much time left. It's up to you to end this curse--only you."

I frowned, since I knew my own limitations. "What do you mean? I can't even get out of this room, mother. How am I supposed to be strong enough to end the curse? To end Morgan?"

"Because my blood recognizes the magic Corbin has given you while you've...well, you know." The image of my mother's face turned a pale pink.

I turned a bright red.

"What...what do I do?" I asked, still feeling like she was so incredibly wrong about my capabilities.

The image flickered and grew weaker, causing my heart to lurch.

“Do what is natural, Nico. Follow your heart...instead of your temper. You’re trying to harness your magic with anger, and that will never work for a Bailey – it will always be driven by love.” The image smiled...sadly. “Hate and jealousy may have started this, but love is what will end it.”

“I...I don’t think I’m strong enough,” I answered in shame.

“Nonsense,” she answered immediately, but the image faded even more. “There are rules to the curse, Nico. Only you can destroy Morgan—not even Corbin and his powerful coven combined. Morgan must destroy you at the exact moment of your birth. After that, all power she holds over you vanishes away. That’s when she’ll be her most vulnerable. That’s when you must act.”

I frowned. “What? But I’d be dead by then. How can I do this, Mother?” I asked again. “I’m trapped in this room, and I can’t save myself, much less anyone else. What do you mean?”

“You’ll know what to do, my son. When the time comes. You’ll know.” I saw her hand touch the mirror, like she was trying to reach for me.

Then she was gone.

I stared at the empty mirror in shock. Gone. I was still trapped in this damned room, and she was gone. It had been a great pep talk, and my heart still ached with love, but nothing had changed. I was still useless.

I sat down on the edge of the bed and contemplated what just happened--the things that my mother said to me. The faith she had in my abilities. I was the one destined to end the curse.

Me. Nicholas Bailey.

With a renewed determination, I walked over to the window, jerked the curtains off the rods, and looked out the window. Corbin had been correct in his assessment that I would break my neck if I tried to jump. We were three stories off the ground. No trees were nearby so I couldn't borrow a limb and climb safely to the ground. I checked the side of the house for overhangs or anything I could grip with my fingers, but there was no escape route available.

I glanced at the trees again and thought about how Corbin had snapped a huge limb with his magic and then flown away on it the night Nicodemus had broken his heart. He'd made it look so damned easy. I concentrated on one of the large limbs, imagining it breaking off and flying toward me, but nothing happened.

Love, focus on love.

Maybe my mother was right. Maybe love did it for me and my magic, instead of anger. I had certainly been angry at Morgan when I burst through her barrier to get in the house, but I had also been consumed with love for Corbin. I focused on my mother and my father, on the loss and pain they'd surely felt when they'd realized the curse was going to end their lives. Alastair's smiling face popped into my mind, reminding me that it was more than my life and destiny at stake. Finally, my heart warmed as I thought about Corbin, the love of my long, long life as Nicodemus. His magic had given me another chance at life...another chance to be with him. I thought of the words of an old John Denver song. "Dreams I can't remember now, hopes that I've forgotten. Faded memories. Still I love to see the sun go down. And the world goes around and around and around." To me, whenever I listened to that song and felt

depressed about not having a family or anybody to love me, to losing so much, I remembered that there was still beauty in the world. And life kept going—just kept on giving you more chances to find that beauty.

My hatred for Morgan tried to squeak into my mind, but I shoved it out and focused only on love. My entire life had been lonely and without much life. The moment I'd stepped foot into Marblehead, that had changed. Now, my soul was consumed with love.

I stumbled backward in complete shock when the limb I'd been concentrating on broke away from the tree, flew in my direction, and then hovered outside the closed window. I stood there, mouth gaping wide open, thinking this was like a fucking movie. Maybe a horror-comedy mix.

Fifteen minutes later, my face was burning with humiliation and I hoped to hell there weren't video cameras planted anywhere near Corbin's sanctuary. Yeah, Corbin had made mounting the limb and riding it look easy, but I had first-hand knowledge of how untrue that was. I'd nearly fallen out of the window as I'd tried to climb aboard, and then I'd nearly fallen off the limb at least ten times as I'd tried to steady my ass on the wood. I could hear every witch to ever walk the earth laughing hysterically at my clumsy attempts to do what they did on that old TV show, *Bewitched*, and still make it look sexy.

I did not look sexy.

Nor did I look like I was capable of ending a century-old curse.

I teetered and then steadied the limb. Not only that, I didn't know how to drive this makeshift broom. Well, fuck.

Chapter Ten

“Nico! Nico, wake up!”

A voice, low and husky, teased the dark corners of my mind. It sounded familiar and made me feel relieved and content. Satisfied, I snuggled my body into a ball and tried to ignore the pain screeching around in my head and the sexy voice nagging me.

“Nico! Seriously, man, you’ve got to wake up. We don’t have long. You’ve been unconscious for over eight hours. Please, Nico. Wake up for me. I know you’re in there. Open your eyes for me.”

The voice didn’t belong to Corbin. I would have opened my eyes for Corbin. Gladly. Corbin was fucking beautiful. Weakly, I swatted at the hand petting my cheek. “Leave me alone,” I muttered as I tried to hide from whatever was on the other side of my eyelids.

“I can’t leave you alone, Nico.” The voice answered with a hint of irritation. “Trust me, I would if I could. You shouldn’t even be here. What have you done, my sweet friend? Why, Nico? Why did you risk your life? We’re both dead now. Corbin doesn’t know, does he? Corbin would have never allowed you to come to Salem. How could you have been so careless and stupid?”

My eyes flew open.

He didn’t just call me stupid.

I squinted and looked at the face hovering over me--Alastair. My friend Alastair. I was going to punch his pretty face for calling me stupid. Hell, I was here because of him.

Wait. Where was I? The last I remembered, I was outside my window, trying not to fall off the limb and kill myself but having more fun than I'd ever had in my life. I'd finally gotten it to move a little and the night air had rushed past me, tickling my magic. My last thought had been of desperately wanting Corbin to be with me so he could see what I'd accomplished with my magic. I'd been grinning like a fucking fool when a lightning bolt of magic had sent my tree limb in one direction and my ass in another. My ass, unfortunately, had been careening toward the hard, hard ground when I'd lost consciousness.

"Nico. Wake up all the way. I'm beginning to wonder if they cast a slumber spell on you. Are you hurt? Tell me what hurts."

Alastair's hands started moving over my body, checking for broken bones, I guessed.

"Where am I?" I asked as I tried moving my body into a sitting position. As it turned out every damned inch of me throbbed and ached. Maybe I did smack into the ground before Morgan scooped me up and brought me to her den of sin. "Motherfuck! My entire body hurts. Did they beat me half to death before or after that knocked me off my ride and sent me plunging to the earth?"

Alastair's eyes were sad as they gazed at me. "No, you didn't get beaten. The pain is from where Morgan's coven bound your magic after you entered Salem. I'm feeling the same bullshit agony. You've got to push through it, Nico."

"Bound my magic? Can they do that?"

"Of course, they can. It's not the same as Corbin's magic being dulled if he entered

Salem. That would happen because he's a high witch. Our magic is bound because of the spells the coven cast. On a bright note, you'll be happy to know that it took the entire coven working together to bind you." He smiled, again sadly. "You're incredibly strong, Nico. Corbin must be so proud."

I looked around the small room where we were being held. There were no windows to be seen, but there was magic flowing all around us, strong enough that it was visible to my naked eye. Morgan wasn't taking any chances with our escape.

"Corbin, I'm sure, is really pissed at me right about now," I answered. "Of course, he didn't approve of me coming to Salem to confront Morgan and try to rescue you." I winked at him. "He always wants to be the one to save the day."

Alastair huffed in frustration and frowned irritably at me. "This isn't a joke, Nico. Morgan plans on killing you. Dead. Gone. Poof. You cease to exist! When you die, Corbin becomes weak again and my entire coven suffers for it. Not only have you thrown your own life away, but you've hurt the man you love in the process and destroyed our coven again. Not cool, Nico. Not cool, at all."

I stared at him, unblinking.

He stared back for a few seconds before a tear slid out from the corner of his eye. "I know why you're here, Nico. I know you came to try and save me. I just really, really wish you wouldn't have done that. I'm already dead. There was no reason for you to have to die, too." His voice broke on the last sentence.

"Don't give up on us, yet, Stair. I'm working on a plan."

I had absolutely zero plan ideas. To be honest, I was surprised I'd made it this far without killing myself.

“There isn’t a plan, Nico. There’s no getting out of this. Corbin will come for you, but he’ll be helpless against Morgan while in Salem. She’ll destroy him completely this time.” He looked away to say the next words. “I’m useless to you. My magic is always sketchy, at best. It took one witch to bind my magic. Imagine my humiliation,” he muttered in disgust. “My life wasn’t worth the risk you took, Nico. Why did you do it?”

“I did it because you’re my friend. And because that bitch has had her way for far too long. It’s time to stop her. I wasn’t going to let Morgan destroy you without at least putting forth a valiant effort. Anyway, it ain’t over till it’s over.”

Alastair had already given up. He’d given up on himself, me, and his coven. That wasn’t going to work for me. It pissed me off and made me sad that Alastair had such a low opinion of himself. He’d kept it hidden well behind his friendly smile and playful attitude.

“Well, well, well, aren’t you two useless witches all lovey-dovey?”

Morgan’s voice interrupted us. When I whipped my head around, she magically appeared in front of us. An ugly smirk marred her face, and my stomach rolled with hate. Focus on love. Focus on love.

“At least we know what love is.” I stood up, careful not to show any weakness, and positioned my body between Morgan and Alastair. “Tell me, bitchy witchy, how does it feel to cruise through life knowing that nobody cares if you live or die...or that most folks are just hoping that you die?”

She didn’t even flinch. Obviously, she enjoyed knowing that she was hated by all.

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Smiling, she answered, “I don’t know, little orphan, why don’t you tell me how it feels? Poor, poor, little lost boy floating through life without any parents to love him. That must have been a bitch. Tell me, love, did you cry your pretty eyes out at bedtime? I bet you did. Nobody to love the last little Bailey descendent...because everybody else was dead?”

“You’re seriously a bad movie just waiting to be made.”

“Don’t provoke her, Nico,” Alastair murmured from behind me. “She’s dangerous.”

“Thank you, sweetheart,” Morgan said with a huge smile. “I’m so relieved to see that at least one of you has some sense.” She peeked around me and looked Alastair up and down. “I can see why Roman wants you so badly, Alastair Harlowe. You’re such a pretty thing.” She made a tscking sound between her teeth as her eyes returned to me. “Do you have any idea what kind of ugly mayhem awaits your sweet Alastair, Nico? After you fail in your ridiculous attempt to save the day, you’ll die, Corbin will die, and Alastair will spend the rest of his miserable life being a plaything to a warlock. Don’t you just love it?”

She was so fucking confident. I needed to end this. “That’s your plan, Morgan,” I countered. “Maybe it will work...but maybe it won’t.”

Something flashed across her face--something that made me feel warm and fuzzy on the inside. It was fear. She hid it swiftly, but it’d been there.

“Cocky, aren’t we?” she asked quietly. “Where did you get all this new confidence, Nico? The last time I checked, your opinion of yourself was as low as Alastair’s.

Why do you think you have a chance of defeating me all of a sudden?" A smile spread across her face. "It doesn't have anything to do with that sillyvisityou had from your mother, does it? Please tell me you didn't fall for my parlor trick. Sweetheart, that was Basic Magic 101. Anybody could have pretended to be your dearly departed mother." Her eyes cut around to Alastair. "Eventhatweak witch could have accomplished a magic trick that simple."

"No!" Alastair hissed from behind me. "Please tell me she didn't use a trick to get you here, Nico."

I could literally taste the guilt pouring out of Alastair, and I hated Morgan even more. On top of that, I hated that I was going to have to act like I believed Morgan. I didn't want her to know that I'd seen the fear in her eyes. I had no idea how she knew about the image in the mirror, but there was no way I believed it had been her. Itwasmy mother. My soul told me so.

"Wh-what?" I stuttered after a loud gasp. "That...that wasn't you! That couldn't have been you. It was my..."

"Mommy?" she finished with an arrogant arch to her brow. "You thought I was your mommy, didn't you? Sweetheart, I destroyed your parents a long time ago. Almost twenty-five years ago, to be exact." She glanced down at her watch. "Would you look at that? We're only thirty minutes away from your huge birthday celebration, Nico." She clapped her hands together, feeling confident again. "Let me go make sure everything's prepared for the big event. Corbin should be arriving at any moment. I can't wait to see the despair on his face! I swear to you both, it gets better and better each time it happens."

She vanished before my eyes and the stench in the room eased up immediately. I turned to Alastair and asked, "Is it just me, or does she stink?"

He looked at me in exasperation. “Why are you so calm, Nico? She tricked you. You and Corbin both are going to die. There is no happy ending to this story!” Several seconds ticked by before he added, “Yes, she stinks. It’s the dark magic.” He slammed his fist against the wall. “I should have smelled it on Roman. I...I should have known. All these years...”

I didn’t have a plan. I didn’t have any magic. Alastair didn’t have any magic. There was a damned good chance that I was about to die and, worse than that, Corbin was about to die. I didn’t even want to consider what Alastair would endure if I failed. Even with all this, there was peace in my heart.

I could do this.

Not wanting Alastair to worry, I tried for humor, “So tell me about this Riker? Was he the reason you blushed the day I asked you about boyfriends?”

“You can’t be serious,” Alastair whispered. “I’m not talking boyfriends with you right now, Nico. You and Corbin are about to die. There won’t be any coming back from this. I’ve heard them talking. They plan on burning both of you at the stake. Witches don’t come back from that, Nico. It’s the one sure-fire way to destroy us.”

“I’m overwhelmed by the confidence you have in my magic, Stair,” I responded dryly, and then shoulder nudged him. “We’re going to do this. I promise. Me and you, Stair. Not Corbin and Riker. Us.”

“Your magic is bound, Nico,” he reminded me. “Plus, I’m pretty sure I overheard that you were powerless against Morgan until your birthday hour, anyway. And then there’s me. I’m useless. One witch, Nico,” he hissed in disgust. “Remember? One witch to bind me.” He took a deep breath. “I wasn’t always like this. I used to be powerful. When Riker...no, Roman, messed with my head all those years ago, everything went to shit with me. It was like all my magic vanished in one day...and

it's never returned."

"You're the same as me, Stair. Your magic wilted because the man you love disappeared from your life. You were in love with Riker, weren't you?"

"No." He answered immediately and then, hanging his head, he amended, "Yes. Embarrassingly so. I loved him so damned much, Nico. He meant everything to me. He was my world and then one morning, that world was destroyed. No need going into the details since none of it is going to matter in twenty minutes, but Roman, Riker's twin, tricked me into thinking he was Riker and did...did something really mean. Then, before I could even confront him about it, he was gone. He and Roman both left the training academy the next day. When he walked out of my life, a part of me died. And I've hated him all these years. I've blamed the wrong man."

"Well, he's been to Corbin's house looking for you, so wake that love back up. Riker's hunting for his cute little witch, and I don't think he's ever going to walk away again."

He snorted and then hiccupped. "Whatever. I'm going to belong to his brother, the evil, sadistic, son-of-a-bitch. I should have known Roman was behind everything. I should have had more faith in Riker."

"Probably," I agreed and was briefly thankful that his magic was being held captive by Morgan's coven. He looked like he might want to turn somebody into a toad. And I was handy. "But, more than that, you should have had faith in yourself. You're a keeper, Stair. No way would Riker have taken a taste of you and not wanted to keep you forever."

Corbin's writings flickered through my brain. This one will be important. Important...how did he mean that? A plan started to form. Excitement flowed through me, and I whipped around to tell Alastair what I'd come up with. But

he'd vanished. "Alastair? Stair!" The room was empty. "Morgan!" I screamed in fury.

A wave of dizziness muddled my brain, and when I came back to my senses again, I was standing in the middle of a clearing, surrounded by Morgan's coven. Morgan stood a few feet from me, grinning like the damned evil witch she was. To my right, up on a tall platform, was Corbin and another unidentified man. They were both tied to stakes and stacks of wood surrounded them. As my eyes met Corbin's warm gaze, I was terrified of the anger and disappointment I feared would be swirling in those beautiful depths.

But as I gathered my courage and gazed up at him, I saw that it wasn't there. Only love shone from his beautiful eyes. Pure enough to make my legs feel weak. I winked at him, but he shook his head from side to side in a negative movement and the words I love you--always have and always will, reverberated in my mind. He was letting me know that he didn't have a rescue planned for us. He'd come to die because he thought I was going to die.

Not so fast, cutie pie.

The unidentified man was ignoring me completely. I followed his gaze across the clearing and saw Alastair. He was kneeling next to a man that looked identical to the first guy. Ah, Riker and Roman. There was a leash around Alastair's neck, and Riker's twin was holding it tightly, sneering and smirking. Dark magic swirled around him. When Alastair looked at me, the despair and shame on his face broke my heart. Alastair needed this victory as much as Corbin and I did.

"Looks like the gang's all here," I said, sneering at Morgan. She looked at me strangely, maybe wondering why I wasn't falling apart. I put on my game face. This had to work. Morgan had been allowed to run rampant for far too long. She had destroyed too many lives. Time for her to pay the piper.

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Her gaze fell on Corbin, and I wanted to scratch her eyes out. The arrogance swirling around her made me want to forget magic and just smack the ever-lovin' shit out of her.

“Thank you for joining us...brother, dearest. It's been awhile, hasn't it?”

I felt my body jerk in shock. Brother? Morgan was Corbin's sister? It couldn't be.

I looked at both of them, studying their features. The resemblance was so blatant that I'm ashamed that I hadn't noticed it before. Their oddly colored amethyst eyes--Corbin's beautiful and Morgan's ugly with evil--were identical in shade. Both of them had dangerous amounts of magic swirling inside them. Alastair was right. Morgan's magic had gone dark. As with Roman, I could see the difference between them and the rest of the witches.

“We stopped being family long ago, Morganna,” Corbin said quietly. His voice was filled with hatred and disgust as he spoke to her. “The day you murdered our mother and used her precious blood to cast this evil spell of yours.” He glanced back toward me and his eyes were filled with love. “Just finish this. I long to spend eternity with my beloved.”

She giggled. “You always were such a nag, baby brother. Stop hurting the animals. Be nice to people. Don't kill mommy. Blah. Blah. Blah.” She blew a kiss to him after she'd finished. “I'm almost going to miss tormenting you. Almost.”

I searched the faces of Morgan's coven, hoping to see something that would make the person I was looking for stand out. And...score. There was my little prize.

“Tick tock, Nico. Ready to die again?” she asked. “Trust me, darling, this will be the last time. Burning witches is such a nasty job, but it is...final. Seven minutes and counting.”

She walked toward me, and with a wave of her hand, a container of gasoline was in her possession. I watched, helpless to do anything to stop her, as she dumped half the contents all over me. When she finished, she whispered, “I’m not going to kill him until I’ve forced him to watch you die. I think it will hurt more that way, don’t you? No, wait, I know it will. I’ve done it time and time again!”

I shrugged and her eyes glittered dangerously.

“You could always save yourself, you know, Nico? All you have to do is vow your allegiance to me and my coven and I’ll let you live. Corbin will, of course, still die and you’ll be my plaything for the remainder of your life, but you’ll live. What do you think pretty one? Would you like to live a little longer?”

I took a deep breath, focused on love, and hoped for the best. “Megan Buchanan! I demand that you pay me the debt you owe!”

There was a nervous murmur from Morgan’s coven, but the high witch merely looked amused at my request. Surprised, but amused. With an arched brow, she asked, “You think there’s something Megan can do to save you, Nico? She couldn’t save her mother, so I assure you, she won’t be able to save you. You’re wasting precious time...time that you don’t have, love.”

Megan stepped forward, her hand clutching the shoulder of the young daughter I’d saved from being flattened in the street. “I’m honor bound to fulfill his request, Morgan.” She looked at me and asked, “What is it that you request of me, Nicholas Bailey?”

Morgan snorted out a laugh. “Be prepared to join your mother, Megan,” she warned. “But, please...go ahead--amuse me before I destroy you.”

Megan leveled her gaze at me. “I don’t have the power to lift the binder on your magic, Nicholas. Nor do I have the magic to fight Morgan. Don’t ask for what I can’t give. You have one request...make it a good one.”

Morgan’s eyes narrowed in fury.

“Unbind Alastair’s magic,” I demanded with confidence.

Alastair’s head whipped up to look at me. There was a stricken expression on his face as he shook his head from side to side. “I...I can’t help, Nico. You know I can’t help.”

Roman and Morgan burst out laughing. Riker growled. As for Corbin, he watched me closely, a thoughtful and proud expression on his face.

“For a moment there, I was worried about some plan you might have cooked up. You think the weakling can help you? Surely that’s not the best you’ve got, Nico?” She squinted. “Is there any Banks’ blood in your veins at all?”

Megan looked disappointed, but she turned, and with a wave of her hand, I assumed she released Alastair’s magic. She turned back to me and said, “It’s done, young one.”

I looked at Morgan and answered, “As a matter of fact, there’s plenty of Banks’ blood flowing in my veins. My mother sends her regards.” I watched with a smile as Morgan took a couple of steps back from me.

“Your powers are still useless, Nico. You’re as helpless as a kitten for the next

minute and, trust me I won't need more than a minute."

Flames tickled her fingertips, and she laughed hysterically when I jerked back in fear.

"Ooh, baby, this is going to hurt so badly...so much more than jumping off that cliff. You remember, don't you? You remember what it felt like the second your body made impact with those rocks? This, Nico, is going to be so much more painful. Fire is a most...unpleasant way for a witch to die." Her eyes danced with laughter as she mocked, "Tell your mother I said hello."

"The curse leaves me powerless against Morgan until the very second of my birth, Alastair." I turned from Morgan and locked eyes with my friend. "I have faith in you. Corbin has faith in you." I looked at the man next to Corbin and then back to Alastair. "Riker has faith in you."

"Stop wasting my time," Morgan hissed and raised both her hands to send fire flying in mine and Corbin's directions.

I never winced...never felt fear. I wanted to look at Corbin, but my eyes were locked with Alastair. I saw his fear and his doubts, and then I saw his conviction. With a graceful movement that could only be described as sexier than shit, he waved his beautiful arm into the air...and the world froze.

One Second. Two seconds. Three seconds. Four seconds. More time than I needed. The clock ticked past the second of my birth, and I was free.

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The second Alastair's magic released us, I blasted Morgan with a wave of fire. It was a concoction of Banks' magic and the interesting Corbin mixture that my lover had been dosing me with on a regular basis...and it was strong—strong enough to fling her across the clearing and slam her against a tree, emptying the contents of the gasoline container she was still clutching, onto her gown. My fire licked at it. Her shrieks of pain and horror echoed in the forest, but no one dared move. No one wanted to help her. Within a few moments of bursting into flame, black greasy smoke spiraling off her body, she exploded into black particles of dust and was carried away by the wind.

I turned immediately to Corbin and was shocked to see his magic begin to shimmer all around him. He should have been powerless in Salem, but I quickly guessed that with Morgan's death, all of her magic—the magic that should have been his by right anyway, reverted to him. Riker's magic sizzled, as well. I watched in amusement as he used his magic to release the ropes and then the next thing I knew, a limb was in his hand, and he was flying toward Alastair and his twin.

I watched long enough to see Riker shoot flames from his fingers at his twin and Roman disappear into a cloud of black smoke. Riker enveloped Alastair into his arms. After that, I only had eyes for Corbin. As I walked past them, Morgan's witches knelt down and pledged their allegiance to me and to Corbin. I didn't care. I didn't need their allegiance. I only needed Corbin. The responsibility of hashing through the coven mess would fall to him, and I'd gladly let it fall at his feet. My only thought was that we were going to spend the rest of our lives together.

When I was close enough that our chests were touching, he whispered, "Happy Birthday, Nico."

“You aren’t mad at me for escaping your magical entrapment?” I asked. I knew there was a silly smile on my face, but I didn’t really care. I’d earned it. Hell, we’d all earned the rights to be giddy with happiness.

“Of course I’m mad at you for disobeying me,” he countered. “I’ll include your punishment with your birthday spanking,” he teased.

The ropes fell away from his wrists, and I immediately stepped into his embrace. “I had to try, Corbin. My mother visited me through the mirror—she told me I was the one who was supposed to break the curse. It had to be me. Don’t be mad, babe. I didn’t really have a choice.”

His hand was stroking my back, and I half expected him to land a hard swat to my ass, but he kept stroking me like a cat. It felt so damned good that I wanted to purr my delight.

“I saw your destiny, as well, Nico. I can’t say that I was happy with what the goddess planned. I even tried to stop her because I couldn’t bear the thought of losing you again. But there wasn’t anything I could do to stop it. Yesterday when you found me in the yard with fire shooting from my fingertips—that was me having a temper tantrum and showing my disapproval over the fact that you had to be the one to confront Morganna. She was my sister—I suppose you heard that. Even though she’d hated me and the rest of her siblings her whole life. She seduced a warlock twice her age—old Nathaniel Banks, one of your ancestors—and stole some of his power. He left Salem then, in fear of his life and she killed our mother and made a bid to take over. I was still too strong and I defeated her, but she didn’t give up easily. She engineered this terrible spell to torment me and wrest power away for herself. She came close to succeeding.”

“But she didn’t. I stopped her.”

“Yes, you did.” He smiled at me. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

I frowned. “No wonder you looked so calm. You knew ahead of time that I would find the magic to defeat your sister.” For some reason, it burst my bubble to know that Corbin had been given a vision of the future. I would have preferred to keep believing that he’d been willing to risk everything just to be with me, whether it be in death or life. But his next words took away any doubt from my mind.

“I looked calm because I had faith in you, Nico. The only future that had been revealed to me was that you were going to be the one to confront Morganna. I wasn’t aware of the outcome.” He squeezed me tighter. “I was terrified that I might lose you again, but when I got here and saw your face, I knew this was the end of the curse.” He nibbled on my earlobe. “Your confidence was rather...arousing.”

My hands reached down and cupped the globes of his perfect ass. “Really? How do witches feel about public displays of affection?”

He chuckled and kept nibbling. “I can’t speak for anyone else, but I feel pretty damned good about it. Did you have something in mind?”

“Thinking about it,” I answered with a laugh. I pulled away and looked into his eyes. “There’s nothing sexier to me than a man in love and not afraid to show it.”

As always, love danced within those beautiful orbs of his. “Then you’d better get ready,” he said, as he took me in his arms and proceeded to show me just how unafraid he was.

The End